

Resource reviews

WHAT IN THE WORLD? POLITICAL TRAVELS IN AFRICA, ASIA AND THE AMERICAS

Peadar King (2013) *What in the World? Political Travels in Africa, Asia and the Americas*, Dublin: The Liffey Press.

Review by Lara Marlowe

Between 2004 and 2012, the Irish journalist Peadar King travelled with a film crew to remote areas of South America, Africa and Asia, making the ‘What in the World?’ documentary series for Irish television. The Liffey Press has published King’s memoirs of his travels under the same title. The theme of the book is summed up by Christina Rodriguez, a Sandinista supporter, trade union activist and feminist whom King interviewed in Nicaragua. Rodriguez had fourteen children. Her daughter Isobel was pregnant when she was murdered by (former dictator) Somoza’s National Guard during the revolution. Later, when Hurricane Mitch devastated Central America, Rodriguez lost forty relatives. ‘The truth is we always suffer’, she concludes. ‘Those at the bottom always suffer. Everything falls harder on us.’

King is repeatedly confronted by hungry people. In Leon, Nicaragua, he and his film crew eat dinner at an outdoor restaurant when they notice they are being watched by street urchins, who inch closer to the table.

“One thin girl in a loose fitting cotton dress was the boldest of the group and she eventually stood right by our side eyeing us and the food. Without a word she began to eat off our unfinished plates and was soon joined by three or four others ... Later we saw the same young girl vomiting – the food was too rich for her to digest.”

Working in Malawi, one of the world’s poorest countries, with a life expectancy of 38 years, King goes out to buy rice, chicken, beef and Coca

Cola for his crew and the family they are filming. ‘As soon as I left the truck to walk the twenty metres to the house, the aroma from chicken and rice wafted through the crowd and they began to press in on me’

In Bolivia, King travels to Potosí, the highest city in the world, at an elevation of 13,000 feet. He and his team descend into the silver mines in the Cerro Rico Mountain overlooking Potosí, ‘crouching and gasping for breath with sweat trickling between our shoulder blades and blinding our eyes’. Since the mid-16th century, ‘The labour system was a machine for crushing Indians’, King quotes the writer Eduardo Galeano. Silver miners were poisoned by the mercury used to extract the silver. Their hair and teeth fell out and they were subject to uncontrollable trembling. It was, King writes, ‘raw exploitative capitalism at its worst’.

The system has changed little in 500 years. Many miners still die from the lung disease silicosis, which is caused by inhaling mineral dust. In one of the most haunting descriptions in King’s book, Margarita Canaviri, a miner’s widow, recounts her husband’s death from Silicosis:

“His skin got darker and darker. His lips went red, then purple. He couldn’t do anything for himself. If you put his poor hand out in the sun, it looked as though the light passed right through it ... He’d cough phlegm and in the end he was bringing up pus. In the end his lungs burst. He started to vomit pus mixed with ore from the mine...”

King avoids what LSE (London School of Economics) professor Lillie Chouliaraki calls ‘the spectatorship of suffering’. His prose is compassionate, not voyeuristic. But the suffering wrought by poverty, war and the pursuit of selfish interests by developed nations and multi-national corporations is inescapable. A Karen woman called Mu Ko Lay recounts how her two young sons died and were hastily buried in the jungle when the family was pursued by the Burmese military. She weeps uncontrollably. ‘Her sobbing was relentless’, King writes. ‘As if she had become engulfed in a wave of grief that she simply could not hold back’.

Intermingled with such tragedies, *National Geographic* or *Boy's Own*-style reportage gives an accurate picture of the dangers, discomforts and adventure of reporting. When they visit the Achuar Indians of Ecuador, King and his crew share *chichi* 'a yellowish, slightly lemon-flavoured but to our palates at least somewhat sour drink' with their hosts. King explains how *chichi* is made:

“The women chew and swallow the boiled yucca, which they then regurgitate back into the vat. Later, the drink will be strained and served in bowls. The women's saliva speeds the fermentation process to make it mildly alcoholic.”

On the same trip, the small aircraft that precedes King and his crew crashes, killing the pilot and a passenger. The journalists travel at night on muddy roads in a bus without lights. To cover poor coca farmers in Peru, they ride for seven and a half hours over rutted, cratered roads through the Andes, fording rivers in old Toyotas. When they reach their hotel in Tarapoto late at night, they are shocked by the filth, cockroaches, overflowing toilet and grimy sheets.

In Patagonia, King treks for two hours on horseback 'through some of the most stunning scenery on the planet'. In the Andes mountains, he feels 'awe at the sheer beauty, fear at the dramatic drop, stretching in places to hundreds of feet below us, where one equine miss-step would have resulted in certain death'. In temperatures of -27° Celsius in Mongolia, King awakes to drink vodka and 'butter-flavoured, salted hot milk' with his hosts, nomadic animal herders whose livelihood is threatened by the exploitation of Mongolia's mineral treasures. King shows how Cold War rivalry between the former Soviet Union and the United States (US) laid waste to Angola, whose fabulous oil wealth has been seized by its rulers and multinational oil companies, leaving the population impoverished. In a lighter moment, he describes meeting 'the worst translator/fixer we have ever encountered on our travels' at the airport in Luanda.

“The fixer and his sidekick had all the garish accoutrements of perceived success: the pinstriped if ill-fitting suit with pen and handkerchief in breast pockets, sunglasses which were worn indoors, heavily polished pointed shoes and what appeared to be empty briefcases.”

The chapter on Asian sweatshops and child labour seems prescient. Before 1,100 garment workers lost their lives in the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory in Dhaka in April 2013, King reports that employees in Primark factories are working up to eighty hours a week, in appalling conditions, for less than a living wage. In India, King interviews children as young as four who chisel stone, pick cotton and manufacture incense. The Indian embassy in Dublin refused him a visa for a return trip. But the attribution of the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize to Kailash Satyarthi, an Indian who has devoted his life to combating child labour, drives home the pertinence of King’s reporting.

Some of the worst human rights abuses take place in the developed world, as shown by the chapter on the United States. King quotes the US law professor Franklin Zimring regarding the continuum between ‘244 years of legalised slavery, 71 years of oppression and discrimination’ and the disproportionate number of African-American men who are executed today. The Southern states where, Zimring writes, for half a century ‘one black person was lynched about every two and a half days’ are the states that carry out the most executions today. Capital punishment, embellished with the trappings of due process, has replaced extra-judicial hangings, shootings, beatings and stonings. As the former first lady Rosalynn Carter tells King, in the US, ‘The death penalty does not depend on the crime, it depends on the race, where they live and whether they have any money or not.’

On the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius, King meets some of the 2,000 Chagos islanders who were driven 1,200 miles from their homeland after Britain sold Diego Garcia, the most populated island in the archipelago, to the US for a military base. Over seven years, the US and British governments ‘threatened, coerced and cajoled’ the islanders by poisoning

their dogs, stopping their food supply and denying them medical attention. Anyone who left was never allowed to return. ‘By 1973, the islands were cleared of their people and a US military base was in place’, King writes. One can’t help wondering if the sign the Americans raised over Diego Garcia – ‘Welcome to the Footprint of Freedom’ – is deliberately cynical.

In South-East Asia, ‘Every day, the US ran 100 bombing missions over Laos – one every eight minutes, for twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks’, from 1964 until 1973, King reports. Some 200,000 people were killed. Twice that many were wounded and three-quarters of a million people were driven from their homes. Washington refused to make any reparations for the suffering inflicted on Laos, a neutral country. Dr Voua Van, the only woman surgeon in Laos, recounts her childhood under bombardment.

“The village was burning and the planes kept bombing – all day long ... They just bombed all the time non-stop ... Whenever I think about the past, it is like something breaks in my heart. The war has finished for forty years but I still feel afraid...”

Unexploded cluster bombs dropped by the US over Laos still maim its civilians. 107 countries are party to the Convention on Cluster bombs, drawn up in Dublin in 2008. The Convention seeks a ban on their production. Yet the US, Britain and Israel continue to use them. Russia, China, Egypt, India and Pakistan have also refused to sign the agreement.

Nature can be as merciless as mankind. In Mali, the Niger River is drying up due to desertification, with devastating results for the country’s inhabitants. King recounts the disfigurement and death of children in Niger who contract Noma, an easily preventable disease that is caused by the conjunction of malnutrition, poverty and poor hygiene. King concludes his book with incomprehension ‘at our utter failure as human beings to share the bountiful resources of this planet with each other in an equitable and fair manner’. The reader shares his profound sadness for the people whose suffering he witnesses.

King doesn't want to end in despair. He expresses admiration for the men and women who continue to defy the forces of nature, multinationals and corrupt governments. There have been some victories: the people of Ecuador in 2011 won \$17 billion in damages from the Chevron oil company for environmental damage. Some of the perpetrators of the Cambodian genocide have been brought to trial. Impoverished indigenous Bolivian coca growers have seen one of their own – Evo Morales – elected to the presidency of their country. King also cites the beauty of the countries he visits, and the generosity, hope and compassion he encounters, as consolation for the world's ills. As his book amply illustrates, the scales tip to the side of injustice. King does us a service by explaining so vividly how and why.

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