HAZARA: ELEGY FOR AN AFRICAN FARM
by JOHN CONYNGHAM

In an interview in 2003, John Conyngham asked, ‘While we have evolved through four generations in Natal, becoming more African generation by generation, are we getting any closer to Africa accepting us?’ The themes of identity and belonging constitute an enigma that has possessed him for years, and which he has sought to understand first through three volumes of fiction and now through a non-fictional account of his own family. Fiction allowed him to use techniques not normally available to the historian. All three novels make heavy use of irony. The first two, The Arrowing of the Cane and The Desecration of the Graves, employ the narrative device of metafiction and also the supernatural, and the third, The Lostness of Alice, employs intertextuality, in which the narrator finds himself in the ‘wonderland’ of post-1994 South Africa. But if readers expect Conyngham’s non-fiction to be in contrast a ruthless, stripped down exposé of white settlers, they are mistaken. Hazara is no ordinary chronicle: it is, as its subtitle indicates, an ‘elegy’.

Conyngham traces the history of three branches of his family: his father’s, his mother’s biological family and her adoptive family. (A genealogical table would have been helpful; and some awkward sequencing of material is confusing.) He himself appears in the first person only in the Prologue and Epilogue; when it is his turn to be born he appears as ‘John’. The context in which he finds himself is both a wider one, through family members and acquaintances who at times farmed, fought, nursed and policed in Europe, the Middle East, the Far East and various parts of Africa, and that of affluent white sugar cane farmers on the North Coast of KwaZulu-Natal. The latter were defined by their world of farming, socialising in their small community and as far as Durban, government through administering rural areas, nursing in hospitals in Durban and Pietermaritzburg, and the private schools of Durban and the Midlands to which they sent their children. This provides the scope for him to meditate on the nature of the British Empire and its decline and the fate of whites in South Africa.

Conyngham sees his family as typical of white settlers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even their neighbours on the cane farms of the North Coast had wide connections around the Empire. For example, he remarks that of a group of children photographed swimming in a river on a neighbouring farm, one was born in Mussoorie, one in Secunderabad and one in Kuala Lumpur. Over the years they had tried farming various crops found in other colonies – cotton, coffee, tea. His own ancestors had farmed cotton in the Umkomaas valley with Cecil and Herbert Rhodes as their neighbours. When that venture failed and the local farming community scattered, the Rhodes brothers’ departure for the diamond fields provided a link with another aspect of the colonisation of South Africa.

Conyngham does not go into great detail on the everyday work of farming
or the minor events of their lives; rather
he recalls in flowing prose the rhythms
of their lives. Hence he does not give
detailed references to his sources.
Outside the work of cane growing, the
communities of African and Indian la-
bourers hardly feature, which no doubt
reflects the consciousness of the whites.
We read of the routine of early morn-
ing rides through the whispering cane,
sundowners and dressing for dinner, and
in the evenings listening to records of
Wagner, reading or solitary drinking. At
the weekends there would be tennis and
parties. For atmosphere, he gives many
short descriptions (obviously drawn
from personal experience) of the set-
tings of gardens, farmlands and natural
bush and forest. He is particularly fond
of birdcalls and other sounds. The pas-
sages are beautifully evocative:

She was mesmerised by the birds,
as in the dense foliage starlings and
louries and hoopoes and flycatchers
bobbed and fluttered as if vying for her
attention …

Each evening … outside on the lawn
crickets would be shrilling, and from
far away at the dam a frog chorus would
just be audible, providing a platform
of sound on which the squalls of a
bushbaby and the chatter of monkeys
would bounce momentarily and then
be gone.³

As a product of the years of research
that Conyngham put into the book
we are rewarded by the profusion of
black-and-white photographs, many of
them intimate snapshots. He is brilliant
at deconstructing their iconography in
a manner reminiscent of the historian
Paul Fussell in his essays on historical
photographs.⁴ For example, of his
mother aged thirteen, in fancy dress,
recently adopted and crossing the
equator on her way to a new life in
Africa: ‘In the withering heat she looks
small and sad;’⁵ and of a group at a
party: ‘Some of the men … have the
characteristic two-tone face, pale above
and ruddy below, that is a hallmark
of fair-skinned people who wear hats in
the sun.’⁶

In writing sympathetically about
his subjects, Conyngham knows what
he is doing. He refuses to argue for
leniency in our judgement of them by
virtue of relativity – of saying that that
was how things were done at that time.
For example, recounting a complaint
before the Protector of Immigrants of
harsh treatment of an Indian servant,
he writes, ‘That a life so subsumed by
toil was taken for granted was perhaps
typical of the times, but John’s uncon-
cern is damning.’⁷ Throughout the book
there are sentences remarking that the
political situation in South Africa was
changing.

Possibly the biggest dilemma for him
in writing the book was how to explain
and handle his parents’ decision to sell
their farm and move to the Isle of Man.
He is restrained in hinting at how the
loss of the farm hurt him personally,
and he loyally tries to understand his
father’s motives – his fear that there
would be no place for whites in the
new South Africa. A photograph of the
dreadful little box with no garden in
Andreas, Isle of Man, that Conyngham
can’t help calling a ‘soulless suburban
house’ leaves the reader stunned at the
contrast that they had let themselves in
for. Nor is he critical or triumphant in
recording that they returned to South
Africa after four years. Instead in his
Epilogue he describes how on complet-
ing the book he made a sentimental tour
of the places of his childhood – but he
could not bring himself to go further
than approach the very centre of their
lives. He ends on a road where ‘in the middle distance was the homestead’. ‘The real farm would contaminate the mythological one that for years I had been piecing together.’

ELWYN JENKINS

NOTES

2 John Conyngham, The Arrowing of the Cane (Johannesburg, Ad Donker, 1986); The Desecration of the Graves (Johannesburg, Ad Donker, 1990); The Lostness of Alice (Johannesburg, Ad Donker, 1998).
3 Hazara, pp. 48, 200.
5 Hazara, p. 44.
6 Hazara, p. 33.
7 Hazara, p. 93.
8 Hazara, pp. 241, 244.
The Hazarajat and other Hazara territories are mountainous. The climate is severe in winter, with heavy snowfall; summers are mild but short, particularly at higher elevations. The Hazarajat, considering its harsh terrain, is densely populated. Hazara are thought to have several affinities with the Mongols, including physical appearance, language, and kinship system. Although the Hazara lack the characteristic epicanthic eyefolds, many believe they are clearly Mongoloid. Hazaragi, the traditional language of the Hazara, is an Indo-Iranian language with many Mongol loanwords. Mixed grain farming is now their primary subsistence activity. Most of the farming takes place on the alluvial floors of the valleys, but the higher ground is also used in various ways. Hazara Welfare Organization. 1,520 likes · 5 talking about this. Hazara Welfare Organization (Asna Ashari), is a charity organization aimed to work for... African proverb. Interesting take on Global citizenship. 1,526,788 Views. Jason Silva. 13 October 2015. From the vantage point of space, there are no borders or geographical lines. There is only Earth, our Earth.