

# Gerald Hanley : Warriors – Life and Death among the Somalis

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TRUE SOLITUDE is when the most restless part of a human being, his longing to forget where he is, born on earth in order to die, comes to rest and listens in a kind of agreed peace. In solitude, once the taste has settled, a man can think upon death with as much pleasure as upon life, and it is in solitude that one can best understand that there is no solution, except to try and do as little harm as possible while we are here, that there is no losing and no winning, no real end to greed or lust, because the human appetite for novelty can only be fully satisfied by death.

Thousands of days and nights spent in wildernesses taught me that a person can never truly know another, or be known by another, and )( that the pleasure of life is in the trying. A man can never convey fully what it is that so strangely disturbs him, the uneasy unrest in him that nothing material can properly satisfy. It is a fear of accepting this which makes a man fear what he thinks to be loneliness, a being alone, without other people. Acceptance of enforced solitude gradually dissolves this illusion. After long solitude when you sit and talk with others you realise that most of what we say to each other means very little at all. Perhaps that is why a Zen monk Will give a silent sermon to a multitude, laughing without trace because he knows there is nothing to say which does not require emotional undertones to give it the appearance of credibility. Even so, one likes to go on talking rubbish with friends, while listening to oneself doing it. At least solitude teaches one to listen to oneself talking this rubbish, whereas before one thought one's every word was golden with value. In the early months of isolation in a wilderness, particularly when burdened with responsibilities which may suddenly turn dangerous, among actively violent and savage people, a sort of hysteria develops in the character.

Ferocity will be replied to ferociously, out of fear, and fear is hatred. One's first sight of ferocity arouses hatred for the ferocious, and one is liable to respond with savagery. It is hard to describe the hatred and contempt one can feel for tribesmen who have slain the women of their enemies, or caused them to die of thirst. Later, when hysteria has been replaced by acceptance of isolation - the fact that one is hundreds of miles out of reach of 'rescue' should anything go wrong, one feels merely contempt for savagery. You do not hate the active savage anymore. You realise instead the size of the pitiful value he places on the need to kill, the need for revenge, the desire to humiliate his enemy (which includes you), especially when thousands of helpless people were being slain by bombs in European cities every night. One knew then that one was one with the savage, while not being so innocently honest about one's savagery as the desert savage. Then despair tries to set in.

There is nothing like isolation in an atmosphere of electric violence for bringing before one's mind the understanding that the varnish of two thousand years is so thin as to be transparent. It is living in civilisation that keeps us civilised. It is very surprising, and alarming at first, how swiftly it vanishes when one is threatened by other men, men of almost mindless resolve. They know if you are frightened of them. They know too if you will kill as readily as they. But the fear does slowly seep in, if you are isolated for long enough among warriors who hate what you represent, a threat to their joyous wars. pp7-8

When the thin cement of European police and order is torn off, a cement which has frozen the normal processes of an occupied country's life, history begins again, usually violently. The only way a country is truly conquered by another is when all the original inhabitants are slain, wiped out completely, unless they are mumbling themselves away into their own kind of cultural death, like the aborigines of Australia. But it is the police, with the threat of soldiers farther behind, who lay on the thin cement of alien peace in conquered countries containing the aboriginal people still vitally alive, and on the Webi Shabeli, as all over Somalia, they drew their knives in 1941. They had to, for an order had collapsed around them.

It is very hard for Europeans to realise how dull, how heavy is the crushing boredom of the order, the habit, the daily round of the work-day which they brought with swords into South America, Africa, India, Ireland, everywhere where a completely different set of appreciations had been at agonised work for centuries. That the Irish tribe-families slew each other gave the invaders no right to take their country, while churls by the thousand groaned in Britain. That the Aztecs piled up mountains of hearts in bloody temples was not why Cortés went there and wrecked the world he found. He went for gold, just as the English went to Ireland for land, to Africa and India for raw materials, for money and power. Most pathetic of all was why the Italians went to Somalia, because there was nothing else left of Africa to take, the Nordics having carved up the rest among themselves. Yet ironically enough, while the conquered everywhere resented losing their country and their freedom, they nearly always took advantage of the policed peace forced upon them, nearly always relaxed, their swords left at home, yet they wanted their country back for themselves, while enjoying the 'peace of the grave', as Pandit Nehru once called it, in which they now toiled under aliens. And they revolted when they saw a hope of success. But time is always on the side of the original owners, if they can only survive. p 86

Perhaps it was the old taste of the swift violent spirit of this land, of the threat of melancholy coming over me, which made me want to leave Mogadishu now. Perhaps it was the memory of the seven suicides I had known personally (there were many more suicides than that), and how many cases of madness and breakdown I had counted up in memory as I had walked these streets with Ali. Fifteen or sixteen of them. People who, if they had never been tried out in that restless threatening country, would be alive today, or would never have cracked in the loneliness that was too much for them. For every one of us there is a situation, a crisis, a place, a commotion, which will force us into what we cannot do, will find us out as lacking, or unable, and most of us spend our whole lives without being trapped in that particular set of circumstances which will break us. You do the wrong uninspired thing, rushed and fearful, a moment's decision, as the tangle of mess piles up, until there is a moment after which nothing can go right again. 151

I knew a cynical old Irishman who tried everything he knew with five raving bloodthirsty chiefs (they shake their fists, scream, threaten, if you once let them start), and these chiefs, at loggerheads with each other over the waterholes, were ready to send their tribes against each other. And they had come in to the old officer to frighten him, and each other, and to work up to the point where the meeting would end in hatred and rage. Then they would rush off to their tribes, who were waiting to kill. The five chieftains shouted each other down and then looked at the old Irishman, and he knew he had tried everything and found no solution to the problem of the waterholes, and to the generations of quarrel which had gone before him. He said the first thing that came into his head, gravely, ponderously, and perhaps it was his white hair and his age which gave it the poetic and sagacious weight it had for them.

'Remember,' he said, looking into all their eyes in the pause, 'remember that it is the elephant asleep in the long grass which defeats the greatest men.' He had no idea what he meant (though he used to invent wonderful, idiotic tribal proverbs), and told me he had said it cynically, out of weariness, exhausted anger, but the chiefs stared at him, exchanged glances with each other, and nodded, went on nodding, and sat down, saying, 'Let us thrash this matter out again. That is a splendid thing you have said.' p154

The sunglare had lit up the carved words on it, words commemorating the long road through the bush hacked out by the Sicilian labour battalion attached to an Italian division which had invaded Abyssinia in 1935. The hot wind was scattering sand against it. The men, their tents, their empty cigarette packets, were all gone, and there was no trace of them. The Italian empire had vanished and the wilderness belonged, as it had always belonged, and will always belong, to the nomads and their camels. Forbidding and desolate, the huge desert with its towering rocks which shake in the sun, waits to turn everything into sand again, men, buildings, camels, even the white ants which send up their enormous towers of mystery in which they teem while they live out their imitation of the universe. I think most of all it was that realisation which the four years' wanderings in the interior had allowed to seep into me, that though he wrote it magnificently, Donne had it wrong. Every man is an island, in the desert or the city, and I can remember coming to feel certain of this one night on a high rock in fierce moonlight, looking out across Africa which stretched forever in the luminous silence. When you mingle again with people you get the impression once more that Donne is right, but it is only an impression. The longing and the effort to diminish the islandhood is everything, but it can never be dissolved.

Among our buildings we get the necessary impression that we have some kind of permanence here, but a single month in a desert, alone, is enough to allow in the echo of doubt, and it stays. Isolation in the wastes taught me to value civilisation, and to get some idea of what this world owes to all the civilisers, whatever their race, or place, or time. Every time we go to a doctor it is probably in the subconscious hope that he will tell us we are going to live forever. Other people die but we don't. When we build, it is forever. Isolation makes you think of the fact of death, too much, and the city makes you think only about life, too much. And there is no in-between area, and we contain it all within ourselves after we have tasted from both wells.

Any lingering ideas I had had about some races, religions, colours, or what have you, being better than others, vanished after a year in those wastes. Excellence and the lack of it are everywhere, and I knew nomads with qualities of natural intelligence and vitality far greater than hordes of white men I had known. And I have seen a white man perform acts of savagery as terrible as that performed by any tribesman. All the rules had vanished, the rules about what was supposed to be what, crumbled away by the billion thoughts sieved out in prolonged isolation, and I no longer believed in the sovereign state, the white message, or the inherent goodness, or evil, of man. For long periods I had forgotten that I was a white man at all, and had been merely a man, another flea on the desert with the nomads, and it was an experience which could not be left behind with the desert. I carried it with me, and I find when I meet friends who drank long enough at those bitter waterholes, that they too can no longer contribute to those ancient myths about the primership of this that or the other if it has a white skin covering it. This is not to say that one did not discover how handily valuable it is to have been born with a white skin, how it helps one to share in the undeniable excellence and superiority of what Europe has defined as civilisation, having clutched tightly the rope thrown out of darkness by Asia long ago.

And what did I think now, sitting in that sunglare in the barge, about Africa, I wondered. About Africa which had stirred in its long tropical sleep and was standing up and screaming for various things lying behind a word called freedom.