

The Responsible African by Paul Foster, O.P.

It is ten years since I went along to Stanford's in St James's to buy a map which would show me where Uganda really was. This was my first move towards becoming chaplain at Makerere, then the University College of East Africa, now a constituent unit in a fully-fledged university.

While my ship turned the corner of Africa off Cape Gardafui the Kabaka was flying back to Uganda from exile to be welcomed by a Governor, the notable Sir Andrew Cohen (whose seat at Entebbe he now occupies as Sir Frederick Mutesa). The train from Nairobi was protected by armed guards against a possible Mau-Mau raid. Jomo Kenyatta was imprisoned in the far north and Sir Evelyn Baring ruled Kenya. Sir Edward Twining governed Tanganyika. Today, under Kenyatta, Obote and Nyerere, it is East Africa which is travelling into an unknown and sparsely-mapped future.

I like to recall what I said when taking over my major teaching assignment at Makerere, the first Honours Class in Political Ideas. 'I am aware,' I said, 'that I am speaking to the the leaders of three future republics'. Neither the class nor I realized how quickly that future would arrive. I do not think that even Dr Jowett's pupils at Balliol reached ministerial or near-ministerial level within three years of gaining their degrees. There have been a few cases of swelled heads as a result of this swift elevation, but in general I find it heartening, on their visits to this country, to observe how these men, recently undergraduates, are conscientiously shouldering their formidable tasks. It is good, too, to sense the professional bonds they feel with their opposite numbers in the other territories who have the same academic background.

I would not maintain that it was a good thing that my prediction was either so fully or so rapidly verified, I would only assert that the completeness was inevitable and the rapidity better than a long-drawn and increasing bitterness. If I may once again intrude a personal note, I am glad that, in the first article I wrote for *Blackfriars* more than thirty years ago, I said that independence was inevitable in any country where there is a powerful intelligentsia demanding it. I only hope that what I taught at Makerere has made that process the more efficient.

Many years ago Lord Curzon declared that efficiency of administration was synonymous with the happiness of the governed. That is just not the case, but it is true that efficient administration is extremely desirable and the rapid evolution of the new African republics has made such efficiency improbable. Any hesitation felt among those of good-will about the wisdom of a rapidly-achieved independence stemmed almost entirely from a reasonable doubt as to whether the educated Africans would be able to produce an adequate administration.

Much, naturally, depends upon what one thinks 'adequate'. There are not enough administratively-minded East Africans at the moment to run their countries efficiently but one could say the same about the staffing of the great Midland city in which I live.

It potters along through a series of muddles but there is no real danger of complete chaos. That danger is almost certainly present in East Africa because the reliable African administrators are so thin on the ground and are consequently grossly over-worked. However, one can over-value a filing-system and I would expect them to pull through at the cost of the last decade or so of their lives.

When a group of peoples has been accustomed for centuries to live in a timeless world of material simplicity, in which all basic needs can be met without a calendar, let alone a time-table; when all arrangements are made by word of mouth because writing is unknown; when, unless one is a nomad, the horizon bounds one's geographical consciousness, the arrival of a time-stricken civilization of great material complexity and elaborate documentation produces bewilderment and incomprehension and an impression, from the point of view of the invading culture, of unreliability. The people confronting one another have widely differing ideas as to what is important. Only the very adaptable representatives of the former culture will be able to cope with the demands of the latter and even they will require a few years before they are tuned in to it.

So far as East Africa is concerned, one must also realize that the female half of the population is, in general, decades behind the male half in education, largely because the early missionaries felt unable to resist social pressure in this matter. So, on one level, few ministers have wives who can assist them socially, let alone politically, while on another there is scarcely a single indigenous efficient secretary-typist. For all important documentation the top executives have to hammer away at the keys themselves.

Only a thin black line, therefore, holds the administration together, assisted by some promoted but bewildered headmen and a spattering of white survivors from other days, the latter under constant threat of repatriation owing to popular pressure. Meanwhile scores of able young people are abroad acquiring qualifications in law, pharmacy, agriculture, education and medicine, enduring five years or so of exile in order to become, sometimes the first in their nation, equipped for the varied techniques of westernized society. It will be nearly the 1970s before the impact of these dedicated men and women will be felt and the intervening period will be very difficult.

The metaphorical map of the future, therefore, is full of those uncounted spaces which can still be found in the physical maps of parts of East Africa. One does not say this in order to be discouraging, but because so few of one's fellow-countrymen have a map of Africa in their heads at all, whether metaphorical or literal. Even Stanford's did not prepare me for the shock of encountering the Rift Valley just after Nairobi, and I continue to nurse a resentment against my expensive education which, while stuffing me with dead languages, failed to give me any idea of the size, variety, beauty

and fascination of an Africa for which, as a budding citizen in the 1920s, I was partially responsible. Even in an excellent newly-published work, *An Introduction to the History of Central Africa*¹, the maps are virtually useless, a criticism which had to be made of the first volume of the otherwise valuable and scholarly *History of East Africa*².

Mr Wills' book, while treating in detail the story of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland, now Malawi, is conceived on such broad and intelligent lines that he gives perspective to a whole century of European-African relations. This is the kind of metaphorical map one needs, the description of how the indigenous peoples understandably resisted at first the European advance from Capetown to Katanga, only to surrender in bewilderment to the astounding energy of the pioneers. 'Throughout Central Africa the railway, tenuous though it was, accelerated change. Over the wild bushveld, green and fresh in summer, dry, dusty and sunbleached in the winter season, the long brown trains, with their black grimy engines spouting out smoke into the blue African sky, rattled and rumbled their way between granite kopjes, across great rivers, among the grasses and the endless trees. The bellow of an accelerating locomotive, the sad wail of the steam signal, sounds like these wandered across the plateau, startling men, beasts and birds accustomed hitherto to the clap of thunder or the trumpeting of the elephant herd as the greatest breakers of the silence of the veld. Freight wagons loaded with coal, corrugated iron, steam pumps or mining tackle, blankets and hardware, sugar and grain, wound their way up the long escarpments and over the enormous plains. At the sidings, placed every ten miles along the line, a few of which grew to be railhead townships, were clustered a few railway workers' huts, and sometimes a store where all manner of goods were sold, permeating slowly to the ultimate limits of the country.' (Pp. 205-6.)

This is more than good, evocative description. It not only conveys a feeling of the size and variety of the terrain, which ordinary maps do not, but it explains the traumatic shock of the advance of the new monster, often at more than a mile a day, into the lands that had dreamed and warred since the sixth day of Creation. The beasts grew accustomed swiftly to the presence of the iron fangs; the men, with their immeasurably more sensitive equipment, withdrew into a protective passivity which lasted for approximately the first quarter of the present century. The Matabele, the Mashona, the Wangoni and other peoples, accepted the new dispensation and were incorporated with only small disturbances into political units controlled from Europe. It was during this period of apparent quiescence that the impression grew among Europeans that the Africans were a naturally subject people. This was a mistaken impression. The

¹By A. J. Wills Oxford University Press, 25s.

²Reviewed in *Blackfriars*, September 1963

shock of the invasion was to be thrown off by a race possessing great resilience, a recovery accelerated by the two World Wars and the career of Mahatma Ghandi. By the 1930s Africans in all the regions had taken the measure of the Europeans and were preparing for their phenomenal advance towards independence and mastery of the new civilization. A mile a day was nothing to them.

The symptom of all this was the insatiable appetite of Africans for education in the European sense. Just as it is difficult for non-Russian Europeans to appreciate the distances that separate sections of Africa from one another, so the major phenomenon of this breakthrough into the academic citadel of the exotic culture has scarcely been evaluated. The historians, research chemists, doctors and teachers who were acquiring their London degrees at Makerere had often started by walking barefoot to school many miles through the bush, to return at evening for their first and only meal of the day. They had acquired their education in a language as foreign to their native tongue as Turkish is to English. When they went to boarding-school they sometimes walked for three weeks to get there. Nothing could stop these young people in all the regions from Nimule to Buluwayo, from Ruwenzori to Mombasa, just as today nothing stops them from taking the further step from the Equator to the Midlands in order to complete the techniques necessary to full responsibility. They pursue the No. 27 bus instead of the zebra; they find their way through the brick and concrete jungle; dressed with a discreet good-taste which is a reproach to their English contemporaries, they attend one another's baptisms and marriages in the dismal churches of their exile.

There is a corollary to this advance towards responsibility which some Europeans, but probably no educated African, will consider unfortunate. Those territorial pockets in which primitive African life has hitherto survived are being eliminated. The game reserves may well outlast the culture of the Masai, the Karamajong and the Wagogo. Three years ago, in *White to Move?*, I said that a major effort would have to be made at once if the anthropological treasure of African custom and costume, folk-lore, dance and song, were to be recorded. I think that it is now too late. The result of this discard of the indigenous cultural forms is unpredictable. Mau-Mau might credibly be attributed to the suppression of Kikuyu customs by external forces; but the new movement comes from within the African fold and is therefore itself an autochthonous cultural phenomenon. It is impossible to foresee whether there will be a recrudescence of tribalism, whether the spurt to catch up with western civilization will exhaust the African's energies or open up avenues to technical initiatives of his own. The complexity of the situation, therefore, needs no emphasis. It is, incidentally, well described in a new Faith and Fact book, *Christianity and Colonialism*,³ by Robert Delavignette,

³Burns and Oates, 9s. 6d.

who has a lot more to say of colonialism than of Christianity. This, in a way, is reasonable, since his readers may be supposed to have the rudiments of the faith whereas few of them have even a vague appreciation of the colonial, post-colonial and neo-colonial factors. The author, without trying to reach any definite conclusions, has done a service by mapping these factors out in considerable detail for so short a book.

As M. Delavignette points out, the future is being moulded not only in Africa but in the metropolitan countries which are changing by their loss of colonies and their contact, now in very considerable numbers, with the new responsible Africans. The Midland landladies are beginning to ask for overseas students; the grocers offer credit with full confidence in its being honoured. The new Africans still occasionally encounter that colour prejudice which is such a futile and unnatural feature of our recent past and has been a cancerous inheritance in the settler territories. They take it, and its derivatives, with a humorous calm that is very shaming. They have no illusions now. 'I am the greatest,' cried an English student the other day on getting the first part of his examination at the third time of asking. 'Well done, Peter,' said his colleague from the uttermost bounds of Uganda. 'Now get part two at your first attempt.' I told him to hit a man his own size.

Notes on Contributors

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