

Reviews

A Palestinian's Journey

Abdel Bari Atwan, *A Country of Words – A Palestinian Journey from the Refugee Camp to the Front Page*, SAQI, 286 pages, hardback ISBN 9780863566219, £20.00, \$29.95

The author of this book must surely have found the last few weeks, with the Israeli invasion of Gaza, deeply troubling, watching his relatives and friends suffering at the hands of the Israeli war machine. To add to this suffering, to be further subjected to the craven and supine apologetics for the Israeli action voiced by much of the western media must have been doubly unbearable. Bari Atwan's spirited and informative defence of the Palestinian cause, through his appearances on Al Jazeera and other outlets, honourably followed the dictum of the poet Mahmoud Darwish printed on the flyleaf of his book, 'We have a country of words. Speak speak so we may know the end of this travel.'

This is an autobiographical account of both the political and personal vicissitudes of a fiercely independent Palestinian journalist and commentator, now based in London. Born in the Deir al-Balah refugee camp in the central area of the Gaza Strip on 17 February 1950, his life, excluding the Nakba of 1948, spans the worst years of the travails of the Palestinian people. As the text makes clear, his early years in the refugee camps of Gaza, whilst not without youthful enjoyment and comradeship, are indelibly stained by the brutality meted out by the occupying power, Israel.

His parents were expelled from the Mediterranean village of Isdud in 1948, the rubble of which forms part of the foundations of the large Israeli port of Ashdod. Regaled with tales of happier days in Palestine by their parents, the family must have contrasted this bitterly with their present lot amongst the dust and poverty of Gaza. Nor was the family to be left in peace by the armed might of Israel. The young Abdel, at six years old, has to witness the physical maltreatment and near murder of his father by the invading Israeli forces in the 1956 war. In 1959 his father is beaten and tortured by the Egyptian police for several days on suspicion of having a firearm and is left permanently physically damaged. It comes as little surprise that his father, mentally scarred by his own treatment and the treatment of his family, plagued by ill health and rendered virtually destitute by the removal of his livelihood, succumbs to a relatively early death.

Growing up in Gaza was not without its relief from hardship, and a section of the book is replete with vignettes that are poignant and humorous. The usual pursuits of growing children were indulged in, so much so that at one time the author considered a working life in professional football as a goalkeeper. Football was, however, to forego his talents as, a diligent student, he quickly demonstrated his intellectual prowess in the rudimentary education system available, and this confirmed him in his desire to become a journalist. Classmates and headmaster were duly impressed when the aspiring journalist received a letter and package from Gamal Abdel Nasser in response to the author's earlier missive; this cemented his life-long affection for Nasser and Arab nationalism. Tragedy again struck the author's family during the 1967 war when his grandmother was shot dead by Israeli soldiers and so, faced with the closure of his school, a strict curfew, no employment opportunities and with continuing repression and killings by the Israeli occupying forces, the family took the decision that he should leave Gaza, hoping to complete his education elsewhere.

Either studying or working he migrated through a succession of Middle Eastern countries noting their social and political differences, sharpening and refining his analytical skills. On leaving Gaza he worked at various manual jobs in Amman, the capital of Jordan, but left there for Egypt just prior to the Black September massacre of Palestinian fighters. Completing his secondary education at Alexandria, he enrolled at Cairo University, obtaining a degree in journalism. This was through a scholarship scheme initiated by Nasser to provide educational funding for impoverished students from Arab countries. Cairo University, at this time, was a seething cauldron of revolutionary ideas and protest. And it was not long before the budding journalist was immersed in student protests against the increasingly dictatorial and pro-US rule of Anwar Sadat. The university activist did, however, find time to indulge his other passions namely football, the theatre and music. His practical musical talents did not prove to be equal to his sporting attainments and he must number amongst the few trainee *oud* players (the Middle Eastern precursor of the European lute) to have been paid by his tutor to desist. Having completed his degree, he applied for an extension to his Egyptian visa, which was refused because of his political activities, and he was forced to make a hasty departure for Tripoli, Libya. Fortuitously, aspiring to a journalistic position, he wrote a freelance article for one of the local newspapers, criticising the Shah of Iran. Gadaffi saw the article, and as this happily coincided with a spat between him and the Shah, the aspiring reporter

quickly found himself attaining ‘senior editor’ status. The experience of working under strict censorship to please a dictatorial regime must have been a chastening one, but may have prepared Bari Atwan for his next journalistic post in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia with the paper *al-Madina*. The author certainly found both working and political life quite difficult in all the Arab states, as an avowed ‘Palestinian, anti-Zionist and socialist’, and it was with some relief that finally he obtained a position with a Saudi-funded newspaper, in 1978, *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, based in London.

The personal freedoms of Western society came to the author as a largely pleasing experience, but one that required much cultural adjustment. In his text he casts a wry and humorous eye over the contextual interface between London’s social milieu and his youthful Arab coterie, including an unfortunate haircut from a Zionist hairdresser! Throughout the 1980s, he worked on two Saudi-London newspapers, but did not find his true journalistic home until, through funding provided by various Palestinian backers, he became editor-in-chief of the pan-Arabic and independent Arab nationalist paper *al-Quds al-Arabi* (Arab Jerusalem). He describes in some detail the many problems the paper faced, from being banned in some gulf states to legal action through the UK libel laws. No longer financially underpinned by some Arab potentate, it was sometimes a struggle to pay the staff on time, on top of which efforts were made to close the paper by powerful forces opposed to its independent views, particularly over the first Gulf War. Advertising was withdrawn, staff were poached, powerful forces within the Arab world applied pressure to change the policy of the paper, sometimes using the UK’s notorious libel laws (one unintentional action involved an Iraqi belly dancer from the Edgware Road). The paper and its associated website are now, however, firmly established, and provide an outstanding source of independent Arab opinion and a fearless defence of the Palestinian cause.

The dogged survival of *al-Quds al-Arabi* has established its editor-in-chief as both a presence in Arab politics and as a sought-after commentator on the Middle Eastern scene in general, and the Palestine-Israel problem in particular. He appears regularly on Al Jazeera, BBC World, Sky News, and CNN, and writes for many English language and foreign newspapers. As one would expect from an international journalist, there is an awful lot of namedropping in the text. Over the years, Bari Atwan has interviewed many important political figures ranging from Margaret Thatcher to Osama bin Laden and Yasser Arafat. With the latter he agreed and disagreed over a number of years, but he always valued Arafat’s

commitment to the Palestinian cause, and he paints a picture of Arafat's last days which is both poignant and tragic. Whilst realising that Arafat manipulated and controlled the PLO through a system of nepotism and bribery, he remains convinced that Arafat personally lived relatively frugally and was unconcerned about personal wealth. Bari Atwan subscribes to the theory that Arafat was poisoned, and certainly there is strong circumstantial evidence to corroborate this, some mentioned in passing in the text. The details of the author's interview with Osama bin Laden are contained in his book, *The Secret History of Al Qaeda*, published in 2006, and well-received in informed circles.

Bari Atwan has done well to survive the rigours of Arabic journalism, even at one remove in London, a journalism which he describes as typified by 'editorial interference from the owners, slavishness to social hierarchies, back stabbing and nepotism'. His independence also manifested itself in his criticism of the Oslo Accords from their inception in his position as a member of the Palestinian National Council. Here he found friends and allies in Edward Said and Mahmoud Darwish, both now sadly deceased, a great loss to the Palestinian cause. Becoming a British citizen, in 1985, was a cause of some gratification: he could now indulge in the democratic pleasures of the polling booth, a right of dubious currency, if available at all, in the Arab world (with the notable exception of the Palestinian elections of 2006). Citizenship has not affected his powers of memory sufficiently to remove the scars of the Balfour Declaration or the Mandate, but may have facilitated easier access to Gaza through the Draconian Israeli border inspection regime.

For all his personal suffering at the hands of the Zionist state, the author can still claim that the Palestine-Israel conflict can be solved simply: through 'peace and co-operation in a multicultural society in one democratic secular state for two peoples'. He does not want to 'destroy Israel', but refashion it and abolish its 'apartheid system', inherently antipathetic to the Jewish experience in history. Bari Atwan has rubbed shoulders with many of the movers and shakers of the Middle East, but for all that his essential modesty and compassion shine through, coupled with a committed but astute appraisal of the realities of the Arab world. There is much of interest in this book, providing as it does both a personal history of achievement, from an impoverished beginning in a refugee camp, to successful editor-in-chief and able spokesman for the Arab people in general and the Palestinian cause in particular.

John Daniels

Congo's Serfs

Jules Marchal, *Lord Leverhulme's Ghosts : Colonial Exploitation in the Congo*, Verso, 256 pages, hardback ISBN 9781844672394, £16.99

Of all Africa's territories colonised by Europeans, none has had a more horrific and miserable history than those which now constitute the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Even before the arrival of the Portuguese – the first Europeans – in 1482, African and Arab slave traders regularly raided the tribal groups which made up the population for slaves. Under the Portuguese, the forcible abduction of the inhabitants to meet the labour demands of European settlers in the New World, as well as African and Middle Eastern requirements, greatly expanded.

When the slave trade was banned in the nineteenth century, after centuries of gross crimes against humanity, the Congo was taken over by King Leopold II of Belgium, with the assistance of the explorer Henry Morton Stanley. This opened up an era of unlimited cruel and ruthless exploitation – above all, for the production of rubber – which continued with only moderate amelioration until the granting of independence in 1966.

Independence, however, did not usher in an age of freedom and improved living standards, as some had hoped. Internecine warfare between different factions, with the American CIA and Belgian interests manipulating events in the background, led to the imprisonment and murder of Patrice Lumumba, founder of the main liberation movement, the *Mouvement Nationale Congolais* (MNC), and many other deaths. Eventually, a totally corrupt and vicious regime was set up under Mobutu Sese Seko.

Mobutu's fall was brought about by a devastating new civil war, linked to the massacres of Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994. From this the regime of Laurent Kabila and, later, his son, Joseph, emerged. The latest phase in the process of never-ending misery is the result of the invasion in the east of forces commanded by a dissident Tutsi general, Laurent Nikunda. Some 250,000 refugees have fled before him, and many have been killed or have died in the ensuing chaos.

This book deals with British involvement in exploitation of the Congo while the Belgian authorities were still in control. William Lever – later Lord Leverhulme – the soap magnate from Port Sunlight in Liverpool, launched a palm oil producing enterprise, *Huileries du Congo Belge* (HCB) in 1909 to 1911.

In contrast with model conditions for workers at Port Sunlight, of which Lord Leverhulme was very proud, conditions for his employees in the Congo were appalling. An option was taken on 750,000 hectares of natural palm groves around Bumba and Barumbu on the River Congo, Lusanga on the River Kivilu, Basonga on the River Kasai, and Ingende on the River Ruki.

Native owners of palms were converted into wage labourers to be paid 25 centimes a day in 1911. Chiefs were paid for supplying labour, and a military force was established by the Belgian state to collect taxes and force villagers to seek employment with HCB in order to be able to pay.

Lord Leverhulme built a school for African children and claimed to have established facilities to provide welfare for all his employees. A report by Dr. Emile Lejeune, a medical officer in Congo Kasai province in 1923, however, stated that rations, accommodation and clothing were inadequate; the hospital intended for black workers was badly looked after and inadequately cleaned, and the medical services provided were subject to flagrant practical shortcomings.

A British Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, William Ormsby-Gore, in a report of September 1926, stated that the concession which Lord Leverhulme enjoyed in the Congo was 'unthinkable in a British Protectorate'. HCB considered the land containing the palm trees to be Company property. The inhabitants were, in effect, serfs coerced by the harshest methods to collect the fruit of the palm trees for a pittance.

In 1937, the chief of the Yongo chefferies had 47 men birched for failing to deliver their quota of fruit. A drunken orgy for the labour recruiters occurred later on the same day, which led to a revolt that was savagely repressed after a European was killed.

During the Second World War, when the Belgian authorities were operating in exile in London, ever more stringent coercion was imposed to maintain the supply of palm oil.

After his retirement in 1989, Jules Marchal, who lived in the Congo for many years as a Belgian diplomat, documented what he had seen in a number of volumes of which this book is one. It is a complete exposure of the appalling exploitation of the population of the Congo by ruthless coercion in what became the private realm of Lord Leverhulme there. Although times have changed and palm oil production by Lever Brothers has ceased, it is still important to record the realities of imperial rule.

The impact of this devastating study is unforgettable. Terrible as the present situation is, no reasonable person could wish to return to the Congo's past.

Human Action

Conor Foley, *The Thin Blue Line: How Humanitarianism Went to War*, Verso, 256 pages, hardback ISBN 9781844672899, £ 14.99

This provocative, informative and useful book is well worth reading. Essential reading in fact for anyone who is serious about building a more just international order, and who is ready to start from where we are, not from where we would like to be.

The author seems to have landed up in nearly every crisis location – Uganda, Kosovo, Angola, Bosnia, Colombia, Sri Lanka and Indonesia – under one or another humanitarian umbrella in recent years.

His theme is the relationship between humanitarian activity, which ought to make human need, rather than borders, its priority, and the State sovereignty on which the United Nations (and most of the political world, since Westphalia) has been based.

My own belief is that the UN never did confer on states quite the sovereignty that they now claim for themselves. Article 2.7 of the UN Charter affirms that the charter does nothing ‘to authorise the UN to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state’. Surely, there is an open door for the lawyers. What is domestic jurisdiction? Can a state claim that such jurisdiction overrides the obligations set out in the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights? It does not, of course, follow that, as the book rather implies, military intervention is the only or the most effective form of intervention. In Kosovo, the observers of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) did a very effective job, until they were thrown out by those who had sent them there, and the NATO militarists took over.

Intervention of any kind is now suspect because it has been used too often for national priorities other than humanitarian, and very selectively. We will live with the lies of Iraq for a very long time. No one is suggesting, for obvious practical reasons, military intervention on behalf of the beleaguered and blockaded inhabitants of Gaza, for instance. Nor is it being suggested on behalf of the occupied inhabitants of Tibet.

There are questions still to be answered. Why did we do our best to maintain the unity of Federal Nigeria when Biafran secession was the issue, but do our best to break up the Yugoslav federation when Croatian and Slovenian secession was the issue?

Who are all these humanitarian non-governmental organisations referred to frequently in the book? Is the Campaign Against the Arms

Trade one of them? If not, why not? I suspect that it is the Oxfams and the Christian Aids who qualify, not the groups with more radical programmes.

The author fairly recognises many of the problems. Of NGO work in general he concludes that, while such activity can ‘prick the world’s conscience that “something must be done” simultaneously it reinforces the delusion that humanitarian action can ever be enough’.

I would have liked more stress on the obvious truth, which is that the real work of the agencies is to awaken their home populations to the need for radical political action and cultural change. After all, the budgets of all the agencies put together are miniscule by comparison with national budgets, and worse than miniscule when looked at alongside the trillion and quarter dollars the world spends on weapons and war every year. The unjust way in which we run our world is a permanent ongoing disaster in its own right.

The author recognises that some agencies are committed to playing safe. How well I remember little Operation Omega, based in Calcutta in 1971, bravely running through East Pakistan’s borders and refusing to use any name but that of Bangladesh. Quite unlike Save the Children, who stuck to ‘East Pakistan’ until the Foreign Office declared that it was safe to do otherwise. It was in Calcutta, too, that I saw first-hand the competitive nature of NGO work. Who got what time on television and radio, so that activity was noted, and donors encouraged at home, was a major part of NGO concern. The bottom line is always there even in the world of altruism.

I hope this book will push many to ask questions and to take action. We need an International Criminal Court which has the teeth it needs to deal with the major violators of international law, not just the nastier small fish. We need a range of non-military as well as military/ policing options in advance for when the time comes for legitimate UN-authorized intervention to protect the innocent from cruelty and violence.

Most of all, we need a people with a sense of involvement in the reality of political power. We, in the nice liberal democratic West, deceive ourselves if we think we have influence in international affairs. Most people have never seen the UN Charter or the Declaration of Human Rights. Few could name those who represent our country on the various important UN agencies. Vital reports like that of the 1978 Special Session on Disarmament gather dust on shelves.

The great merit of *The Thin Blue Line* is that it will stir some into activity. It is not only Obama who thinks that the future is ours to make.

Bruce Kent

Endless Conflict

Julie Flint and Alex de Waal, *Darfur: A New History of a Long War*, Zed Books, hardback ISBN 9781842779491 £40, paperback ISBN 9781842779507, £12.99

The seemingly endless conflict in Darfur in the western Sudan has led, over the last twenty years, to the deaths of hundreds of thousands and the displacement of millions of the region's inhabitants. Across the world, thinking people have been horrified by reports of appalling suffering on a mass scale, without being fully aware of the root causes. Julie Flint and Alex de Waal have provided, in their revised and updated book, a comprehensive and detailed account of this extremely complex and confused ongoing tragedy. It is unlikely to be surpassed as the authoritative story of events up to the present, although the ultimate conclusion still lies in the future.

Darfur is a vast area stretching from its well-watered south to the semi-desert in the north. It was incorporated into the Sudan by its British colonial rulers in 1917, following the overthrow of its independent Sultan, Ali Dinar, in the previous year. When the Sudan gained its independence, in 1956, Darfur formed a western province, which was later divided into North, West and South Darfur.

Prior to recent upheavals, the population was estimated at six millions, but was divided between forty and ninety different ethnic or tribal groups. The main African groups were the Fur, the Tungur, the Meidob, the Zaghawa, the Berti, the Birgid and the Massalit, but Arab people had moved into the territory from the fourteenth century onwards. Although many of these lived as separate tribes, with their own chiefs, there had been much intermixing, which was reflected in the genetics of a large part of the population.

Ethnic tensions existed and were, to some extent, fostered under British rule. Following independence, however, they were exacerbated partly by desiccation of the northern semi-deserts, which caused nomadic Rizeigat Arabs to move south. Other Arabs, previously domiciled in neighbouring Chad, to the west, fled to Darfur to escape civil war there, and teamed up with local Arabs to drive out native Fur people. The civil war between the Sudanese Government and the south – where the Sudanese People's Liberation Army, under John Garang, eventually achieved many of their objectives – also overflowed at times into Darfur.

These and other frictions led to clashes resulting in deaths and the

destruction of property, followed by reprisals, which built up into a crisis situation. Arab militias were formed – the Janjawiid – which attacked, looted and burnt villages inhabited by African populations, and the latter formed defence organisations which responded in kind. In 1987, the first Arab-Fur civil war broke out, resulting in vast destruction, many deaths, the perpetration of atrocities and the flight of populations from their home villages.

In 1989, Omar Bashir seized power in Khartoum, and used the Sudanese Army to subdue those who took up arms, but allowed the Janjawiid to attack, loot and burn defenceless villages with impunity.

In 2002, conferences were held at Nyertete and Kass to seek an end to the fighting, but in vain. The Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) was therefore formed by the Zaghawa and the Fur to resist the Government and the Janjawiid by force of arms. The Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and other rebel groups were formed with a similar purpose in view. Total war followed in 2003/2004, and resulted in a large part of the African population being massacred or driven from their homes. The most appalling atrocities were perpetrated, mainly by the Janjawiid, but the rebels were also guilty of some disgraceful deeds.

Peace talks at Abuja in Nigeria trailed on for months, while the fighting continued, but when agreement emerged in May 2006 the main rebel groups refused to sign it.

Although the UN subsequently took over from the African Union Mission in the Sudan (AMIS), and the Sudanese Government, with great reluctance, agreed to the entry of a UN/African Union force (UNAMID), the breakdown of society has continued. It is estimated that five million of the six million people of Darfur are either in camps in Darfur and neighbouring Chad, or are dependent on aid anyway. Restoring the peace is unfortunately beyond the UNAMID force alone, which has substantially fewer troops than the 26,000 originally promised.

The Janjawiid has fragmented, and some sections have even turned against the Sudanese Government, while rebel groups have also broken up. Meanwhile, the fighting continues.

Over all, there can be no doubt of the criminal guilt of the Government, which used its own forces and encouraged the Janjawiid militias to inflict death and suffering on the population on a devastating scale. The rebel groups, however, have also contributed to the catastrophe.

Elections in 2009 throughout the Sudan have been reluctantly agreed by President Omar Bashir in return for the foreign aid received to restore the country following the 2005 peace agreement with the south. Whether he

will refrain from interfering with these if he is threatened by electoral defeat, however – particularly as this might force him to face charges on which he has been indicted in the International Criminal Court in The Hague – is surely open to considerable doubt.

He none the less agreed at a Khartoum meeting, in November 2008, to a new ceasefire in Darfur, and to outline proposals designed to restore the displaced to their homes and compensate them. This would require a new peace conference, which Qatar has offered to host, but various rebel groups have not agreed to this and are fighting on.

People of goodwill throughout the world should maximise the call to end hostilities. A continuation of the fighting can only lead to more destruction and suffering. This book is an indispensable guide for those who seek to understand the background and – hopefully – to raise their voices in favour of peace and of negotiations to restore the situation. I recommend it without reservation, and hope that it will be read widely by specialist and general readers alike.

Stan Newens

In Common

Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All*, University of California Press, 376 pages, hardback ISBN 9780520247260, £17.95

Peter Linebaugh is Professor of History at the University of Toledo, Ohio, on whose web site he is described as a student of E.P. Thompson. He received his PhD at the University of Warwick in 1975. He is the author of several books and articles on social history and the law, the first being *The London Hanged* (1991) on crime and the death penalty in 18th century England.

The Magna Carta Manifesto has a wide agenda connecting not only with the recent attacks on civil liberties such as Guantanamo Bay, torture and extraordinary rendition, but also with globalisation, the loss of commons, and the current need to revive the world economy from the effects of capitalism's invention of new vehicles for greed.

Social security as a human right is not as new as those recalling only Lloyd George, Beveridge, or the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights may think. Linebaugh's book includes the full text of *The Great Charters of the Liberties of England; or, Magna Carta and the*

Charter of the Forests. The author is at pains in the early part of the book to emphasise that at Runnymede it was not simply that the arbitrary power of King John was being regulated; practices which empowered the barons were being codified along with the entitlements to commons that benefited many more. The author's concern with 'commoning practices' involves wide interpretation of the word common, which he allows as both noun and verb. Note, for example, the entitlement of a widow to fuel and timber for building, in Chapter 7 of Magna Carta:

'At her husbands death, a widow may have her marriage portion and inheritance at once and without trouble. She shall pay nothing for her dower, marriage portion or any inheritance that she and her husband held jointly on the day of his death. She may remain in her husband's house for forty days after his death, and within this period her dower shall be assigned to her, and she shall have meanwhile her reasonable estovers in the common. There shall be assigned to her for her dower a third of all her husband's land which was his in his lifetime, unless a smaller share was given at the church door. No widow shall be forced to marry so long as she wishes to live without a husband, provided that she gives security not to marry without our consent ...'

It seems odd that a chapter dealing with inheritance and the need for the king's permission to marry mentions also the entitlement to take sticks for heating and cooking from a neighbour's forest. Not all widows would be of interest to the king, but some would have estates too large to be safely combined with others. All would need warmth and food.

Linebaugh documents some of the responses to the enclosure of common land, such as Kett's rebellion in East Anglia in the summer of 1541 when tens of thousands set up camp throughout lowland England rather than march on London. Sixteen thousand tradesmen, yeomen and commoners developed an alternative government under the Oak of Reformation. They denounced enclosers who 'regarded only private lucre and peculiyere commodyte ... to the decay and utter destruccune of the Comon welthe'. Later, similar processes in the colonies deprived people of access to land, and, in India for example, caused the greater incidence of famine.

The author has a fascinating chapter on Magna Carta and the US Supreme Court, listing in chronological order the number of citations of Magna Carta in Supreme Court cases, and discussing the effects on the movements for independence, on slavery, on the civil war, and on the US constitution and its amendments. He makes the comment that only by ignoring the history of land use in North America before colonisation could the law have developed as it did. It had to be presumed that the continent had been uninhabited.

In three concluding chapters the other civil liberties founded in Magna Carta come to the fore and for good reason. We are reminded not only of twentieth century fascism, but also that in the United Kingdom proposals for detention without charge for 42 days were only narrowly defeated recently, and that they remain on the table. The spirit of those who required the king's signature on Magna Carta is required to 'open the secret state', to challenge the privatisation of public assets and the military, to devise new forms of common wealth, and to restore all that G W Bush and the 'coalition of the willing' forget in the war on terror. Militant movements opposed to American imperialism are increasing. The ideals of free human beings enjoying freedom from want and freedom from fear are codified in the 1966 UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, one of the covenants implementing the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It remains our task to realise those ideals.

Christopher Gifford

Destructive Democracy

Gail Vida Hamburg, *The Edge of the World*, Miráre Press, 172 pages, paperback ISBN 9780979827594, £7.99

John F Kennedy and his First Lady Jacqueline journeyed to the small island of Chomumbhar in 1962. Their state visit was intended to elicit an alliance with the Americans from the peoples of this imaginary republic in the Indian Ocean. The journey was not a wasted one. Press coverage of the visit put Chomumbhar on the world map, and the American military formed a coalition with the island that was to last more than four decades.

Post-colonialism is at the heart of Gail Vida Hamburg's tale of fear and betrayal, love and hatred, religion and politics, as seen through the eyes of the citizens of Chomumbhar. The Prime Minister, Ferdinand D'Souza, wishes to accommodate the Americans. He does so by welcoming JFK and Jackie, as well as the ensuing US military installations. America is keen to set up bases on this small island in the Indian Ocean, as Chomumbhar is an important location in their fight against all things 'non-democratic'. The spreading threat of Communism is subdued on the sleepy island by the American military presence. But the implementation of US led Democracy has devastating consequences.

With the military bases come alcohol, prostitution, beatings and death. Thirteen-year-old Maya Gomez vanishes one summer's day. She had been

working at a bar in Riyalh, on the western coast of the island, close to the largest of the US military bases. Her native parents were glad of the money their young daughter was bringing home, but were unaware of her job at the bar. When she reappears, a month later, her face is swollen and bleeding and her front teeth are missing – ‘a quiet American’ had beaten her after taking her virginity.

The Edge of the World is dominated by the cracking open of a beautiful, sleepy, imaginary island and its inhabitants following invasion by a huge force. Each character’s life is damaged by the weight of this oppressing power, which pushes the small island into the spotlight. The world is turned upside down for all Chomumbhar’s citizens when the edge of the world becomes the centre.

Abi Rhodes



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