The Devil's Feather

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Published by Macmillan

>>>**Reuters**
>>>Wednesday, 15 May 2002, 16:17 GMT 17:17 UK
>>>Filed by Connie Burns, Freetown, Sierra Leone, West Africa

Spate of brutal killings

Four months after President Kabbah announced an end to Sierra Leone's bloody civil war a spate of brutal killings in Freetown threatens to undermine the fragile peace. Police blame former rebel soldiers for the savage murders. Attacked at intervals since peace was declared in January, the five victims were found raped and hacked to death in their own homes.

A government source said yesterday, 'The killing of these women bears the trademark ferocity of the rebels. Sierra Leone has just emerged from a decade of savage conflict, and police believe a group of dissidents is responsible. We call on everyone to put an end to bloodshed.'

Detective Inspector Alan Collins of Manchester CID, who is in Freetown as part of a British training force, points to the serial nature of the murders. 'It's difficult to say how many people are involved at this stage, but the evidence suggests the crimes are linked. We are looking for a disturbed individual, or group, who acquired a taste for killing during the war. Rape and murder were commonplace then, and violence against women doesn't stop just because peace is declared.'

>>>**Reuters**
>>>Tuesday, 4 June 2002, 13:06 GMT 14:06 UK
>>>Filed by Connie Burns, Freetown, Sierra Leone, West Africa

Three suspects charged

Three teenagers, formerly members of Foday Sankoh's RUF child army, were charged yesterday with the murders of five women. They were arrested after the attempted abduction of Amie Jonah, 14. Ahmad Gberebana, 19, Johnny Bunumbu, 19, and Katema Momana, 18, were caught and detained by Miss Jonah's family when the girl's screams alerted a neighbour.

A police spokesman said the teenagers were badly beaten before being handed over to the authorities. 'They caused great distress to Miss Jonah,' he said, 'and her father and brothers were understandably angry.' Fear has been rampant in Freetown since the gruesome discoveries of five murdered women. All were raped and disfigured by machete wounds.

In two cases identification was impossible. 'They may never be named,' said Detective Inspector Alan Collins of Manchester Police, who is advising the enquiry team. 'The civil war saw nearly half of this country's 4.5 million population displaced and we've no idea which region these women came from.'

He confirmed that a request for a British pathologist to provide expert assistance has been withdrawn. 'I understand that Gberebana, Bunumbu and Momana have provided the police with full confessions. Investigators are satisfied they have the right men in custody.'

The three teenagers were given medical treatment before being transferred to Pademba Road prison to await trial.

Paddy's Bar

One

I DON'T KNOW if that story was picked up in the West. I believe some interest was shown in South Africa, but only because rape and murder had been high on that country's agenda for some time. I was transferred to Asia shortly afterwards, so I never learnt the outcome of the trial. I assumed the teenagers were convicted because justice, like everything else in Sierra Leone, was subject to economic restrictions. Even if the court went to the expense of appointing a public defence lawyer, confessions of guilt, with graphic details of how each victim was murdered, would attract a summary sentence.

I know Alan Collins was troubled by the indictments, but there was little he could do about it when his request for an experienced pathologist was refused. He was in a difficult position – more an observer than an adviser – with less than two weeks of his secondment left at the time of Amie Jonah's abduction, and the youths' descriptions of their crimes effectively sealed their fate. Nevertheless, Alan remained sceptical.

'They were in no fit state to be questioned,' he told me. 'Amie's family had reduced them to pulp. They'd have said anything the police wanted them to say rather than face another beating.'

He was also troubled by the crime scenes. 'I saw two of the bodies in situ,' he said, 'and neither of them looked like a gang attack. Both women were huddled in the corners of the rooms with their heads and shoulders sliced to ribbons and defence wounds to their arms. It looked to me as if they were trying to

protect themselves from a single individual who attacked from the front. A gang would have been slashing at them from all sides.'

'What can you do?'

'Very little. No one's been interested since the youths confessed. I've written a report, pointing up the anomalies, but there are precious few doctors in Freetown, let alone forensic pathologists.' He smiled ruefully. 'The thinking seems to be that they deserve what they get because there's no doubt they were trying to abduct young Amie.'

'If you're right, won't the killer strike again? Won't that exonerate the boys?'

'It depends who he is. If he's a local, then probably . . . but if he's one of the foreign contingent – ' he shrugged – 'I'm guessing he'll export his activities elsewhere.'

It was that conversation which increased my suspicions of John Harwood. When he was first pointed out to me in Paddy's Bar – Freetown's equivalent of Stringfellows – I knew I'd seen him before. I wondered if it was in Kinshasa in 1998 when I was covering the civil war in the Congo. I recalled him being in uniform then – almost certainly as a mercenary because the British army wasn't involved in that conflict – but I didn't think he'd been calling himself John Harwood.

By the spring of 2002 in Sierra Leone he was dressed in civvies and had a bad reputation. I saw him in three fights while I was there, and heard about others, but he was never on the receiving end of the damage. He had the build of a terrier – middling height, lean muscular frame, strong neck and limbs – and a terrier's ferocity once he had his teeth into someone. Most of the ex-pats gave him a wide berth, particularly when he was drinking.

At that time Freetown was full of foreigners. The UN was coordinating efforts to put the country back on its feet, and most of the ex-pats worked for the international press, NGOs, religious missions or world charities. A few, like Harwood, had

private contracts. He was employed as chauffeur/bodyguard to a Lebanese businessman, who was rumoured to have interests in a diamond mine. Once in a while the pair of them vanished abroad with heavily armoured cases, so the rumours were probably true.

Along with everyone else, I tended to avoid him. Life was too short to get involved with loners with chips on their shoulders. However, I did make one overture during the six months I was there when I asked him to pass on a request for an interview with his boss. Diamonds were a hot topic in the aftermath of conflict. The question of who owned them and where the money was going had been a bone of contention in Sierra Leone for decades. None of the wealth was fed back into the country and the people's resentment at their grinding, subsistence-level poverty had been the spark which ignited the civil war.

Predictably, I got nowhere near Harwood's boss, but I had a brief exchange with Harwood himself. None of the local women would cook or clean for him, so most evenings he could be found eating alone at Paddy's Bar, which was where I approached him. I said I thought our paths had crossed before, and he acknowledged it with a nod.

'You're bonnier than I recall, Ms Burns,' he said in a broad Glaswegian accent. 'Last time I saw you you were a little mouse of a thing.'

I was surprised he remembered my name, even more surprised by the backhanded compliment. The one fact everyone knew about Harwood was that he didn't like women. It poured out of him under the influence of Star beer, and gossip had it that he was in the tertiary stage of syphilis after contracting it from a whore. It was a convenient explanation for his aggressive misogyny, but I didn't believe it myself. Penicillin was too freely available for any westerner to progress beyond the primary stage.

I told him what I wanted and placed a list of questions on the table, together with a covering letter explaining the nature

of the piece I was planning. 'Will you pass these on to your boss and give me his answer?' Access to anyone was difficult except through a third party. The rebel fighters had destroyed most of the communications network and, with everyone living in secure compounds, it was impossible to blag your way past the guards without an appointment.

Harwood prodded the papers back at me. 'No to both requests.'

'Why not?'

'He doesn't talk to journalists.'

'Is that him speaking or you?'

'No comment.'

I smiled slightly. 'So how do I get past you, Mr Harwood?'

'You don't.' He crossed his arms and stared up at me through narrowed eyes. 'Don't push your luck, Ms Burns. You've had your answer.'

My dismissal, too, I thought wryly. Even with a score of ex-pats within hailing distance, I didn't have the nerve to press him further. I'd seen the kind of damage he could do, and I didn't fancy being on the receiving end.

Paddy's was the favoured watering-hole of the international community because it remained open throughout the eleven-year conflict. It was a large open-sided bar-cum-restaurant, with tables on a concrete veranda, and it was a magnet for local hookers in search of dollars. They learnt very quickly to avoid Harwood after he hurt one so badly that she was hospitalized. He spoke pidgin English, which is the lingua franca of Sierra Leone, and cursed the girls vilely in their own tongue if they tried to approach him. He called them 'devils' feathers' and lashed out with his fists if they came too close.

He was rather more careful around Europeans. The charities and missions had a high percentage of female staff, but if a white woman jogged his arm he always let it go. Perhaps he was intimidated by them – they were a great deal brighter than he was, with strings of letters after their names – or perhaps he

knew he wouldn't be able to get away with it. The less articulate black girls were easier targets for his anger. It persuaded most of us that he was a racist as well as a woman-hater.

There was no telling how old he was. He had a shaven head, tattooed with a winged scimitar at the base of his skull, and the sun had dried his skin to leather. When drunk, he boasted that he'd been in the SAS unit that stormed the Iranian embassy in London in 1980 and the scimitar was his badge of honour. But, if true, that would have put him in his late forties or early fifties, and his devastating punches suggested someone younger. Despite the strong Scottish accent, he claimed to come from London, although no one in the UK ex-pat community believed him, any more than they believed that John Harwood was the name he had been born with.

Nevertheless, if Alan Collins hadn't made his remark about the foreign contingent, it wouldn't have occurred to me that there might be more to Harwood's violence than anyone realized. Even when it did, there was nothing I could do about it. Alan had returned to Manchester by then and the murders of the women had quickly faded from memory.

I ran my suspicions past a few of my colleagues, but they were sceptical. As they pointed out, the killings had stopped with the arrest of the boys, and Harwood's modus operandi was to use his fists, not a machete. The tenor of their argument seemed to be that, however despicable Harwood was, he wouldn't have raped the women before murdering them. 'He can't even bring himself to *touch* a black,' said an Australian cameraman, 'so he's hardly likely to soil himself by dipping his wick into one.'

I gave it up because the only evidence I could cite against Harwood was a particularly brutal attack on a young prostitute in Paddy's Bar. A good hundred people had witnessed it, but the girl had taken money in lieu of prosecution so there wasn't even a report of the incident. In any case, my stint in Sierra Leone was almost at an end and I didn't want to start something

that might delay my departure. I persuaded myself it wasn't my responsibility and confined justice to the dustbin of apathy.

By then I'd spent most of my life in Africa, first as a child, then working for newspapers in Kenya and South Africa, and latterly for Reuters as a newswire correspondent. It was a continent I knew and loved, having grown up in Zimbabwe as the daughter of a white farmer, but by the summer of 2002 I'd had enough. I'd covered too many forgotten conflicts and too many stories of financial corruption. I planned to stay a couple of months in London, where my parents had been living since 2001, before moving on to the Reuters bureau in Singapore to write about Asian affairs.

The night before I left Freetown for good, I was in the middle of packing when Harwood came to my house. He was escorted to my door by Manu, one of the Leonean gate-guards, who knew enough about the man's reputation to ask if I wanted a chaperone. I shook my head, but protected myself by talking to Harwood on my veranda in full view of the rest of the compound.

He studied my unresponsive expression. 'You don't like me much, do you, Ms Burns?'

'I don't like you at all, Mr Harwood.'

He looked amused. 'Because I wouldn't pass on your request for an interview?'

'No.'

The one-word response seemed to throw him. 'You shouldn't believe everything people say about me.'

'I don't have to. I've seen you in action.'

A closed expression settled on his face. 'Then you'll know not to cross me,' he murmured.

'I wouldn't bet on it. What do you want?'

He showed me an envelope and asked me to mail it in London. It was a common request to anyone going home because the Leonean postal service was notoriously unreliable. The usual routine was to leave the package open so that the

bearer could show Customs at both ends that there was nothing illegal in it, but Harwood had sealed his. When I refused to accept it unless he was prepared to reveal the contents, he returned it to his pocket.

'You'll be needing a good turn from me one day,' he said.

'I doubt it.'

'If you do, you won't get it, Ms Burns. I have a long memory.'

'I don't expect to meet you again, so the situation won't arise.'

He turned away. 'I wouldn't bet on it,' he said in ironic echo. 'For people like us the world's smaller than you think.'

As I watched him walk to the gate, I was curious about the name I'd glimpsed on the envelope, 'Mary MacKenzie', and the last line of the address, 'Glasgow'. It flipped a switch in my memory. It *was* Kinshasa where I'd seen him before – he'd been part of a mercenary group fighting for Laurent Kabila's regime – and the name he'd been using then was Keith MacKenzie.

I must have wondered why he'd assumed an alias, and how he'd acquired a passport as John Harwood, but it wouldn't have been for long. I spoke the truth when I'd said I didn't expect to meet him again.