Opening Extract from...

The Lure of the Honey Bird

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Published by Polygon

First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Polygon, an imprint of Birlinn Ltd.

Birlinn Ltd, West Newington House, 10 Newington Road, Edinburgh EH9 1QS

www.polygonbooks.co.uk

ISBN 978 1 84697 246 1
eBook ISBN 978 0 85790 581 9

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available on request from the British Library.

Text design by Teresa Monachino.

1

ADDIS ABABA

Addis Ababa leans against the slope of Mount Entoto like a child lying on the shoulder of its mother. I like to take the steep road up to the top of the mountain's long ridge every time I visit Ethiopia. The land beneath one's feet swoops away to the south, levelling out onto a vast plain where the hot light shimmers in shifting shades of green and blue, before it rises again up the sides of Mount Wuchacha.

From this vantage point, the city below looks like a vast shanty town, intersected by the sweeps of grand avenues. This is an illusion. It is true that most houses are small, that the walls, made of mud and straw, list alarmingly when of a certain age, and that all the roofs are of corrugated iron, on which the downpours of the Big Rains clatter with a roar. But unlike a shanty town, Addis Ababa has an underlying structure, even a certain orderliness. Each district has a controlling administration, called the 'kebele', and although many back streets are little more than lanes, treacherous with mud in the Rains, and negotiable only by donkey hooves and human feet, they are less haphazard than they seem.

They do not, however, yield their secrets easily. There are no A–Z maps of Addis Ababa, no plans or directories. To find the house of a friend you have to follow elaborate directions.

'You know the Bio-Diversity Foundation?'

'No.'

'Yes, you do. There's a sign near it saying A Twist Night Club. Turn up the lane beyond it, then the next one to the right after the Paradise Heaven Pasterie. You'll probably see a priest sitting on the corner under a striped umbrella. Our place is just beyond him.'

Up on Entoto, the thin cool air is spiced with the scent of eucalyptus and the city is a hundred years and a mind's journey away. Forty years ago, when I used to ride Meskel, my nervous grey pony, along the ridge of Entoto, the city was a fraction of the size it is now, the air was polluted only with the smoke of cooking fires and the sky was blue all the way down to the horizon. These days, one looks down on a smudge of pollution, and one is no longer struck by the sound of barking dogs, squealing children, saws, hammers and the clatter of small workshops, but the drone of traffic.

The temperature always catches you out in Ethiopia. The sun beats down with equatorial intensity on your bare skin. But as soon as you step into the shade, it's so cool that you need a sweater. As a result, a fussy person like me is constantly fiddling with hats and over-garments.

I was doing this while strolling along the Entoto ridge one afternoon in 1996, chatting with my companion, a mechanic called Tesfaye, who could perform miracles of rejuvenation on obsolete vehicles.

'So, Liz,' he said, 'I see you are feeling chilled. But in Britain I have heard that it is colder than Ethiopia. How are you managing there to keep warm?'

'Oh, you know, coats and hats and scarves. And in the winter we have heating inside our houses.'

He thought about this.

'Each person has a fire in their house, not only for the cooking? From where do you get the wood?'

'Not a fire exactly. We have a system called central heating. There are pipes that bring hot water into each room, supplying tanks called radiators. A radiator can warm a whole room.'

He nodded.

'That is a very nice idea. What is the fuel used to heat the pipes?'

'In our house we use gas.'

'Gas? In bottles?'

'No, it comes to the house in pipes.'

'Like water?'

'Like water.'

"I see. How do you pay for it?'

'We have meters which measure . . .'

But at this point we both became aware of something moving on the ground beside our feet. We bent down to look.

Across the ground in front of us ran a groove about a centimetre wide and deep. It started from a hole under the tarmac of the roadway to our right, and went in a straight line towards the field on our left. I saw that it was a miniature highway formed by the feet of ants, a column of which was marching in each direction. The ants coming from the field were carrying morsels of food in their mouths – a seed, a grain, or even a small flower. They disappeared down the hole under the tarmac, presumably to their nest, manoeuvring their loads past their colleagues, who were emerging from the hole and setting out along the road towards the field to fetch more supplies. Fascinated, Tesfaye and I squatted down to watch.

After a moment or so, I became aware of a pair of bare feet on the far side of the groove. Their soles were hardened to a thick hide, and their nails were as tough as horns. I struggled to my feet. An elderly man, carrying a farmer's stick over his

shoulders, which were draped in a cream-coloured shamma,[1] was looking down at us with concern.

'Have you lost something of value?' he asked Tesfaye in Amharic. 'Are you looking for it?'

Tesfaye explained about the ants. The man smiled, lowered one end of his stick to the ground and leaned on it, making himself comfortable.

'The ant is very good animal,' he said. 'I will tell you a story about him.'

He did so, pausing at the end of each sentence so that Tesfaye could translate for me, and finishing off with a moral which made us smile and nod. Then off he went, back to his village, and down the mountain went Tesfaye and I, never to meet again.

I told the story of the ant to the friends I was staying with. I mulled it over. I compared it in my head to the fables of Aesop and La Fontaine. I relished its perfection, and promised myself to preserve it in my diary. But somehow I never did. And it went clean out of my head. All I can now remember is a fragment about a man pinching his wife on the ankle, and the woman blaming the ants.

That moment in the cool air on Mount Entoto, with the trail of ants on the ground and the old farmer shaking back the folds of his shamma as he embellished his story with gestures, struck me with the force of a revelation. I felt as if I had caught a pearl falling from a treasure chest and that I only had to reach out and prise off the lid to reveal a priceless hoard.

That evening, in one of those reversals of experience that make life so enthrallingly dislocated in Ethiopia, I found myself standing on the lawn of the British Embassy under the windows

[1] The hand-woven shawl worn by both men and women in the highlands of Ethiopia.

of the august Edwardian residence, while the band of the Royal Marines in their shockingly white tropical uniforms and solar topees rapped out a drum tattoo. Beside me stood the director of the British Council in Ethiopia, Michael Sargent.

'I've got an idea,' I said, trying to restrain myself from grasping his sleeve. 'I want to tell you about it.'

'Tomorrow. My office. Eleven o'clock,' he said.

And so it began.

The British Council, like all successful organisations, is an evolving creature, reinventing itself in twists and turns of policy. One of its virtues is autonomy. Separate from the Foreign Office, it can pursue its generally worthwhile goals of development and 'soft diplomacy' at some distance from the machinations of Her Majesty's Government's foreign policy. Another strength is the British Council's ability to attract good people. Within its ranks there are of course the usual careerists, hacks and bureaucrats, but it has had more than its share of romantics and idealists, who plunge into whichever country they find themselves in and look for creative things to do.

It seems to me that there were more such people in the British Council thirty years ago. This was partly because they were out of touch with their controllers in London. It could take a day to book an expensive telephone call from Addis Ababa to Spring Gardens. The diplomatic bag went and returned once a week, and even telexes, when they came in, were cumbersome. Faxes speeded things up alarmingly, but with the advent of email, the game was up for the old style director, who ran his fiefdom with independence.

Michael Sargent was a British Council director in the grand old tradition.

❖

There can't be many cities in the world where you can step into a taxi, say 'British Council' and be taken to its doors, as you can in Addis Ababa. This gave some Addis Ababa residents an inflated idea of the importance of the British Council in British national life. I heard of an Ethiopian visiting London who hailed a taxi, said 'British Council', and was of course met with a blank stare.

I was nostalgic as I walked into Artistic Buildings where the British Council was then housed. Thirty years earlier, when I had been a teacher in Addis Ababa, I had often walked up those chipped marble steps to visit the library, where I had sent my students to register so that they could borrow books. I had hoped that they would develop the habit of reading, an unusual phenomenon in Ethiopia, where until recently there were no public libraries; many schools still possess almost no books, and the rare bookshop has few titles on its shelves. The British Council, after one of its policy reviews, was soon to close the library, but even when it was open the books on offer were often not accessible to inexperienced readers. (I remember leafing through Southey's *Life of Nelson* and shutting it with a snap.) Where were the books that Ethiopian children could read and enjoy? Where could they find reflections of themselves and their own world? It was these thoughts that had given me my big idea.

'Could you possibly,' I said to Michael Sargent, 'provide me with the means to make a journey or two out of Addis Ababa in order to collect some stories? What I'll do is write them in simplified English easy enough for schoolchildren to understand. I'll produce a couple of little books to give to schools so that children can have reading practice in English with familiar Ethiopian subject matter.'

Luckily for me, two developments had made my idea timely. The first was that the Ministry of Education had decided that English should be the medium of instruction from the seventh grade onwards. The rationale for this was partly to sidestep political and social tensions over language in a country with over seventy diverse tongues, all jockeying for formal recognition, and partly to make students competitive in the wider world beyond Ethiopia, where few people understand Amharic, the Ethiopian lingua franca, and even fewer can read its ancient and beautiful script.

The second factor was that, since the change of government in 1991, when the dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam had been swept from power, and the country had risked fracturing along ethnic and linguistic lines, the incoming government had offered some autonomy to Ethiopia's widely different ethnicities and had created fourteen regions. Each of these had its own ministries of education, culture, agriculture and so on, and were joined in a federation under the national government operating out of Addis Ababa.

I was barely aware of all this as I sat in Michael Sargent's office.

'Collect stories?' he said. 'Readers in English? Yes.'

He sat thinking, his blue eyes bright between the thick crown of white hair above them and the neat white beard beneath, while I sat, stupefied, appalled at what I was proposing.

'But,' he continued, 'two readers won't do. You should visit each of the fourteen regions and write two books of stories for each one.'

It's not easy to grasp the intricacies of Ethiopia's cultural, linguistic and religious life. Vastly varying landscapes and

climates, criss-crossing camel and mule trade routes, and two millennia of written history have produced not one but many widely differing cultures. Ethiopia's monuments include giant stelae from the fourth and fifth centuries, twelfth-century rock-hewn churches and seventeenth-century castles. In the churches, frescoes surge from the walls, and the priests may well show you manuscripts dating back hundreds of years illustrated with a vibrancy that makes you blink. Musical instruments, forms of dance, a love of wordplay in poetry and stories – all these make for a richness largely unknown to the rest of the world. Given all this, I knew in my bones, without any evidence to back it up, that there must be troves of oral stories waiting for me to discover.

It's galling to Ethiopians that the name of their country evokes in most outsiders images of poverty and famine.

'Going to Ethiopia?' the nurse in my London surgery said as I offered my arm for a typhoid jab. 'Do you take your own food with you?'

I tried to tell her that I was already salivating at the prospect of Ethiopia's delicious cuisine, but I could tell she didn't believe me.

This is ironic, given the hold which Ethiopia has in times past held on the imaginations of the West. The Mountains of Rasselas, Prester John and the Lion of Judah ring down the ages.[2]

The old heartland of Ethiopia is the central highland region, a massive cool plateau that rises in the north to the peaks of the

2 The legend of Prester John, a Christian king said to rule over a lost nation of Christians surviving amid a sea of Muslims, was popular in Europe in the Middle Ages. Samuel Johnson, exploiting the eighteenth-century obsession with the exotic, set his philosophical romance *Rasselas* in the mountains of Abyssinia, while the Lion of Judah, one of the titles of the Emperor Haile Selassie, echoes the Old Testament, so well known in the West, where the term refers to the Israelite tribe of Judah.

Semien Mountains, and is intersected by gorges below whose dizzying cliffs run powerful rivers: the Nile, the Omo and the Takazze. The land shelves down towards the Red Sea in the east in a series of giant lurches to bottom out in the Danakil Depression, an arid, inhospitable region which claims to be the hottest place on earth. In the north-west, an even more spectacular escarpment plunges down thousands of feet to the deserts of Sudan. Hollows in the Rift Valley, which runs from the north to the south, have filled with water to make a string of lakes. In the south-east there are vast plains of semi-arid grassland, and in the south-west steam rises from the hot lowlands where the Baro river snakes its marshy way towards the Nile.

Human beings, as they do everywhere, have created diverse ways to survive in these different and sometimes uncomfortable environments. It's hardly surprising that settled cereal farmers have for millennia cultivated the cool fertile uplands, that nomadic pastoralists populate the semi-arid east, and that small groups of hunter-gatherers have until recently lived in the relatively empty lands of the south-west. Michael Sargent was proposing to send me to visit all of them.

Back in London, I had the shakes about what I'd taken on. I would wake with a jerk in the night and horrid visions would crowd in. I'd get malaria. I'd die of exhaustion. No one in Ethiopia would know any stories and I would embarrass myself and everyone else.

I went over the memory of the old farmer on Entoto again and again. If only I could remember his fable about the ant! If only I could be sure that I'd find enough stories to fill a few little

books! I had on my shelf a much-thumbed volume of Ethiopian folk tales,[3] but it had been published half a century earlier, and by now, surely, such tales would no longer be living in people's memories. I delved into the London Library, losing my way as I always did in those dim, dusty stacks, but unearthed only collections of stories from all over Africa, the religious legends of Ethiopian saints and the tale of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

I started to think about stories. What was I looking for? What did the word 'story' mean, anyway?

I was a child with aunts. I had five in New Zealand, who seemed as remote and exotic as baroque goddesses on a *trompe l'oeil* ceiling, and six aunts and great aunts, whom I knew well, in Scotland. Their names were Mary, Marie, Mona, May, Martha and Nancy. My understanding of oral literature, if I had any at all, came from them.

Mary, my grandmother's sister, had fallen in love with a missionary to the Inuit in her youth. He had informed her that the Arctic was no place for a woman, so she had concentrated on her career as a nurse, ending up as matron of the Glasgow Royal Infirmary. She would sing snatches of verse and offer the tag ends of tales to small nieces like me. I took from her a love of rhymes and riddles and jingles.

Marie, my grandfather's sister, was among the millions of young female victims of the First World War forced into

3 *Fire on the Mountain* by Harold Courlander and Wolf Leslau (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1950).

involuntary spinsterhood by the shortage of young men. She looked after her parents into their old age and became a repository of knowledge on the history of our family. She made up genealogical trees, talked of an ancestress arraigned as a witch, and was proud of our Covenanting heroes standing up to the bullying troops of the Stewart kings. From her, I learned that history has meaning when it's the story of one's own family, and (much later) that tales of the ancestors move from history into myth, and don't necessarily agree with the views of real historians.

May was the one I knew least well. She was married to an uncle, and was from a Highland family.

'She sees beyond the every day world,' my mother would say, but May, like all my other aunts, was deeply religious, and her special gift was not something she liked to discuss. She was also the kindest woman alive. I learned from May to respect the unknowable.

Mona, Martha and Nancy were my father's sisters. Mona was a true storyteller. She was the headmistress of a girls' boarding school and had a weakness for titles and the aristocracy. She was bossy, imaginative and wildly generous. I adored her. She drove my sister and me all the way from London to Scotland in her small car, defiantly negotiating blind corners on the wrong side of the road, while she spun fabulous yarns of the Three Adventurers setting sail on the high seas. (I was the cabin boy.) Mona taught me that stories can be made up, embroidered, added to, changed, laughed over, remembered and forgotten.

Martha joined the Indian army as a nurse in 1939 and was sent to Burma, where she experienced such horrors in her jungle hospital that she could never speak of them afterwards without weeping. I suppose I learned from her the power of real stories,

of the dark emotions their telling and concealment suggests.

Nancy was a missionary in Angola. She too was a gifted storyteller. She sent us tales she had written herself. The postman would bring them in envelopes with colourful Angolan stamps, which I would soak off and stick into my album. Her stories were of leopards and monkeys, of brave missionaries and of Africans brought to salvation. For Nancy, stories were a means of spreading the gospel and bringing children to the Lord.

This education in story didn't seem much to go on as I contemplated my task in Ethiopia, but in retrospect I can see that my aunts didn't give me such a bad grounding, after all.

The night before I left London for my first story-collecting expedition, I dreamed that the man checking passports at the airport in Addis Ababa was the king of Saudi Arabia. He gave me an old-fashioned look as I approached the desk because my sleeves were too short. I was anxious, I suppose, at the thought of being a woman alone in Ethiopia. Ethiopia may be ahead of many countries in the world when it comes to the rights of women, but there is still a long way to go. Decades ago, during the 1960s, when I had been a young, single teacher of English in Addis Ababa, I had had to learn the art of side-stepping out of many an ambiguous situation.

Flying to Ethiopia, if you are lucky enough to get a window seat, is a lesson in geography. Once you have skimmed over the Alps, you find yourself peering down the funnel of Vesuvius. Shortly afterwards you are following the winding snake of the Nile, with irrigation channels glinting between the geometrically precise rectangles of Egyptian fields. Some time after Khartoum,

the great escarpment of the Ethiopian highlands rises beneath you, and you float across the plateau and land in Addis Ababa as the sun sinks behind the mountains in the west.

It was a soft landing for me on that first expedition because I was to stay with Robin and Merril Christopher, old friends from England. They were entertaining on the night of my arrival, and an hour after the plane had landed I had washed my face and hands, put on a clean blouse, and was sitting at their dinner table, listening to a Russian diplomat discoursing on the life of a young boy from a noble Ethiopian family who had somehow become a page boy at the court of Peter the Great. The Tsar had adopted him, and he had married a Russian princess. His great grandson was Alexander Pushkin.

The talk turned to the White Russians who had fled to Addis Ababa after the revolution, of the restaurants they had opened, their mysterious comings and goings and sudden disappearances. Nazis, too, had sought concealment in Ethiopia after the fall of Germany. One of them, indeed, had presided over the stables of the Imperial Bodyguard, where I had been taught to ride.

'Anybody remember that old Austrian woman?' I chipped in. 'The one who was reputed to have been the mistress of an archduke? I used to go to her restaurant on the Ambo road. She served up *Wiener schnitzel* and *apfeltorte*.'

'And those dynasties of Armenian merchants! And the Greeks! Why didn't anyone collect their stories?' everyone kept saying. 'It's too late now. They've all gone.'

Stories lost and gone. I tried not to feel discouraged.

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At over 2,300 metres, Addis Ababa is one of the highest capital cities in the world. High altitude induces in me a sense of irrepressible joy. The downside of this euphoria is an inability to sleep.

I did sleep that night, however, which was just as well, because in the days to come there would be a gruelling round of meetings as the details of the project were hammered out with the Ministry of Education, the British Council and the various officials whose blessing needed to be sought.

It was a piece of luck that the man at the British Council in charge of my project was Ato[4] Mulugeta Hunde. I was catching him just before he retired after his long career. I found myself looking at him carefully as we sat over our first lunch together in Castelli's, a venerable restaurant, which, with its *buffet fredo* and pasta *al funghi* would have graced a side street in old Palermo. Mulugeta was an old man, moving with an extreme slowness which belied the sharpness of his mind.

'Weren't you the librarian at the Council in the sixties?' I asked him at last. 'Wasn't it you who sat by the door with a rack of tickets in a long wooden box, and stamped the books as they went out?'

This memory of his early career enchanted him, and we promised each other that when we were less pressed for time we would meet and swap our life stories, and so we did, weeks later. This is what Mulugeta told me.

He had been working at the British Council for some years before the revolution which had toppled Emperor Haile Selassie,

4 Ato equates to Mr in English.

and when the old order changed he concentrated on keeping his head down and pressing on quietly with his work.

'I saw him, you know, His Majesty, when they were taking him away to the barracks on the day they arrested him. I was standing there, by the underpass, and he came past in a small Volkswagen car. A little car like that! For him! Children and young people were running along shouting abuse at him. 'Burn him! Burn him!' I was so shocked. It was very terrible. He was a man we all respected, with a very great charisma. To see him like that! On that day!'

A few months later, the British Council had sent him to Aberystwyth to do a degree in librarianship and he was out of the country for three years.

'When I was going into breakfast one day, some English students said to me, 'You Ethiopians are very cruel people. You have shot all your ministers.' I ran to find a newspaper, and it was true. All the cabinet ministers executed. Men I had looked up to!'

He had nearly decided to stay in Britain but in the end he had returned to Ethiopia and gone on working for the British Council. He had been afraid all the time, and with reason.

'Working for foreigners at that time, you know . . . Every day you go out of your house and you don't know if you will come home. Even our food! We could only buy tef[5] on the black market, because it was considered to be a bourgeois luxury. You had to pretend to eat only maize and if you wanted tef you must buy and eat it secretly. But time is healing, you know. Time is healing us from all those things.'

[5] The staple cereal unique to Ethiopia from which injera is made.