

Every Meal a Banquet, Every Night a Honeymoon: Unforgettable African Experiences  
by Peter Younghusband (Jonathan Ball R139.95)

17 December 2003

In this collection, Peter Younghusband looks back on a long and evidently harrowing career as foreign correspondent in Africa. There are, no doubt, equally gripping stories to be told about his time covering the Vietnam War, or his spell as Washington bureau chief for the *Daily Mail*, but he limits himself here to his African experiences. The book consists of some 23 stories culled from these experiences, most of them previously unpublished “stories behind the stories”, although here and there we have a transcript of an actual dispatch, say from his time as *Newsweek*'s African correspondent.

In the nature of the material, there is no easy coherence here: the stories vary from wry insights into the fraught married life of a foreign correspondent to highly coloured accounts of farcical and not-so-farcical revolutions and other upheavals all over the continent. The tone, too, varies from the wryly humorous to the tragic, the subject matter from the relatively trivial to the earth-shaking. Some of the stories would seem to be faithful first-person accounts of Younghusband's own experiences; others are near-fictionalised accounts of third-person protagonists, often with a good deal of imaginative extrapolation. Africa being Africa, many of the stories are concerned with war and upheaval, but there are also quieter pieces dealing with farming crises like a couple of copulating tractors or the creation of a rose garden for the discontented wife of a Karoo farmer.

In the intriguing human situations Younghusband reveals behind the headlines, there is the raw material for any number of short stories and novels. Here and there, even, we have what is, in treatment and theme, much more of a conventional short story than a report: “The Beermaker of Soweto”, for instance, goes into the minds of its characters in the way of an omniscient narrator rather than a reporter, as does, in very different vein, “The Oasis”. The title story is a hybrid of both techniques: though partly concerned with extremely bizarre facts surrounding the disappearance, somewhere in Africa, of the favourite son of a newspaper proprietor, Younghusband allows himself insight into the thoughts of various participants, the better to convey a sense of the tangled web of ambition and deceit which the reporter has to negotiate.

The only connecting element between many of the stories is the African setting – and Africa, of course, is notoriously multifarious and unpredictable, so that even here we are given a wild variety of terrains and situations, from diplomatic receptions to filthy backwaters, from Karoo farms to the British Club in Zanzibar, from shebeens in Soweto to wine farms in the Cape.

If there is, after all, common ground here, it is in the stance and attitude underlying all of these pieces: as befits a good reporter, it is objective and non-judgemental; as is necessary for a foreign correspondent, it is tough in the face of adversity, eschewing an easy sentimentalising of the often deeply upsetting experiences reported upon; but there is also an understated humanity surviving all the horrors and deprivations, an unblunted sensitivity to the sufferings not only of the countless victims of atrocities in Africa but also of the individual men and women who make it their business to report on these atrocities.

Youngusband does not shirk the excesses, the sleaze, the opportunism of reporting, but he insists on these as the price paid for the conditions under which these people work. In this regard, the story "Sadly, the Snake" is exemplary. It is an account of the life and death of one John Edlin, who combined all the worst excesses to which foreign correspondents are prone with extraordinary kindness and generosity. The latter proved to be his undoing, in that, sent to Ethiopia at the time of the terrible famine, he became traumatised, took leave from his job, and turned his formidable if alcohol-soaked energies into the creation of a refugee centre for starving children. His employers were not pleased by his philanthropic venture: "Correspondents were hired to report noble causes, not to create them."

There is nothing sentimental about Youngusband's evident admiration and affection for Edlin's humanity; he can be quite brisk about what he sees as misplaced emotion getting in the way of good reporting. He cites the case of a female reporter in Vietnam "who went to pieces in a nasty situation and insisted on tearfully cradling the heads of wounded marines. She was quickly flown out."

There is, finally, for all the scrupulously non-partisan reporting, a sense here of a basic decency, of standards of humanity that remain inviolate even in the most extreme of conditions. Reporting on the Rhodesian war, Youngusband can convey the stoic ordinariness of white Rhodesians intent on preserving the privileges they feel they have worked for, without shirking the extreme brutality of the methods of the Selous Scouts. He can express grudging admiration for the efficiency of the South African Intelligence Service in the Apartheid era, without suggesting that this in any way makes the regime itself defensible. He can give us, in "Sarah Barrell", an admiring portrait of a woman who was, before she became a foreign correspondent, a high-class prostitute, and who ended her days as the mistress of an officer in the Rhodesian army. He can write dispassionately and yet movingly about the death of his son, killed by a mistimed terrorist bomb in Cape Town.

*Every Meal a Banquet* testifies, in a most engrossing and often entertaining way, to a life of courage and initiative. More unusually, it reflects a humanity sobered but not embittered by experiences so extreme as to be thinkable for the rest of us only as newspaper reports. This book forces us to reflect on the processes whereby those reports reach us, and the price paid by the reporters. .