

Brooks on Books African, June, 2017

1. Where Giants Trod/1989 by Monty Brown

There is a definite subset of folks writing about certain sections of Africa—think, the Sahara, Zimbabwe and South Africa, the Congo, Kenya—which is clearly adventure and/or nostalgia driven. In a sense people, often white people, showing off as part of the “been to” phenomenon. Sometimes these books are really intentionally bragging [think Stanley] but are sometimes unintentionally historical records. That is, who has written critically of the Northern Frontier District/NFD in Kenya? Practically nobody because there seems to be no important historical or political point. Turkanaland is hot and dry and lifeless. Some of these narratives are self-serving, but NOT this book. Brown devoted 5 years to researching the late 19th century expeditions to Lake Turkana and environs and the attendant history (1886-1920); and he included some Ethiopian history and British Empire history. Nice stuff, actually, with good maps. Taken together with In Teleki’s Footsteps, Bwana Karani, and Journey to the Jade Sea, you get a nice view of this torrid land where now you can take 5-day camel safaris finished off with cold beer and tiramisu. And just when you think you’re sated, find Permanent Savings by Ahmed Muhidin/Mwalimu Sharu about Moyale in the NFD and Dust by Yvonne Owuor.

Now to be fair, see the following URLs:

- a. <http://www.visitturkanaland.com>
- b. <http://www.ancient-origins.net/turkana>
- c. <http://www.turkanabasin.org/2016/04/a-site-tour-around-nariokotome-the-archaeology-of-the-holocene-and-a-bit-of-digging-in-the-dirt/>

2. The Boy Who Spat in Sargrenti’s Eye/2013 by Manu Herbstein

Ghana is one of the epi-centers of new research in African history leading to readable and overdue academic history. Abina and the Important Men/2013 by Trevor Getz is the landmark title. Herbstein’s is the second of his that I

have read. It may be pitched to younger readers but its content is adult. The book purports to be the diary written between 1872 and 1874 about the British attack on Kumasi. It was composed by the young Kofi Gyan from a royal family of Cape Coast who had to flee to Elmina. It is a very convincing account, and one finds out at the end that it is historically accurate fiction, but fiction nevertheless. What the author has done, as he did in *Brave Music of a Distant Drum* is to find a very accessible vehicle for rendering very painful history.

3. *Java Hill: An African Journey*/2013 by T. P. Manus Ulzen

This is the fascinating story of a family which has members all over the world and whose name dates back to the 16th century and perhaps earlier. It is the story of how the Dutch exploration of the West African coast, the northern South American coast, and the islands of Indonesia created an unintended network of related people. The Ulzen family of this book is the one centered in Elmina of present day Ghana. It is also the story of a family's dedication to following and tracing the threads of genealogy over centuries and continents. This book presents the broad view; *The Boy Who Spit in Sargent's Eye* presents a connected but more narrow view in a format that is more convincing than Ulzen's.

4. *Valiant Gentlemen*/2016 by Sabina Murray

Drawn to the story of Roger Casement in Africa and having been charmed by Mario Vargas's *The Dream of the Celt* I took up this book with eager anticipation. The novel draws the lives of Roger Casement and his lifelong friend Herbert Ward and Ward's Argentinian wife, Sarita Sanford. Murray's goal she states is to sketch these lives with the anticipation of World War I but without these people knowing that the war was coming. Casement is a shadowy figure in anybody's account, and you get the suggestion that the Casement of the Irish cause suffered from ennui rather than conviction. All his involvement in Ireland led to a disgraceful plan and his execution. The end papers of the book suggest a tie to Stanley's Emin Pasha expedition, but

this tie is minimal. I couldn't figure out if the poignancy I felt at the novel's end was something special or just that the end of all lives is poignant.

5. **Born A Crime/2016** by Trevor Noah

Noah is special, and this memoir documents how he survived his youth and adolescence in Soweto, gaining street skills and book skills to prevail over major odds. It reminded me of Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land*. Born in 1984 to a feisty Xhosa woman who had chosen a nondescript Swiss white man to father her son, Noah is now world famous. The offspring of such a union is called "colored" in South African terms, common in Cape Town, rare in Johannesburg. Noah learned multiple languages which helped propel him forward, mastering any number of hustles helped him, too. He was 18 when he started his career as a stand-up comedian. A good read.

6. **Dance of the Jakaranda/2017** by Peter Kimani

A good and readable book from East Africa. The Uganda Railroad has spawned many books, and this one is a two-fer: great book and great publishing house. "Jakaranda" details the lives of three long-lived men starting in 1897 and ending in 1963: Babu Salim from the Punjab, Ian McDonald from the British colonial service, and Richard Turnbull, philandering church minister. The narrative follows the railway line from Mombasa to Nakuru where each of the men comes to rest, literally and figuratively. Their lives intersect intriguingly, and you will be swept up in their stories. The epilogue hints at a future book about long-lived Kenyan women, and I shall look forward to it.

7. **The Book of War/2012** by James Whyte

This book makes you feel how foolish, tiring, purposeless, and cruel were the Xhosa Wars of the 19th century: forced marches, inadequate clothing and food, nasty officers, camaraderie out of necessity. A war ends, and you go home and try to forget all that had happened. Only you can't. This book tries to trace South African racism and aggression back to these aimless wars,

conducted in part by George Cathcart who won the 8th war with the Xhosa and then was killed in the Crimea. Served him right. The central character is known only as “the kid,” and his spoils are a Dutch flintlock and a dog named Jack. Again, this book’s impact is that it makes you feel what war—undignified war—does to people. If you want the whole megillah, read *Frontiers* by Noel Mostert.

8. *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe*/2013 by Zakes Mda

Mda continues to research the history of southern Africa and create fiction complementary to that history. Here he takes two brothers, Rendani and Chata, to show how the Mapungubwe state with its reverence for carvers might have operated. At the end Chata and his youthful muse Marubini (she the magnificent rain dancer) and his idiot savant protégé Chenayi leave their homeland after being seized by mitshimbilo, “the disease of the wanderers.”

From Wikipedia: “The Kingdom of Mapungubwe (1075-1220) was a pre-colonial state in southern Africa located at the confluence of the Shashe and Limpopo rivers, south of Great Zimbabwe. The kingdom was the first stage in a development that would culminate in the creation of the Kingdom of Zimbabwe in the 13th century, and with gold trading links to Kilwa Kisiwani on the African east coast. The Kingdom of Mapungubwe lasted about 80 years, and at its height its population was about 5000 people.”

9. *Shakespeare in Swahiland: In Search of a Global poet*/2017 by Edward Wilson-Lee

Yes, this book is about Shakespeare productions in eastern Africa, but it is so much more. Anyone with an interest in 20th century East Africa will be transfixed by the author's command of the cultural and political elements of this wonderful land. Plots of the plays are used to illuminate political dynamics, and there are touching chapters on the acute connection of Tanzanian Julius Nyerere with Julius Caesar and the bewildering embrace of *Macbeth* by Haile Selassie. It turns out that African leaders and European explorers all took the complete plays with them wherever they went. Wilson-

Lee finds the details of how Shakespeare has become a global poet, including the possibility that Portuguese sailors performed sections of Hamlet on board their boat off the West African coast during Shakespeare's own lifetime. Chapter notes and comments on further reading will drive esoteric-seeking tidbits to used book sources. I assure you that you will love this delightful narrative.

10. We Were Walimu Once and Young/2017 edited by Brooks Goddard

So what was it like going out to teach in Kenya, or Tanzania, or Uganda in the 1960s? This book will tell you everything from drinking orange squash and shandies; to flying into Kano, Nigeria, on the way to Entebbe, Uganda; to negotiating the British educational system; to exotic travels up and down eastern Africa; to climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro; to finding snakes in toilets; to realizing that people were finding themselves by immersing themselves in another culture; to honoring some politicians who really were good. In this brilliantly edited volume, the indices alone are worth the price. And if you were in the Peace Corps teaching in East Africa, you'll find your story, too.

11. The Face: Cartography of the Void /2013 by Chris Abani

Please read this small enigmatic book which is Abani's direct and occasionally fierce effort to confront his father now deceased. Abani's father left mixed a legacy to his son. Abani's mother left a mixed legacy to her son, but that legacy is not explored in this book. In fact, neither parent is named. Restless is Abani's persona; Restless ironically is the name of the book's publisher.