MCLAREN - DRAWERS - DOC 16

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Dear Shirley & John:

I am under instructions to put something down on paper about what I have been doing lately. Some of you will have seen material sent back from the River Congo to Nita, but I'm not sure about this, so I'll recapitulate a bit.

At very short notice, and with much anxiety about such matters as not being able to get on a plane, I flew to Cape Town on 9 August, had two days there, boarded the MV Atlantic Isle (Tristan da Cunha was HMS Atlantic Isle during the war), and slogged for a week or more up the west African coast, pushed along a bit by the Benguela Current, to the Congo, or more particularly and in the first instance to a place called Banana (shades of Jo Bjelke P.), a sandspit of land at the very mouth of the river, where we unloaded supplies for the extensive American oil-fields offshore (including some off neighboring Angola, where they are guarded by Cuban troops; yes, I started from South Agrica on to learn a lot of political lesssons very quickly). Main event here, apart from drinking local beer in sly-grog shops, and attempting not to catch cerebral malaria which has in past voyages already carried off two of the Atlantic Isle's crew, was being taken in a work-boat 17 miles out to sea to spend an afternoon on an 850-foot oil tanker called the Solen (which after the 1500 tons of the Atlantic Isle seemed to us like the MCG), which acts as a hotel and oil storage to the rigs, and also a place of refuge for shore-based Americans when civil commotion threatens (they get on and off by chopper). From Banana a fascinating all-day trip 80 miles up river, as far as the Congo is navigable from the sea, to Matadi: fishing villages, dugout canoes, the river sometimes miles wide and the satisfaction of surveying a scene, topographically and humanly, which probably hasn't changed significantly in a thousand years.

Matadi is by contrast with Banana a big place, some 300,000 people living in great poverty and ruthlessly oppressed by police, army and a totalitarian state headed by the third richest man in the world. Zaire, of course, the former Belgian Congo, and one of the world's biggest countries. Here the most impressive experience was being told some hard home truths about the 'situation' by a burnt-out case, a young and desperately tired and despairing Catholic priest trying to run single-handed a parish where 10,000 turn up to his church for Christmas mass. Apart from the 'jungle bunnies' in the Top Club at the Hotel Metropole, not unknown to some of the ship's officers, there wasn't much in the way of entertainment at Matadi; and we suffered the familiar tensions of returning from walks abroad among hungry and often sick people to three course meals -- of a kind -- on the ship. Yes, we had plenty of time to study Matadi, for the ship (in effect a South African tramp steamer somewhat perfunctorily disguised as Panamanian) decided to take on a spec. loan of 800 tons of Japanese oil-rig pipes for Banana, and I had many days to study every last detail of the technology of loading and unloading cargoes of pipes, a somewhat hair-raising procedure. Time ceased to matter; all I know is that one day I looked aft and saw Africa disappearing and realised I was headed for Tristan da Cunha.

About this time the captain produced a document, which we all had to sign, declaring that we accepted the fact that we might not be landed at Tristan and that, once landed, we might not be taken off again.

By 'we', I mean a young British civil servant going out as Treasurer to Tristan with his Columbian wife and two little kids (so he at least didn't have to come off again), a returning Tristanian (or, as they called themselves, "Tristan"), and a South African Catholic priest of Portuguese descent undertaking a pastoral visit to Tristan's fifteen Catholics. We all got on very well, considering what we went through together, and may I add here what I have previously written, that I have been cured for all time of the desire to run away from home and join the merchant marine. A bloody boring, uncomfortable and idiotic life if ever there was one. I drove myself to work -- reading about South Africa and Tristan, conning books borrowed from the Australian consul-general in Cape Town for quotations for the dictionary I'm doing, writing up my diary -- to overcome the ennui, the sense of confinement and above all the almost total depression of the senses, so that despite some of the cheapest grog in the world (Scotch was I think £2 or £3 a bottle) and smokes, everything one drank or ate or smoked failed to arouse any sensual response whatsoever, and so got too boring to carry on with. But the sea was always marvellous, the albatrosses and Cape pigeons and shearwaters that followed us the whole way, and the realisation as week succeeded week without the sight of a ship that we were in the most deserted waters in the world, or very nearly so. Indeed it was said that no ship had ever before been over our route. Tristan it is true is (I should think by a factor of three or four at least) the most isolated human community in the world, the nearest humankind being some 1500 miles away, but at least on Tristan there are 300 others around you. Here, in mid-Atlantic (the trip back to Tristan from Banana was 2309.1 nautical miles; if we had gone straight west from Banana at that distance we would have run into Brazil), we were for most of the time some 500 miles from the nearest human being. That, at least, was exhilarating, if at times intimidating.

Finally at last, as Danny Kaye says, there was Tristan da Cunha. Not, as I had hoped, looming up ahead, visible from 80 miles off, a vast mountain peak the height of Kosciusko and seven miles across rearing up from ocean deeps of 18,000 feet, but rather first seen by me as a narrow black line at sea level a mile off, as we edged our way cautiously forward through a sea-mist: the bottom of the vast cliffs as they plunged into the breakers. I never did see the whole of Tristan while I was there -- it was as usual covered with cloud and mist -- but I felt less badly about this when I read that Mrs Barrow the missionary's wife, back in the early years of this century, spent three years there and never saw it either!

And then, as we came quietly up to the island at Dead Slow, we saw the little point of land, running out from the base of the cliffs at the north-west corner, which is the Settlement, and has been now for nearly two hundred years: green as Ireland beneath the great ridges like Goat Ridge and the terrifying 'gulches' like Hottentot Gulch, running down at a slope to the little lava beach and the cliffs, sprinkled with white houses hidden deep within what we later came to realise were great stands of New Zealand flax, the island's great shield and defender from the appalling gales, so much so that the plant is protected by law.

I was deeply moved, as we all were, by the unexpected beauty of the place; and somehow this sense of domestic order and serenity within a total scene of natural grandeur, chaos and destruction (Tristan is only a million years old, and crumbles as you look at it -- rock falls are a constant menace to life --) was matched by a sense I suddenly caught at: we are a tough breed, the ultimate colonisers, we are not entirely despicable, it is right that man should be here. In fact, just as it is said that the Tristans return to Tristan in 1963 was the greatest slap in the fact that our civilization has ever received, so it might be said that the fact of Tristan is the greatest justification for our existence.

Not that I'm romanticising. There are many romantic and colorful things about Tristan, there are wonderful evolved customs that symbolize the necessary solidarities of a community clinging to existence like a lichen to an Antarctic rock, there are social customs that represent in rather a moving way the adaptation of behavior to circumstance (attitudes to the sub-normal, to the unmarried mother, for instance), but Tristan has been seen, perhaps, too much through a distorting lens of sentiment. Not all Tristan attitudes and customs are amiable -- though where they are not amiable, or acceptable to 'us', they often spring from circumstance again, and when we think a bit more about it simply mirror the deficiencies of us all. There are many irrationalities which the islanders cling to, and which have for a century or more irritated the rational: to believe that to own three cows each yielding half a pint of milk a day is better than to have one cow giving five pints. And now, entering with increasing force, there is the conflict between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft, between man as an economic unit, earning money and spending it (rates of pay 50c. an hour; fishing 50 days a year, maximum catch for two men in one day 2000 lb. of crayfish -- delicious --, payment for same £20 each: try that out in Bass Strait) and man as part of a community, closely-woven in some ways, anarchic in others. It is a marvellous microcosm in almost any direction: genetics, colonialism (though I was very impressed with the British 'expat' advisers), social organization, culture, generational strains, authority patterns. All the great issues occur here in bite-sized chunks -- for instance, educate for what Tristan can offer and no more, or educate for the big world? In other words, what is happiness and what is fulfilment?

Back to real problems -- how does an eight-teen-stone man get off a ship with high iron bulwarks and into a small barge veering and plunging madly in a six-foot swell (the answer is down a Jacob's ladder with a helping hand at the bottom -- I didn't disgrace myself like Frank the priest, who fell off the ladder into the barge; but on re-embarking I swallowed my pride and went up -- with Frank -- in a big basket, swinging madly in a great arc over ocean and ship). As we had been told, the entire population of Tristan lining the cliff tops for the poppy-show -- which is understandable when you reflect that it was some six months since the last ship, and the beer had run out. (We had 2000 cases on board, plus great quantities of fierce Cape brandy, which the island doctor Peter Cook says induces the horrors, especially over Christmas.) (Brandy costs £1 a bottle ($1.80) plus £1 levy which helps reduce the price of the bottled gas, of which we also brought a great quantity; beer is cheaper than lolly water; there is a small pub.) We also had on board the constituents of a swimming pool, a tractor, quantities of masonite and building materials, mail, canteen stores, clothes: you name it, it was there. Very reminiscent of Port Albert on Erith Day.

Wonderful reception once we got ashore -- which involved lying off in the breaking swells until the man on the end of the miniscule 'harbor' gave the signal for the coxs'n to gun the barge into the narrow entrance: we were washed in, to scramble up iron stanchions to the dockside. I stayed at the Residency (where else?) and Colin Redstone, the Administrator, and Josie his French wife, were wonderful hosts. How wonderful to be ashore -- the beer tasted good again! Up till one o'clock talking. A frantic day the next day -- had a loan of the Land-Rover, out to the potato patches, to the volcano (rejecting a kind offer to escort me to the top, still giving off sulphur fumes -- by 'the volcano' I don't mean the top of the island, but the volcano right beside the Settlement which occasioned the Evacuation in 1961), to Pig Bite; I passed Bugsy Hole and other wonderfully named places, but would have had to have been there much longer to have seen (for instance) Down-where-the-minister-land-his-things, Ridge-where-the-goat-jump-off or Dead Man's Bay. In and out of the older houses, introduced with deference and great politeness all round to the old people, admiring roofs held up with spars from wrecks, gloriously-crafted gable-ends of great blocks of cut stone ("Cyclopean architecture", it's been called), the thatched roofs still remaining -- a distinguished Swedish Tristan buff has a fund going which pays for roofs to be re-thatched but not for re-roofing with asbestos or iron. Lucky to find that 76 year-old Tom Glass (there are only seven family names on the island; the last -- official -- genetic input was in 1906, when two women came over from Cape Town) had one of the fabled model long-boats for sale for £30. The long-boats are the great mythological symbol of the island: there are eight, up to thirty feet long (no metrics on Tristan): Canton, Margaret Rose (the Tristans are plus royaliste que le roi, as Josie Redston pointed out; they subscribed £1000 to the Falklands Defence Fund; the padre caused great offence by not praying for victory in the (quite marvellous) Church of St Mary the Virgin; and it's ironical that the question of emigration from Tristan is now merely an academic issue, as South Africa is out (they have temporary status as honorary whites, like the Japanese, but are not allowed to stay there, and even if they did would be socially regarded as Coloreds; one Tristan girl (more educated and ambitious than the boys) is as a matter of fact on the run in South Africa at the moment), and so is the great Motherland, Britain, which refuses them residence -- it is said because of the problem of creating a precedent vis-a-vis Hong Kong. Still, for the most part, overwhelmingly in fact, they are intensely loyal to their own community and their island. It is a most interesting consideration as to what stage of 'social' degeneracy the community is in, if it is in such a stage at all; it could be argued that it has never been more flourishing; with two years' advance revenue in the bank, so far as I know only one other country is in a similarly fortunate position: Singapore. But I am bound to consider Tristan in relation to St Kilda, Cape Barren and Pitcairn -- indeed that is my point d'appui -- and any of you who have heard me on this topic will know of the startling parallelisms despite the lack of lateral contacts. I see I never got round above to the names of the other longboats, in which heroic voyages are made -- they are only canvas over a wooden frame -- to Nightingale several times a year (some 15 miles south) for egging, birding (mutton-birding, just as in Bass Strait, though they call mutton-birds 'petrels' and their 'mutton-bird' is the Black Haglet (=Black Eaglet?). Other boats are British Trader, British Flag, Lorna, Stirling Castle, Union Castle and Britannia. They have 'familiar' names as well, and every boy's ambition for his father is for him to become coxs'n of a long-boat, the highest status-symbol in Tristan, and about the only distinction this proud, anarchic, no-man-is-better-than-another-nor-woman-neither, quintessentially mullettish community will allow.

The whole time I was on Tristan we were on an hour's standby to leave, depending on weather and other factors, and at first it seemed we might get only a few hours there, but eventually I had the best part of three days. I was unlucky; normally turn-around is four to six, but a combination of light cargo, unparalleled weather and an island team working like buggery (so would you, if you were paying yourselves $US 6500 a day for all stopover time) resulted in a record short stay; it would have been shorter but for the ship's running on to a rock pinnacle ten feet below the surface (in 70 feet of water), causing $20,000 worth of damage and nearly holing itself. Characteristically, the Tristans knew the rock was there but didn't tell anyone because they hadn't been asked. You mind your business I'll mind mine. Which doesn't mean of course that everyone on the island doesn't know everyone else's business within minutes and in great detail. I was interested in there having been a little bit of minor crime lately, directed mainly against the government and not other islanders; in studying small groups the nature of internal crime is of the highest significance. The punishment is not so much the 'work six months without pay'which the magistrate (the Administrator) imposed, but the fact that there is no chance of the culprits ever being in a group which doesn't know about their record, ever in their lives. Yet the Tristan community is a very non-judgmental one and a very forgiving one. It is said, incidentally, that there has never been in Tristan history any occasion on which violence has been used by one islander against another.

However, by dint of working 18-hour days and utilising tape-recorders, cameras etc. all the time, I got a lot of work completed, including all my primary tasks; and spent the week's voyage back to Cape Town (Tristan is 300 miles south and 1500 miles west) writing up some 15,000 words of notes. It was a really wonderful and very moving experience; I can't think of anything I have ever done that has given me more satisfaction; and I hope to return, though not via the Congo.

I'm afraid the colorful details of Tristan will have to wait until we see each other. The rest of the story is easily told. Two days in Cape Town, ransacking bookshops and working in archives and library, and talking to contacts about the South African situation (in a nut-shell, it is probably too little and too late, but it is an extraordinarily interesting time to be in South Africa, and there has been more political movement in the last two years than in the previous two centuries; the verligte (enlightened ones) are gaining ground over the verkrampte (the closed-up ones), but the English, Colored, Asians and black Africans are cut off from any effective political process. The color bars are weakening, for what that's worth (no more 'whites only' taxis). The frustrating thing for observers and reformers is to realise that Afrikaner South Africa is a formidable country, in morale and logistics, and that if internal reform is merely tactical and leads nowhere, then outside intervention or internal revolution has no present or foreseeable chance of success).

I took the famous Blue Train, said to be one of the world's best, from Cape Town to Johannesburg, a 24-hour trip of great interest and comfort, a pleasant small room to myself. In a day and a half in Jo'burg I worked in archives, bought books, talked to people and had a very useful and perceptive briefing from the political attache at the Australian Embassy in Pretoria. I flew home on the 17th, touching at the Cape Verde Islands en route (the South Africans can't fly over black Africa), and arriving home to the arms of my wife at mid-day on Saturday; exhausted by the whole sequence of events but supported by two strokes of last-minute luck: the airline waived $288 worth of excess baggage (Tristan documents and the long-boat and the like), and I had a row of seats to myself so could sleep most of the night.

I have been casting around for some way to sum up this whole bizarre episode. Perhaps the best epigraph is this: "If you march your Winter Journeys you will have your reward, so long as all you want is a penguin's egg." If you don't know where that comes from, you will have to ask Max Marginson.

My and our love to you all. One of the great things about coming 'home' again was the many letters and messages that awaited me from kind friends and relations, as we used to say in our prayers.

Stephen

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Thank you for splendid letter & the birthday greetings – received in mid Atlantic! And thanks muchly for getting 02 88 off the stocks – a good issue, I think. We think of you much & send our love – off to the Lake District for a week. Please show or send copies of this to Barrie & Vane, with my love. Would you also thank Bob Cayley for his birthday greetings & send a copy of this with great affection from us both.