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Listening. Books from Zimbabwe

Diana Auret, *From Bus Stop to Farm Village. The Farm Worker Programme in Zimbabwe* (Save The Children, UK, 2000), ISBN 0-7974-2068-1.

M. L. Daneel, *African Earthkeepers. Volume 1. Interfaith Mission in Earth-care* (UNISA, Pretoria, 1998), ISBN 1-86888-050-8.

David Harold-Barry, *They Stayed On. The Stories of Seven Jesuits Martyred in the Struggle for Zimbabwe* (Mambo, Gweru, 2000), ISBN 0-86922-749-1.

Irene McCartney, *Children in Our Midst. Voices of Farmworkers' Children* (Weaver, Harare, 2000), ISBN 0-7974-2075-0.

Save The Children, *We Learn With Hope. Issues in Education on Commercial Farms in Zimbabwe* (Save The Children, Harare, 2000), ISBN 0-7974-2074-6.

Mary Witoshynsky, *The Water Harvester. Episodes From the Inspired Life of Zephaniah Phiri* (Weaver, Harare, 2000), ISBN 0-7924-2123-8.

Zimbabwe Women Writers, *Women of Resilience. The Voices of Women Ex-combatants* (ZWW, Harare, 2000), ISBN 0-7974-2002-09.

Introduction

Writers often claim to be giving a voice to the voiceless. This never seems convincing to me. In my experience, women, peasants, even children, are articulate, indeed vociferous. The trouble is that too few people listen. So it is more a matter of giving ears to the earless.

Two of these books have the word 'voices' in them but what they really represent are triumphs of listening, helping us to listen as well. (Irene McCartney's interview with Maureen Moyo in *Women of Resilience* is such a triumph of hearing empathy that Moyo tells her things she could not possibly confess to her husband or children). The blurb to Mary Witoshynsky's *The Water Harvester* tells us that we 'will never forget the inspiration of Mr Phiri, the water harvester, and after reading his story you will never again see the world in quite the same way'. After listening to these books I don't think I am going to see the guerrilla war, or farm-workers, or indigenous ecologists in quite the same way.

Listening to the War

The two books about the war – *Women of Resilience* and *They Stayed On* – listen to very different speakers. One book is about black women; the other about white men. In one book the speakers are all still alive, despite the deaths that took place all around them: in the other they are all dead. Nevertheless, they both have fresh things to tell us about the war.

They Stayed On deals with Jesuit 'martyrs', but it is no hagiography. 'They were so ordinary', the editor tells us of his seven dead subjects. Many of them were unhappy misfits in their communities – 'The Society of Jesus has many people who "don't fit" in the sense of belonging to a group of people who think and behave alike. It is one of the myths that we are all somehow of one mould' (p. 28). Moreover, 'they did not even seem to be dying

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"for" something. In 1989 another group of Jesuits were gunned down at the Catholic University in El Salvador. Everyone knew immediately why they were killed. Their deaths were the price paid for their analysis and studied denunciation of the injustices in Salvadorian society' (p. xii). But Rhodesian Jesuits made no such analysis or denunciation. Some sympathised with the whites among whom they worked. Others remained with rural Africans but in varying degrees of paternalism and passivity. 'The Jesuits had a coherent policy', wrote Fr. Fidelis Mukonori, 'of having no policy at all' (p. xiii).

Nevertheless, I found listening to these very different dead taught me things I didn't know before about the extraordinary variety of Zimbabwe Catholicism. It is difficult, of course, for dead men to speak. But as the least ordinary of these seven men, Fr. Gregor Richert, asked after his experience of Shona religion, 'Are there any dead at all? There are only those living on earth and those in the next world!' (p. 57). Richert himself still speaks loudly to us from his letters home to Germany, which have been published there and also translated into English.

Richert was born in Danzig and grew up in East Berlin. He was one of four Jesuits who established the East German Jesuit Province in north-east Rhodesia in 1959. One might have expected East German Catholics to have been strongly anti-communist and suspicious of the guerrillas. In fact they were strongly anti-fascist. The mission at St Rupert's, Magondi, where Richert was killed, was dedicated by its founder, Fr. Kensy, to Rupert Mayer, 'who died in 1945 in Munich after heroic resistance to the Nazis' (p. 55). When Richert took over St Rupert's he 'went over' to rural Africans rather than to white administrators and patrolling police. One Maundy Thursday, not having enough Christian men and thinking it imprudent to do so with women, he washed the feet of 'twelve influential men of the neighbourhood, all of them non Christians'. The men enjoyed it – 'they don't experience a white man kneeling before them every day'. Richert equally enjoyed Easter, with 'the biggest Easter fire I ever saw', with drums at baptism, and then 'the real, happy worldly joy ... until dawn [with] dancing, singing and drinking. The whole community was united – priest, sisters and believers' (p. 57).

Obviously Richert's letters are a major source for Zimbabwean Catholic social history. But then came the war. 'The Church of Rhodesia has begun its life of suffering', he wrote at Pentecost 1976 (p. 60). Shortly before he died on 27 June 1978, Richert reflected:

> One time we were mighty proud of our measurable achievements, visible signs, monuments perhaps of our own pride which had sprung up like mushrooms. In the shortest time: schools, hospitals, churches etc. But now after the closing by force of so many of our buildings – has that all to become desolate, forgotten?! I think it is now time that after a period of more outward growth the message of Christ takes stronger and deeper root than before. But if this is supposed to be achieved, then the heart of the one who has devoted himself to this task must bleed! We are not spared the fear and distress of the heart caused by the terror all around us ... But what this world considers mad, senseless, futile and foolish wastefulness is – if we really take God's word at least once seriously – the fulfilment of all our longing ... to win everything. (p. 63)

Richert, at least, had come to feel he was dying for something.

The nine black ex-combatants of *Women of Resilience* do not at first seem to have much in common with these male Jesuits. But from their stories there emerges so much of what the world might consider 'mad, senseless, futile and foolish wastefulness' that they must often have wondered what they were risking death for.

None of these seven women ever got to take part in combat with the enemy. All of them were beaten terribly by men on their own side; most were sexually abused; they were accused of being spies; they were bombed by Rhodesian planes and shot at by Rhodesian paratroopers. In the end they had to take the same comfort as Richert – it was worth it

because they were there, in the midst of 'the terror all around us'. After Mavis Nyathi has described dreadful sufferings in Zambia, she concludes: 'I don't regret that I went to join the struggle. I never did regret it even when I was in Zambia. I think it was worthwhile cause' (p. 154).

All of these stories demand listening to. I found another of Irene McCartney's interviewees, Prudence Uriri, the most engrossing of all. Prudence was one of seven girls, her brothers having all died of haemophilia. Her mother sent them all to school – 'she only had girls, and what would she do with uneducated girls?' (p. 56). Her father 'was very active as a ZAPU member, organising people, holding meetings, and distributing information'. He was constantly arrested. 'I remember as far back as 1965 ... I saw a truck driving to our home one day ... and we knew the truck was going to our house to take my father, and we started running so that we could see him before he was taken'. But by the time they got home he had been taken to Gonakudzingwa (p. 57). So she grew up 'not really knowing your father and the work that is supposed to be done by a father ... even the love that one wants from a father – he was a very loving father ... Every time we saw him, we knew he was there, but that he was not there to stay for ever. If a day went by without seeing one of those trucks, then we knew we had him for the day'. She hated 'the Government for treating him like that ... I actually saw him as a hero' (p. 58).

When he was imprisoned in 1974 (and remained in jail until 1980), the 17 year-old Prudence decided to go into Mozambique. 'I thought then that I would come back, make a shootout, take my father, run away and go, maybe, to Malawi' (p. 61). Needless to say, things did not work out like that. For months, indeed, she had no training at all in the camps in Mozambique: 'It felt very bad. In fact, I personally felt that I had made a mistake to go and join in the war. I felt that what I had heard about it – what was going on – and the intention of this whole war was not really what was happening to me ... A lot of people tried to run away at that time because there was too much suffering ... I was just eager to get started and then go home and free my father' (p. 67).

There was more suffering to come. There were many brutal beatings. She was suspected by the original women recruits because she was better educated; she had to be careful not to speak urban Shona or English. After six months she went to Chimoio camp but still did not receive military training. She was 'involved in news gathering and dissemination ... we would go to camps – at the border, for instance, and have interviews with guys coming from the front. You made your interviews and the tapes were played on radio' (p. 78). Chimoio was better because it was more structured. But then came the Rhodesian attack:

> We saw an aeroplane – everybody was kind of suspicious, people were talking about it. 'Have you seen it? Is it a good sign?' And suddenly there was bombing. Paratroopers were being dropped, people began running away. We were just caught unawares. We didn't even know which direction to run. Some of us had guns, but not all of us. It was mainly the guys who had guns ... So we ran away without thinking which was the proper direction to take, and as we were running we were confronted with paratroopers. The tactic they were using that they burnt grass around the camp so even you managed to get out of camp, away from the paratroopers, there was this big fire. You were stuck.

She and a man called Mathe hid in a stream all day. 'A funny thing was that when I was in this stream with Mathe, I don't know what happened – maybe it was the gunpowder – but we all felt like peeing every now and then. But you couldn't move ... so you just said to the other person: "Please look in the other direction"' (pp. 78–79).

Thereafter she left Chimoio but she still did not receive military training. She went to Wampoa College, the ideologically radical college that later became so suspect to the party leaders. She was employed to help produce *Zimbabwe News*. Then at last it looked as though she might get 'to the forefront'. She was at Mudzingwadzi camp when 'a whistle

was blown and everyone gathered at the parade. They were selecting people who were going to be sent to the forefront, including women. At first they wanted volunteers and I volunteered. But I was taken back into the camp with people who were staying behind. I knew immediately it meant something ... Later that same evening I was called to the police department and had these charges made against me and I was beaten thoroughly' (p. 71). As an ex-student of Chimoio College she was accused of being part of a radical conspiracy against the leadership. Every morning she was dumped in the freezing river and beaten spread-eagled on a big rock.

After two weeks she was released and sent to Maputo, where she was trained as a printer. She collected information from the front. 'One thing that really excited me was that women were fighting in the forefront because all along they had been transporting materials and staying for a while in Zimbabwe ... I felt "What am I doing here?"' Then came Lancaster House. She was flown back and met at the airport by her elder sister. She was treated with undue respect by her family, which she did not feel she deserved:

> I came back before my father and we got information that he would be coming on such a day on this train. He was supposed to arrive at 8 am at the railway station. I said I was going to meet him and he was going to have the shock of his life. I got there and missed him – the train had arrived much earlier ... I was very disappointed and went home more or less crying ... only to be greeted by him. So that was quite a great moment of reunion. (p. 86)

So Prudence's story has a happy ending; she had acquired a skill and was employed by Jongwe Printers; when she left them she sought higher education. Nevertheless, her experiences contained too much useless suffering. Now she says 'it's very difficult for me to think of going back to war. For what? Whatever you are fighting for, in the end it's just a matter of removing one regime and replacing it with another' (p. 93).

Others in the book fared worse than Prudence. If we listen to their stories we will get by far the best impression of the experiences of female guerrillas currently available. The interviewers and editors sum it all up:

> Men often recount war from an heroic point of view. Women tend to explore ...the underbelly of war, the small unpleasant details of the day-to-day horrors – and consider their capacity for endurance... The women represented in this volume ... remind us that war is never glorious and they lead us to hope that war will never again be an option in Zimbabwe.

Listening on the Farms

There have been many books about the war and yet there is always something fresh to hear. But there has been little published about the life of workers on the commercial farms. So far we have heard two succeeding stereotypes – the first a stereotype of unique oppression and deprivation of farm-workers; which has been succeeded with astonishing suddenness this year by a second stereotype of solidarity between worker and employer. There is no doubt that farm-workers were widely assaulted by ZANU/PF youth and war veterans before the June 2000 elections; nor is there any doubt that many of them were displaced by resettlement. There is no community in Zimbabwe that we need so much to listen to.

Save The Children has published three very timely books that help us to do so. The first is *Children in our Midst*. This presents what the children of farm-workers think; it is compiled by Irene McCartney from school essays and a few interviews. Listening to these children is often like hearing a 'fairy tale'. There are plenty of step-parents and some of them wicked. 'My stepmother sees me like a golila [gorilla]', says 14-year-old Pingidzai Nyamadzawo. 'She shouts at me every day. I don't know why. I like my father because he cannot shout at me every day. I see my stepmother like a lion' (p. 28). There are all too many orphans. There are witches. 'Our farm living conditions are not easy', says 13 year

old Simbai Chaparira, 'because of the witches. [There] will be a death on every Christmas. People are trapping witches by placing a dish of water. Water which has been prayed [over] – that's what we do when someone has died because there are witches ... They are the best witches on the farm. When I grow up, if I capture witches, I will cut them with an axe' (pp. 139–140). There are *Chigure* dancers, men dressed as animals, who carry off children into the bush. There are protectors and rescuers, too – prophets and grandparents and resourceful children themselves.

What emerges from the children's testimony, and from the graphic drawings with which the book is illustrated, is the picture of a multi-ethnic society with many 'customs' and 'religions'. Some of the children want to go to live 'in the rural [Communal] areas', where life is more homogenous. At the same time there is a firm belief in the possibility of a stable and good life on the farms themselves, touchingly expressed when the children are asked how *they* will behave when they are parents. 'A child needs to be cared for like an eagle's egg'; 'parents don't have to grumble at their children for silly mistakes. They don't have to give them hard household chores that they can't do, and they don't have to beat them for no reason' (pp. 2, 4). Above all, the children believe in education. 'Even parents', says 14 year old Makomborero Magwa, 'are passionate for us children to learn with hope ... You hear your mother and father saying, "My child, I want you to be a doctor or a teacher"' (p. 3). And the children themselves have high aspirations, even though hardly any of them get to secondary school. Some want to be pilots; many want to be doctors so that they can do something about the disease that is all around them. Yet even when they achieve education there is no escape. The most tragic photograph in the book is of Esnat Zenda. 'I got seven O-levels', she says, and now I am working in the packhouse. I earn $171 a week' (p. 99). Perhaps Esnat consoles herself with the thought that so many of the children express: that farm life is better than town life. 'Sure, life in Harare, and what you get for free is sun only' (p. 145).

Listening to these children makes one realise how terrible it would be if the current land occupations made things worse for them rather than better. Diana Auret's *From Bus Stop to Farm Village* is a chronicle of how things have become a little better since 1980, as pre-school schemes and primary schools and farm villages have been established on some farms. She emphasises how dependent this was on voluntary organisations, heroic health and community education workers, and on the 'conversion' of some white farmers and farmers' wives. Farm workers themselves had no way of making anybody listen to them:

> The farm workers were unable to exert political pressure on the government ... Although Independence had given them the right to vote in parliamentary elections, they could not vote for their local authority. Local government had been decentralised in the communal areas but not in the commercial farming areas where the rural councils primarily represented the landowners in whose interests the council's revenues were primarily used ... The developmental structures introduced soon after independence to ensure that the needs of people at the grass roots were heard did not extend to the farming areas. No village or ward development committees were set up. (p. 18)
>
> ... The farm worker community also suffered from an underdeveloped trade union system and primitive industrial relations. The same applied also to the workers' committees: they too lacked capacity and their members were ignorant of their rights and roles. (p. 62)

Community development, literacy campaigns and conscientisation have done something to change this. Farm Development Committees (FADCOs), which include the farmer and/or his wife, the farm health worker, literacy tutor and women's club co-ordinator together with elected representatives of farm workers, have 'given the farm workers a formal structure ... to make themselves heard':

> During the government's current land acquisition movement, FADCO members from eight

> farms participated in debate in national forums in Harare ... For the first time, these representatives of farm workers were able to articulate their concerns, which ranged from anger at not being consulted to fear that they would not be considered for re-settlement ... This entry into the political arena was a coming of age. (p. 107)

Yet even the FADCOs depended upon a sympathetic farmer. Auret describes the 'conversion' of some farmers. 'According to two farmers' wives, the amazing change in attitude towards the [development] programme observed in many farmers may have been due to a new awareness stimulated by the evangelical Christian movement. Farmers who had previously walked away from the team to avoid having to talk to them, were now inspired to set up pre-schools, become involved in women's clubs and get to know the people on their farms' (p. 87). Auret describes some remarkable achievements. But she ends with a failure in listening:

> The most recent government attempts to acquire farms for resettlement purposes has unfortunately undermined the gains of the past years. As in 1992, the lack of involvement of the farmers in the debate about the need for land reform, and in the formulation of a plan for much needed resettlement of small-scale farmers on land acquired, has led to insecurity and even hostility, destroying much of the commitment among farmers to improving the lives of their workers. Farm workers, also left out of the debate, have similarly felt their livelihoods and homes threatened ... farmers and workers found themselves for the first time on the same side of the fence, battling for their livelihoods and futures. (p. 110).

This was written, of course, before the farm invasions and assaults on farm workers.

The third Save The Children publication, *We Learn with Hope*, allows us to listen to these adults as well as to children. Even a category quite unrepresented in the literature – white farmers' wives – is given their chance to speak. One, who has started a secondary school and library, nevertheless sees 'how little has been achieved twenty years after Independence. We really have not done what we could have done to form a bridge between the government and the farmer ... There are still some farmers who should be taken to task ... I would love to know the answers. How is it all going to work out in the future, in the long term? Because it is quite sad when you see that we have really not progressed very much in the last twenty years' (p. 72).

Listening to the Earth

This question of how 'it will all work out in the future' dominates the minds of the authors of the last two books, *African Earthkeepers* and *The Water Harvester*. Both books preach the need to listen to the land in order to save it. Both connect this listening to the liberation war.

Martinus Daneel is well known as a remarkable type of scholar – a precipitant observer rather than a participant one. He creates institutions and then writes about the debates within them, including attacks on himself. This book is about the linked institutions ZIRCON (the Zimbabwean Institute of Religious Research and Ecological Conservation), AZSM (the Zimbabwe Association of Spirit Mediums), AZTREC (Association of Zimbabwean Traditional Ecologists), and AAEC (Association of African Earthkeeping Churches). These bring together men and women who were allied during the liberation war – mediums, Zionists, ex-combatants – to fight for what Daneel calls the second liberation, the liberation of the environment. The book describes visits to the High God shrine at Dzilo in the Matopos and the blessings it has given to traditional ecology.

Perhaps reading this book enables us to listen mostly to Daneel himself, the mediums and traditional ecologists being mainly represented in splendid photographs. But the last book discussed here, *The Water Harvester*, allows us to listen with all our ears to an

extraordinary survivor of the nationalist struggle and liberation movement, Zephaniah Phiri, the ecological hero of Zvishavane.

The first part of Zephaniah's story is like hearing the story of Prudence's father told by himself rather than by her. Zephaniah too was detained in Gonakudzingwa; he too was arrested in August 1976, tortured, put in leg-irons for almost five years. The day they put him in leg-irons

> the Native Commissioner and the Special Branch of the police made a party for me. They celebrated – well, you know when one dies in our tradition, a special party is prepared to celebrate that so-and-so had died for such a year, so we want his spirit to come home. This is called a *bira*. So this was done for me, as though I were dead. I was told personally by the commissioner and the Special Branch that, 'Look here, we want you to celebrate your *bira* before you die, because you will soon be dead! So we want you to celebrate your death'. They brought drinks and biscuits and rounded up people for the ceremony. (pp. 31–32)

But there was from the beginning an ecological element in Zephaniah's persecution. When he was released from Gonakudzingwa he asked himself 'How was I going to survive with my wife and six children?' And then he made a discovery:

> One day I was reading a book, from the Bible, Genesis, Chapter II, where Adam was offered a garden by God. The secret that touched me then was these rivers that ran across the Garden of Eden. Now, to my knowledge, Adam did not know how to plant a tree or a vegetable. Or to use the water and water the trees there. He didn't know about it. But God made it that Adam survived from the fruits in the garden. So when I thought about the Tigris River, the Euphrates River, I picked up that the sole survival of these trees and Adam was because the rivers had water. Nature — God – made it that these trees survive from the moisture, from the seepage that came from the rivers. So it touched me. (p. 11)

Adam had rivers but no rain; Zephaniah had rain but no rivers. He made sand traps to catch the run-off water; he caught the rain from his roof in a tank; he made a reservoir. Forced to make contours by Rhodesian 'experts' he found that they diverted the rainwater from his fields. So he 'dug many large pits on my land, within my contour ridges'. These Phiri pits 'saved my life and my family, surely, and they have also helped me to become famous. But long before that, they also landed me in a lot of trouble with the government'. Along his fields ran an old, dry waterway, which flooded when the rains fell. Rhodesian officials banned any cultivation of these *dambos*; Zephaniah dug pits in them. He planted bananas and reeds. He remembered that 'before the settlers arrived, *dambos* kept us going during drought'. But 'many of these ways are becoming forgotten because, under the settlers, we were no longer able to use them'. Zephaniah, however, persisted. So he was prosecuted and fined.

After 1980, however, his water harvesting flourished. It nourished not only his family but an extraordinary philosophy:

> I feel God created a human being and Earth the same because, in me, there is blood circulation. And yet in the soil, water also circulates. When you dig a deep hole into the soil, water also circulates. God's nature is going to send this circulation into that well, that hole. And the healing of that hole is mostly done by water. Gradually, water seeps into that broken area and then fills it up [with] very fine soil and some small stones. To me, that shows it's a living system. Just as happens to me if I break ... my blood oozes through the broken part, then it clots ... In my land I invite water for healing. (p. 9)

He plants 'water as I plant crops. So this farm is not just a grain plantation. It is really a water plantation.' This water plantation is full of voices to which he listens. 'My trees around here seem to talk to me – "Thank you, Phiri, for harvesting all this water around here". The frogs all sing very lovely songs because when the reservoirs have water, they all sing to enjoy' (p. 37):

> Water can talk. I make this a place where water can speak to me. Some of the water is frozen among the stones of my containment pit. When I come here and look, I find that the water is saying, 'What does he want me to do now?' So I say, 'Please, go over there, take that way'. The water will flow into that pit. The water obeys my order.

Conclusions

Zephaniah is the greatest listener of all the people in these books. Now internationally famous, he founded one of Zimbabwe's earliest indigenous NGOs – the Zvishavane Water Project. He embodies, in a body still crippled from the leg-irons, what can be done with the autonomy nationalism demanded and in whose name the war was so ambiguously fought. He is, indeed, as the blurb says, 'a champion of human dignity'; his book does indeed 'invite readers to celebrate the boundless potential for human development'. Yet, however frustrated that potential may have been for the women ex-combatants or may turn out to be for the children on the farms, listening to these books makes one aware of it all the time. At a moment when reporting on Zimbabwe is reduced to armed stereotypes mobilised against each other, it is good to hear Zimbabwe's humanity speaking.

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