

# The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

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## Diary

New Year Party  
29<sup>th</sup> January 2005

Closing Date for SCPSW  
Competitions  
28<sup>th</sup> February 2005

Poetry Workshop Weekend  
29<sup>th</sup> – 31<sup>st</sup> July 2005

## DATA PROTECTION ACT

**Members' names and addresses are held on a computer database which is used for mailing copies of the Civil Service Author.**

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**The views expressed in the SCPSW Author are those of the contributors and are not necessarily those of the Editor or of the Society.**

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# THE SCPSW AUTHOR

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## CONTENTS

- 3 Editorial
- 4 Feature Writing *Joan Lewis*
- 7 Market Information *Gordon E Gompers*
- 8 Poetry Pages
- 12 Poetry Workshop Pages
- 13 Winter Meeting *Alan Watts*
- 14 SCPSW Annual Competitions 2005
- 15 My First Civil Service Author *Albert Thornton*
- 18 Trapped *Matthew Arnot*
- 20 The Story of Po Li *Terry Rickson*
- 25 An African Journey in 1961 *H J Williams*
- 28 On the Trail of Turtles and Lemurs  
*Jenny Chamier-Grove*
- 32 The Boat with Skirts *Arthur Bromley*
- 34 A Christmas Tale *John Buchanan*

## **Editorial**

Adrian Danson

Your committee and I wish all members Happy Christmas and A Prosperous New Year.

I won't bore you with more details of my house moving traumas, suffice to say that I am now installing hardwood throughout the ground floor and my wife is talking of moving again!

The efforts of our new Publicity Officers, the generosity of John Jenkins, Editor of Writers' Forum, in giving us a plug and, with Roy's kind approval, offering new members free entry to the Froud Memorial Competition have all helped. Certainly our membership numbers has begun a modest rise and we hope this will continue. Sadly this is not quite sufficient to enable us to be financially viable. We continue to look to those members who can afford to contribute something in addition to the normal renewal fee to please do so again. We hope this will be the last time that we have to appeal to member's generosity in this way. We are also seeking ways to reduce our expenditure, but this continues to prove difficult.

For those not familiar with John Jenkins' excellent magazine Writers' Forum, an A4 size s.a.e. To Writers International Ltd., PO Box 3229, Bournemouth BH1 1ZS, will secure a copy.

On the ITV series Heartbeat, set in the 1960s, the barmaid handed over a pint with the words, "There you go". It appears that none of the writers has access to anyone old enough to have been around in the 60s, who might have pointed out that we still said, "There you are" at that time.

I have noticed many other instances. Either researchers were not employed to check the idiom of the day, or they were less than competent. It appears that some sort of dictionary of time related phraseology is needed before the common speech of the period is forgotten. Perhaps one of our members might take this on, initiate a literary reference book and be famous for all time. Sadly I am too busy laying floors, but someone might have time to spare...

The plague of ups, such as listen up, next up, up with after meet, or met, etc., an incongruous "the" in front of the word both, "for" in front of the word free, absolutely in place of yes, really really, never ever, up to speed instead of up to date, at the moment has become at the minute.

Such peculiar phrases have crept up on us and so easily becomes part of our own vocabulary. Is it because they sound so weird that they stick in our minds and, having done so, involuntarily then escape from our own mouths?

Whatever the reason, they have been creeping in with increasing frequency, yet having been with us for varying lengths their date of introduction needs to be identified so that future writing does not make the same mistakes as in Heartbeat. So there's the challenge. Who will take on the task of listing such with appropriate chronology?

Contributions for next issue by 15th February 2005 please.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Feature Writing**

Joan Lewis

A Course at Lumb Bank, near Hebden Bridge, run by the Arvon Foundation.

Monday, 20<sup>th</sup> to Saturday, 25<sup>th</sup> September 2004.

The early nineteenth century mill owner's house nestles half way down the valley below Heptonstall. Nestles is perhaps too cosy a word for this stone house, which sits a backbreaking walk down a windswept hillside. On the Monday afternoon sounds of running water suggested a river. Hints of sunshine vying with savage winds and drizzly mist gave a promise of the wild beauty of the spot if only it would stop raining.

On Thursday morning the mist finally cleared and we found ourselves looking out across splendid wooded hills and a deep valley where old mill chimneys pierced the view. By this time we had been hard at the writing game and happily took a few minutes off to absorb the view. Lumb Bank and its surroundings were to be the subject of one of our assignments so we were not really wasting time.

The course was for writers 'wishing to share their experiences in magazines and newspapers, a practical course to show how to research, develop, write and sell your feature ideas and articles'. The tutors were Anthony Clavane, full time sports writer on the Sunday Mirror and Will Woodward, Education Editor at The Guardian. Guest speaker was Will Buckley, regular columnist in The Observer and author of the hilarious novel 'The Man Who Hated Football'.

There were fourteen of us and we were a real mixed bag of ages, nationalities, beliefs and styles. This made for a lively week, with lots of discussion and argument. We were told we should have two assignments to prepare, several private tutorials, sessions on interviewing, research, writing up and selling. The major assignment was 1500 words by 5 pm on Friday on Lumb Bank and any aspect of it we liked to choose. We were expected to interview and do some research for this. Because of the connection between Lumb Bank, Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath (she is buried in Heptonstall churchyard) many chose to write on a local connection and thereby had to try and talk to villagers who were probably fed up with these ‘writers’ on their doorstep.

In my tutorial with Will we discussed at length my reluctance to interview. I knew I’d never make a journalist, as I’d not be able to push for information. My experiences with Home Office immigration interviews to determine whether marriages were genuine or not had put me off for life. I couldn’t ‘go for the jugular, I’d never make a Lynn Barber or ‘Killer’ Colombo. Will suggested that I develop that as my theme. I agreed to try and used a gentle ‘chatty’ approach with the delightful couple, Caron and Steve, who ran Lumb Bank, finding out about the trials attached to having fourteen people each week for most of the year to share your life in an old house with typical problems of plumbing etc. I suggested that tutorials are also interviews during which tutor and student find out a lot about one another. Gentle chats seem to work on some people. I managed my 1500 words by 4.55 on Friday.

Will Buckley, midweek speaker, was a definite character. This was to be expected if you’d read his book. We were able to chat with him, listen to him, fire questions at him, read his Guardian article and his novel and try not to count how many bottles of red wine disappeared during the evening. He’d have been slippery to interview, being an old hand, but his talk and body language told us quite a lot – doubtless not an iota more than he intended us to learn. Enough, however, for fourteen students to come up with fourteen very different articles about him – our secondary assignment for the week. We were given from ten until one on Thursday morning to produce 800 words on him, to be handed in before we got any lunch. It was clear that he aroused many different passions and the reading out of all the articles on a relaxed Friday evening proved interesting and quite hilarious.

The ‘housekeeping’ aspect of an Arvon Course should be made clear. You join up accepting that you’re part of a group of writers, which

includes two professionals and two house managers, and that you're going to live as a family for five days. The kitchen was superbly equipped and stocked so at breakfast time (any time before the first session at 10 a.m.) everyone foraged for cereals, fruit and gorgeous local bread or if they wished, cooked eggs and bacon on the enormous range. At lunchtime Caron laid out superb salads and cold meats and cheeses and bowls of fruit and on the first day we all ate too much. Supper was cooked by teams of 3 or 4 students (the tutors were excused this), using menus and recipes posted up in the kitchen, and the raw food supplied. We did eat well. Young men who couldn't cook found themselves chopping onions for 18 people. I was in the team to cook salmon steaks and was most impressed at the huge sides of perfectly filleted salmon awaiting us. I left that to a girl who seemed keen and tackled a fruit salad made up of thirteen different fruits. Wine was available on an honesty box principle. Caron and Steve were competent but laid back hosts who joined us for meals.

Rooms were comfortable and warm, not many en suites and some people shared, but one could apply for a single on health grounds. There are facilities for the disabled. You can take your own laptop if you wish but the studio in the barn has 18 computers.

So the big question – was the course worth it? The cost was £435 but there are grants available to be applied for. I didn't apply but asked Grantham Writers, of whom I'm a member, for a contribution as they are well funded and happy to help, and their input was welcome. I'm not sure that the magazine aspect of feature writing was really covered but Will happily discussed this with those of us who target periodicals rather than the press. A lot of the basics of writing were the same, perhaps the approach differs somewhat – apparently newspaper editors would not be happy at titles being submitted, they jealously guard their right to produce headlines. Certainly the turn round time for acceptance is very different, according to Will a fortnight is a long time in newspaper terms even if your feature is not of immediate interest only. I would suggest that the course is chosen carefully and if in doubt ring the centre for advice. Other centres are in Devon, Shropshire and Inverness-shire. . For more information log on to [www.arvonfoundation.org](http://www.arvonfoundation.org) or write to Arvon Foundation, 42a Buckingham Palace Road, London SW1W 0RE.

I had an enjoyable week of companionship, hard work and advice. On Arvon Courses one's tutors are working professional writers and one has the opportunity to live as and mix with writers, and I came back determined to ditch things that take up my writing time.

## **Market Information**

Gordon E Gompers

Got a Good Stationer's.

All freelance writers need stationery so they might just get their requirements from a shop that sells everything else. However, such a shop is unlikely to sell everything a freelance needs.

I use a shop that only deals in stationery and for good measure has a good photo-copying service. This latter is very important. When soliciting work from editors I usually send them samples of my published work. These are always photo-copies: I never risk sending magazines. Not only does this shop do plain black and white copying but it has a copier that reproduces in colour. This is important as some of my photographs are in colour.

This jewel of a shop also caters with the envelope problem. One does not just need envelopes. Monochrome photographs have to be despatched in a special cardboard backed envelope. Transparencies need a special jiffy bag. As a typist (I am still not into computers) I would never use liquid Tippex but would resort to a needle point corrector. Paper clips are always useful. One also requires two different sized staplers and a staple remover.

I always use A4 size manuscript and I never send folded work to a *paying* editor so I need extra large envelopes.

When considering a good general stationer's one automatically thinks of RYMAN and I am sure that these shops are very good. The shop I use is called UNIKOB. As soon as the staff knew that I was a published writer they could not be more helpful.

In case any of my readers have any false ideas of economy I have a little tale to tell which is quite true.

“Manuscripts need to be double spaced with an inch and a half margin.”

“That is how the editor likes it.”

Remember, in matters of presentation the editor is always right!

[Not many of our members will find this advice applicable, but for those who do and those who live in hope ... Ed.]

## Poetry Pages

Edited by Joyce Thornton

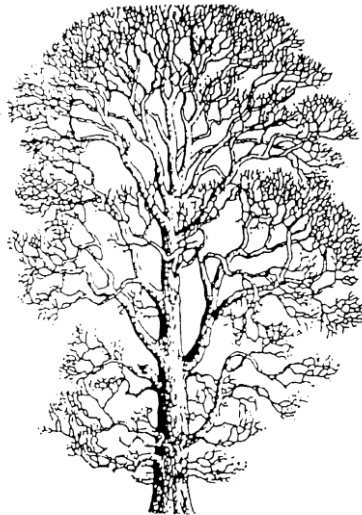
### Arbre Vitae

Margaret Chrisman

We owe a great debt to trees  
They were houses, boats, fuel for us;  
They harboured the holy in their sacred groves.  
‘Without trees as wood or in fossilised form  
No warmth would have comforted us  
At night or in winter’s drear days,  
No cooking pot would have spread  
The appetising odours of simmering food,  
No interwoven branches would have sheltered us.

Now, too clever by half, as the saying is,  
We spin our warmth from electrons  
Or trap the rays of old Sol  
In batteries of low-impact technology.  
We make our ships from shining cold steel,  
Our homes we mass-make from relentless cement.

Cut down are the sacred groves for motorways;  
The holy has retreated, obsolescent  
For all but a few, who, in their hearts  
Keep alive the need and the search for that  
Which could fill the void at the heart of our being.





## **Legend**

John Abrahams

The summer's independence froze like glass  
The rose beneath the ice foretold the storm  
Strong mornings, blue and gold, were full of joy  
The downpour, when it came, was gone like dew.

The voyage to vine-land lasted, long  
The boats from everywhere were loaded down  
The city squares were busy all year round  
The founders' words were full of right and wrong.

And when the travellers recalled  
The rainbow scenes engraved upon the mirrored tears of Time,  
They dreamed in fury and in vice  
Of olden shattered fields of Fire and Ice.

## **Memoirs of a Conservationist**

Mike Boland

I was a conservationist once,  
One of the first,  
Before I got too old, too cold,  
And thought the battle won.  
Oh, it was fun,  
Marching and kicking the traces,  
Like a small child making faces  
At the multi-national shibboleths,  
Until the whaling stopped,  
The world turned Green,  
And a New Age seemed fair begun.

But the 'Eighties smeared around us,  
Slimed their dross across us,  
And Green became a soap-sud slogan  
Douching coldly over us.

And now the fish are dying in the Thames again,  
Our water isn't fit to drink again.  
And I read that whaling will soon start again;  
The hot, indignant blood of youth aflames again ...

... But the fire gutters, age-cool, undone.  
Once, I hoped; now fear the worse.  
To paraphrase from Larkin's verse,  
I think that very soon it'll all be gone.

So, walk soft upon the Earth, my friend;  
Her Time is measured now in years;  
Alone, like life-lorn ash, she'll drift  
Amongst the stars, the quiet stars.

## **MEMORIES OF ...**

### **An Anchor Watch**

Terry Austin

Evening cloaks the cockpit,  
channel markers flickering  
in concert with the eddies.  
A chart light glimmers below,  
shielded by the cabin hatch.

Anchor light swings gently,  
between rigging bereft of sails,  
giving a strange aura of calm  
amid a turmoil of crossed lines  
chattering in the breeze.

The yacht gives a shudder,  
keel and rudder gurgling,  
interacting with currents  
of the fast ebbing tide,  
anchor chain graunching.

A wake approaches silently  
as large vessels pass unseen,  
gathering strength every moment,  
as if a creature after prey,  
to catch and buffet the unwary.

Depth gauge alarm reacts,  
“Bloody fish” — a curse below  
as a shoal swims beneath.  
A hidden hand hits the switch,  
another curse as the wake hits.

Wraith forms flit above,  
oyster-catchers, their slender  
white bellies reflecting in a  
dim glow while circling, swooping  
in airborne profusion of beauty.

Moments later, a cacophony  
shatters the silence as flocks  
come to roost on the nearby bank,  
myriad shrieks conjure scenes  
of the embattled inhabitants.

Silence soon, then follows anguish,  
the smell of freshly grilled food,  
torturing, beckoning from ashore  
mid waves of cheerful voices —  
while we sit hard aground

## Poetry Workshop

Mike Boland

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Chairman: Liz Rowlands, 19 Arkley Court, Maidenhead, SL6 2YR

Treasurer: Terry Rickson, 48 Marlborough Road, Ashford, TW15 3QA

Secretary: Mike Boland, 11 Boxtree Lane, Harrow Weald, HA3 6JU

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### Bill Barnes Competition 2004

At the time of writing, the results of this year's Competition aren't known, but we hope they will appear in the first issue of our new magazine Wavelengths, which replaces the old Newsletter and will be published on 1 December.

There were 67 entries from 15 poets, a record number for the Bill Barnes Competition, so well done to everyone who entered and made this year's event a success.

### PW Weekend 2005

We have provisionally booked the Manor House at the University of Birmingham for the weekend of 29-31 July 2005, our normal accommodation being unavailable this year. We have been there before in 2003, and it proved a very pleasant location. Full details and price to be announced later.

A booking form will be enclosed with issue 1 of Wavelengths in December.

### Waves 2005

The closing date for submissions to Waves, our annual collection of members' work, is 31 March 2005. Full details will appear in issue 1 of Wavelengths.

### Subscriptions

Subscriptions for the Poetry Workshop will fall due in January. A renewal form will be enclosed with issue 1 of Wavelengths.

The membership fee remains unchanged for yet another year, being **£3** for members of the SCPSW. **Please** remember to make out cheques correctly; they should be made payable to: **SCPSW Poetry Workshop A/C** and sent to Terry Rickson (address above).

Membership of the Poetry Workshop provides:

- three issues of our magazine Wavelengths each year, plus a fourth, Competition Special issue
- the chance of publication in **Waves**, the PW's annual anthology of members' work
- access to the popular Postal Folio scheme
- eligibility for the Bill Barnes Poetry Competition (open exclusively to PW members)
- eligibility for the annual PW Weekend at the University of Birmingham

If anyone is interested in joining the Poetry Workshop, please contact Mike Boland at the above address. He will be pleased to provide further details.

### **Dates to Remember**

1 December 2004	Wavelengths Winter issue
1 January 2005	Poetry Workshop subscriptions due
1 February 2005	Wavelengths Competition Special
31 March 2005	Closing Date for Submissions to <u>Waves</u>
1 May 2005	Wavelengths Spring Issue
29 - 31 July 2005	Poetry Workshop Weekend

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### **Winter Meeting**

Alan Watts

The sun was shining in my eyes  
As I walked down the wintry lane.  
I did not see her, when, surprised,  
She spoke and took my hand again.  
I knew then, all those words were lies.

Those bitter words were merely lies,  
Those words which drove us two apart.  
I did not try to shield my eyes  
Or quell the beating of my heart.  
It came to me as no surprise.

But time had gone; the days were fled.  
We had been young but now were old.  
All those bright dreams of ours were dead  
And all our youthful spirits cold.  
I said: "Hello." "Good-day," she said.

## SCPSW ANNUAL COMPETITIONS 2005

### **Lewis Wright Short Story Competition**

Maximum length 3,000 words, double spaced on A4 paper. Entries will be returned if accompanied by s.a.e. Entry Fee £4.00 per story. Total prize money for best seven entries, £150 (5 3rds £5).

### **Herbert Spencer Poetry Competition**

No restriction on theme or form, but maximum forty lines and one poem per sheet of paper. (Writers of humorous verse should consider the George Farley Prize.) Entries will be returned if accompanied by s.a.e. Entry Fee £2.00 for first and £1.50 for each subsequent poem. 1<sup>st</sup> prize £50, 2<sup>nd</sup> prize £30, 3<sup>rd</sup> prize £15.

### **Vincent Brennan Travel Article**

Maximum length 2,000 words, double spaced on A4 paper. Entries will be returned if accompanied by s.a.e. Entry Fee £2.50 per entry. 1<sup>st</sup> prize £30, 2<sup>nd</sup> prize £20, 3<sup>rd</sup> prize £10.

### **George Farley Prize**

For light humorous verse only. Judges and sponsors, Pamela Farley, Aline Shee and Jean Squires (daughters of George Farley). Judges look for the qualities their father valued in humorous verse — “wit, clever construction and interesting language”. Entries returned if accompanied by s.a.e. Prize £25.

### **Notes for Entrants to all Competitions**

1. Unless entrants state on entering competitions that do not wish their entry to be published, all winning entries will be published in *Author* if space permits. The entrant's name will also be quoted, unless entrants advise on entry that they prefer to use a pen name.
2. Entries must be the original work of the entrant and must not have been published at the time of submission. Entries exceeding specified number of lines or words will be disqualified
3. All entries should bear only the pen name (which should be varied to avoid recognition) and a separate sheet quoting: pen name used, title of entry, real name and address. (Optional for serving members, Department and staff association for potential publicity use.)
4. All entries should be sent to Competition Secretary, Ron Jeffreys, 186 Lewis Flats, Lisgar Terrace, London W14 8SQ not later than 28<sup>th</sup> February 2005

R C Jeffreys  
Competition Secretary

## **My First Civil Service Author**

Albert Thornton

**I**t would be about 1930 when I first met him, how do I know? Well our local Labour Exchange had been moved from the small empty newsagent's shop at the top of The Butts to Procter Barret's wood yard. Here was a large two storey workshop of no further use as a storage space for his readymade fitted kitchen units.

A few years earlier the town had seen an explosion in the building of the new terraces. These were usually small blocks of five houses fitting neatly into the small plots of land between the cotton weaving mills and the old long stone terraces built before the First World War. New names had been found, Wordsworth Street, Milton Avenue, Keats Close and the rest chosen it seemed at random from a well used Palgraves Golden Treasury.

Now the shadow of unemployment had reappeared. Procter Barret's double storey workshop, which with a little ingenuity from the Office of Works had LADIES, sorry "WOMEN" catered for in the semi-basement and the "MEN" up the wooden steps to the upper floor. A room which could have easily altered for one of the Marathon Dance Competitions held at the time when out of work weavers might achieve local fame and a substantial prize for non-stop dancing the slow fox-trot.

In the school holidays I would often be allowed to count the copper pennies into piles of one shilling ready for Tommy Greenhagh, John Pateman and my father, all temporary clerks when trade slumped, but returned to their mills cotton weaving, when trade revived.

Mr. White the manager had as his second in command Bill Warwick, newly arrived from Kirkudbright. This was the far off land, the Solway Firth and sheep country. Bill, who wrote under the pen-name Milligan Warwick was an authority on the folklore of the area. A lean thin man, with shining red cheeks clean shaven and as tall as our local bobby. It was easy to imagine him in kilt and sporran marching smartly with rifle and bayonet during his wartime service. He fitted easily into the life of the town, and soon became acquainted with the ones who were on the fiddle.

I remember seeing our coal delivery lad with a black eye having his dole adjusted after winning a small prize at a boxing both in a fair at Colne. “Albert, does tha know Ahm art a pocket, Ah couldn’t claim mi travelling expenses, yon Mr. Warwick tecks some watching.” “Well John, I suppose you thought the coal would cover up your black eye.”

What was a little eight years old lad to do on Saturday nights in the dark cold days of Midwinter. Shivering cold yellow fog spotlighted at intervals by gas lamps lighted by Wallace from the Gasworks were no comfort, first house pictures were beyond his pocket, he and his schoolmates had been to the Saturday morning matinee, admission either one penny or a clean empty jam jar and return home with a thin skinned orange, never eaten until warmed in front of the coal fire in the parlour.

So where is this man from the land of Robbie Burns on Saturday evening? He is at home in the bedroom of the stone built terrace house. His daughter Margaret, her younger sister Jane and little brother Billy with Mrs. W all downstairs sitting on those hard wooden chairs which served as seating, stools for standing on and footrests when the weekly shoe cleaning ceremony took place. It was a pity that the floor had only the polished thin lino, so awfully cold and such a contrast to the quarter inch thick Office of Works brown linoleum at the Exchange.

Milligan, upstairs in the fireless cold bedroom, his old “sit up and beg” Remington set squarely on an empty upturned tea-chest, sat on the edge of the bed with his spare paper at his side. His rhythmical tapping on the typewriter could be heard downstairs, without the deadening effect of carpet in the bare room, I joined the merry band of little Warwicks on Saturday nights having used my spending money to buy a cheap cardboard game, provided if lucky with its own dice. A game where all the family could be involved. Even Mrs. W could take part when she wasn’t sewing or knitting or baking or cooking in the gaslit kitchen. She had quite a pleasant voice and knew so many of the songs of Robbie Burns which had been set to music. No, there was never any instrument in their house, we had a piano, or at least Grandma Gill had, and Dad played his trumpet in his Broadway Dance Band and the cornet



in the Town's Brass Band, but there was no music making instrument chez Warwick.

At the end of the evening, the signal to return home was when Milligan would come down and hand over the weekly collection of publishers' catalogues for me to take home for my father, an avid Bullets competitor, a regular subscriber to "John Bull" and "John o' London's weekly". I enjoyed reading the catalogues discovering such gems as "Alcibiades, beloved of Gods and Men". Never read it but happily played with arranging the words to design different covers, funny that I never had a go at Milligan's epic yarn of piracy and smuggling under the Solway Firth, "The Yawning Lion". Why yawning was not clear to me but had significance for the Warwick family, publication of the book meant that they were able to leave the overcrowded terrace house and move to a large detached in the classier part of the town still rented of course, Milligan was ambitious and when promotion came a year or two later he had no dealings with estate agents to worry about. But almost at the same time that the book was published there was an awful downside. The new arrival in the family was taken ill and died at the age of six weeks. The funeral took place at lunchtime. Going back to school a solitary black car passed at a quick walking pace, inside Milligan was holding a small wooden box on his knee and Mrs. W sat with arms folded her face hidden beneath a black veil, just the two of them, the young family were staying with neighbours on an afternoon off school.

My Father was given a signed copy, but sad to say, it was lost later when we moved on Father's promotion to Permanent status. I doubt there will be any copies still surviving, boom and slump and war and peace take their toll. Pity that I never had a go at designing the jacket for Bill's book, but then, who cares about such things when only little me can remember how my first Civil Service Author came to our little town all those years ago and at the end of each Saturday night his eldest daughter Margaret, six years older and a good foot taller than I was, would bend down and give me a little kiss on the right temple. "Thanks for coming."

## Trapped

Matthew Arnot

In the oppressive darkness his fingers groped subconsciously for the folds and crevices that would aid his escape. His mind was not yet acclimatised to his surroundings. His eyes were of even less use because they swam with visions of the past and the never-to-happen. He found it hard to distinguish between the two, for the dreams were so vivid. All else faded into an indistinct, translucent grey that reflected his sickly pallor. A slow, relentless throbbing invaded his skull. The vibrations seemed to permeate to the very depths of his soul. He felt nauseous. Time passed.

Vague recollections of the previous days rose hazily in his mind; unasked for and unwelcome. Unfamiliar faces reared before his unseeing pupils, and, for a second, he was frightened by the sudden appearance of the misshapen and ethereal spectres. As a result his fingers lost the tenuous grip they had on the terrain. The ground flew towards him at a terrifying speed no eyes tightly shut wind rushing clench no fist falling cry shout NO scream NO. The extent of his inebriation became all too apparent.

But he hit nothing solid, not this time.

The memory, so intense until this point was unable to recreate the pain or the blood or even the feeling of immense satisfaction he had experienced at the time. Why had he been drinking? He wasn't sure — not because he had no reason but just a lapse in his memory, of that he was sure. Was it fear or joy or ... or ... ? Can't remember.

Forgetfulness.

Now this was something that had plagued him all his life. He was always forgetting things like birthdays and anniversaries and when to eat ... .. When had he last eaten? How did he remember that he hadn't eaten if he was so forgetful? Why is it so dark? Who was ... His head swam. Good. No thinking. Satisfied. Trapped.

His fingers recovered their hold on the environs. Maybe he worked too hard. Perhaps it was a pressure that had become too great? The

stress was probably affecting his brain. Or maybe it was the alcohol? He shifted uncomfortably, easing a cramped shoulder, but reigniting the fiery ache in his head. His hands gripped ever harder and the terrain yielded under his grip. Something soft caressed his cheek. He slipped dangerously back towards unconsciousness before veering wildly in the other direction as reality almost threatened to strike. Eventually his mind settled for sub-consciousness.

Had he really been ...? ... No, he was too dull for that ...

He was enveloped; it was still dark.

Trapped, trapped but not afraid.

Indeed, he felt strangely tranquil and protected. Still though, the stale air of his confines was beginning to grate against his delicate alveoli. His throat was parched; his tongue licked salty sweat from his dry, cracked lips. A foul, bitter taste filled his mouth and he found it awkward to swallow. The claustrophobia of his situation had begun to suffocate him and he felt his mind begin to interrogate itself again. But he couldn't remember. He had forgotten.

To forget! To forget! That's why he had been drinking. But he had forgotten to forget, once the liquor had left. To forget the bitterness that was now a taste in his mouth. To forget the suffocation of his mundane existence that was now embodied in the air around him. To ... his fingers clenched and dragged and the fibres caught and rucked and were drawn away from his face and air — sweet air! — flooded his senses. The light invaded and he couldn't see.

He had to get up, but found that he couldn't.

Inexorably his eyelids closed and his head sank slowly back onto the pillow. The duvet that had so long been his captor was overcome by gravity, and slipped quietly away until it deprived only the carpet of air.

## Lewis Wright Competition Runner-up

### The Story of Po Li

Terry Rickson

Once upon a time, long, long ago, in a faraway country, lived a boy called Po Li. The country was called China.

Po Li's family was very poor, the poorest in their village. His father and mother worked hard on their small farm, growing rice and vegetables and keeping a few ducks to sell in the market. Po Li loved helping his parents on the farm but often there was not enough to eat either for him, his brothers and sisters or his parents.

One day an old man came to the village asking the way to Po Li's house. The villagers were afraid of the man because he was old and bent and walked slowly with the aid of a stick. Some of them said the old man was a wizard and would bring bad luck to their homes and their village and began throwing stones at him.

The chief of the village council came and stopped the people throwing stones, saying the old man was a stranger and traveller and should be welcomed. He could see he was a good, wise man. The councillor took the old man to Po Li's house.

The old man greeted Po Li's mother and father and asked to see their son. Although they too were a little afraid of their visitor, they called the boy forward.

For a few moments the old man stood with his hands resting on his walking stick, looking at Po Li intently. Po Li was not afraid, seeing only kindness in the bright eyes.

"One day, Po Li," the old man said, "you will be a famous and powerful man, known throughout China."

"How can that be, sir?" asked Po Li.

"Like this," he said. Hooking his stick over his arm, he took Po Li's hands between his own, pressing them gently between his palms then sliding them over the boy's fingers.

"Your power will come through your hands, on all you touch, living things, green things and water."

Po Li did not know what to say.

The old man smiled, took his stick, saying he must be on his way as he had far to travel.

Po Li's mother and father begged the old man stay and eat with them before he set off on his journey.

"We have very little, sir," Po Li's father said, "but what we have, we will share with you."

So the old man stayed and shared in their simple meal. He told them wonderful stories of his travels to far and distant lands.

Then it was time for him to leave. "May we know your name, sir?" Po Li's mother asked.

He only smiled and said, "A traveller."

He gave Po Li and his family a blessing and thanked them for their kindness.

Po Li watched the old man for a long time as he climbed the steep, hilly path; then he seemed to vanish in the mist and cloud of the high pass over the mountains.

Po Li often thought about the old man as he worked on the farm. He began to notice something very strange. The seeds and rice he helped to plant, grew bigger and fresher than before and the ducks, fatter.

People bought more of the rice and vegetables from their stall in the market. People from beyond their village heard about Po Li and came to see for themselves, the greenness and freshness of the little farm and the fatness of the ducks quacking and splashing in the stream.

One day, a messenger came running into the village. Everyone could see he was out of breath and very afraid.

"Soo Ming the terrible warlord and his army, are marching towards your village," he gasped.

The villagers were very frightened. Soo Ming cared for no one, not even the Emperor of China. His army stole, robbed and burned down towns and villages.

Before anyone could think of running away to hide in the mountains, Soo Ming and his army had arrived.

Soo Ming demanded that the Head of the village council be brought before him.

“I’ve heard,” he growled, “ you have a boy, Po Li, in this village. I want him here at once.”

“We do, sir, but ...” stuttered the Councillor.

“Silence!” roared Soo Ming. “At once, do you hear, or I’ll chop off every head in the village and burn every house!”

The villagers were so afraid and wondering what to do next, when a clear voice was heard.

“I am Po Li.”

The warlord stared at Po Li for a moment then pointed a finger, “You are to come with me, boy with the magic fingers.”

“I will come with you, sir, if you spare the village and its people,” Po Li replied bravely.

There was silence. Then Soo Ming signalled with his arm, pulled on the reins of his horse and swung around, ordering his army to leave the village, taking Po Li with him.

Po Li was taken across the mountains and over a wide river, to Soo Ming’s fortress and city. He was made to work very hard in the fields and gardens; often he was beaten and given little food to eat. When the rice grew thicker and better than before, the ducks and pigs fatter and the buffalo gave more milk, Po Li was no longer beaten and given more to eat. With more food, Soo Ming had an even bigger and more stronger army to go raiding and stealing. The Emperor of China became angrier and angrier.

Po Li did make a friend, a boy called Koo Sok, the son of Soo Ming. It was Koo Sok who taught Po Li to wrestle and defend himself with sword and stave. As he grew older, Po Li became as quick and as fast as Koo Sok and would beat him sometimes. One day, when they were out on the lake fishing, Koo Sok told Po Li a secret about himself that Po Li found hard to believe at first.

That summer, the Emperor of China came with a large army and Soo Ming was killed in a fierce battle. Po Li and Koo Sok were taken prisoner.

All the prisoners were made to kneel down with their heads touching the ground whilst the Emperor rode past, all except Po Li who looked up boldly at the great man.

The Emperor reined his horse, "Do you not know, impudent boy, that it is forbidden under the pain of death, for anyone below the rank of a great noble, to look at the Emperor?"

"Yes, sir," said Po Li.

"Well," the Emperor said with a cruel smile, "you shall die next after Soo Ming's son. See, the executioner is ready."

Indeed he was, a great sword in his hands waiting for the signal, his assistant already having hold of Koo Sok's pigtail.

"He is not Soo Ming's son," answered Po Li.

The Emperor's face went red with anger, "Who are you, boy, to speak so to the Emperor?" he shouted.

"I am Po Li," the boy replied.

The Emperor looked at Po Li sharply, leaning forward in his saddle.

"Po Li? The boy with the gifts of the gods in his fingers?"

"I am, your Imperial Highness," Po Li said.

"Who, then, is that?" the Emperor asked, pointing at the unfortunate Koo Sok.

"He is Lim Sung Han, son of a wealthy nobleman, stolen as a child by Soo Ming and held for ransom; his father served you well in the wars against the rebels in the South."

The Emperor ordered the immediate release of Po Li and Lim Sung Han and the two friends returned with him to Peking.

Po Li was put in charge of the gardens of the Emperor's palace at Peking. To the delight of the Emperor and his court, the gardens grew more and more splendid under the care of Po Li. Plants, flowers and trees from all over the world were found by Po Li to make the gardens

even more beautiful. The fountains, lakes and canals were the wonder of all the visitors to the Emperor's palace.

Lim Sung Han became a famous general in the Emperor's army but he remained Po Li's greatest friend.

The Emperor sent his men to search for and find Po Li's mother and father so that they could be brought to Peking. When they did come to the city, they could hardly believe the young man dressed in fine clothes of a nobleman and living in such a fine house, was their son Po Li. They returned to their farm with gifts from both Po Li and the Emperor.

One morning, Po Li heard a great deal of shouting and running feet outside his house. He went out to the courtyard to find the guards dragging an old man towards the house. Po Li recognised him immediately, he commanded silence and ordered the guards to release the old man.

To the amazement of the crowd that had gathered, Po Li removed his silken hat of authority and knelt down on the cobblestones of the yard, before the old man.

"You are the traveller who came to our poor house and farm those many years ago and gave me this great gift. You are welcome to my house."

"You have used the gift well and wisely, Po Li," the old man said.

"Tell me your name, sir, that I may thank you with due honour," Po Li asked.

The old man smiled, "My name is Het Mai, traveller, teacher and servant of the gods."

Het Mai was treated with respect in Po Li's house. Later, Po Li gave him a token with the Emperor's golden seal attached allowing him to travel freely and be shown honour in all the lands and dominions of the Emperor and beyond.

Po Li lived to be a very, very old man. It is true to say he lived happily ever after; famed throughout China, honoured at the court of many Emperors and loved and respected by his family.



## Vincent Brennan Travel Article Competition — 2<sup>nd</sup> Prize

### An African Journey in 1961

H J Williams

**I**t all happened a long time ago. In August 1961 I was employed as a land Surveyor in N Rhodesia in the days before the electronic revolution that completely changed the way we worked. N Rhodesia is now Zambia. Violence and mayhem had broken out in the adjacent Belgian Congo (now Zaire) and the mineral rich province of Katanga, bordering N Rhodesia, had experienced a major exodus of Europeans. To complicate the situation Katanga had declared itself independent from the Congo — an early example of UDI, and this action was strongly opposed by the United Nations.

I was based at Solwezi, a small town close to the border, and had to make an urgent trip to Chingola on the Copper Belt about 100 miles away, to replenish rations for my men and to obtain items for survey purposes. These could only be obtained from the Government store there.

I decided to take a 5-ton truck with a driver and six men and to save time (so I thought) I would enter Katanga via Kipushi and travel on the far better roads there. I would then be able to re-enter N Rhodesia near Chingola. I must admit I was also anxious to see what was happening in Katanga.

On 11<sup>th</sup> August we drove across the border and stopped at the police post. This was a scene of confusion with a few harassed Belgians, a fraction of the former European population trying to hold things together. I explained the reasons for my journey to a tired Flemish speaker whose French did not seem much better than mine. I was eventually given authority to drive through Katanga. At this stage I was beginning to have reservations about my journey. My “authority” stated that:

“Mr Williams, arpenteur de Service Geographique du Rhodesia de Nord est autorise de voyager le long de la frontier avec six hommes, et un camion.”

I was glad to leave the scene of crowded confusion. We set off, refusing to take the usual crowd of Africans begging for a lift and drove on a good road “... le long de la frontier ...” towards Chingola. The country was comprised of scrubby woodland with a few animals, mainly small deer and the occasional group of baboons at places. Suicidal ground squirrels made quick dashes across the road. This was laterite and dry season conditions meant that we were closely followed by clouds of red dust.

There was little traffic on the road, a few vehicles came the other way covering us in dust — we reciprocated of course. The frontier followed the

watershed between the two great African rivers — the Congo to the North and the Zambezi to the South. It was marked by a survey pillar every few miles which had a ‘C’ on one side and a ‘NR’ on the other.

After about an hour we pulled over for what would now be called a comfort stop. Taking a swig of lukewarm water I watched a big Cadillac come towards us. It slowed down as it passed us and the passenger in the back seat looked out towards our parked lorry. I recognised Moise Tshombe, the leader of the breakaway state of Katanga. My driver said:

“Bwana, that is the king of Katanga.”

This was a man who would be murdered in Algeria several years in the future.

Eventually we arrived at the small village on the border which was the entry point into Northern Rhodesia. We stopped at the police post by the obligatory red and white striped pole which closed the road. It was hot and ominously quiet. I got out of the truck and looked around. Under a large mango tree nearby were a group of Africans in scruffy uniforms lounging on the ground. I walked over to them. As I approached I couldn’t fail to notice their surly looks and the sub machine guns they were holding.

“Bonjour,” I said. “Comment ca va?”

This was greeted by a grunt from a large man I took to be an NCO. I was close enough to see that his eyes had a peculiar look — drugs I thought. He pointed at a small building I had failed to see “Le bureau” he said. I responded with a “Merci” — it was as well to be polite, then walked over to “le bureau”.

This was, I assumed, the customs office and was occupied by two Africans — one a frightened little man in an ill-fitting suit, and the other a large thug in a dirty uniform with a revolver holster on his belt. I repeated my “Bonjour” and “comment ca va?” that I had used before and got a somewhat negative response. I continued to smile, then, in my best schoolboy French said:

“Je m’appelle Williams, Service Geographique Rhodesia du Nord. Je desire d’aller a Chingola” and I showed them my “authority” that I had received at Kipushi.

The response to these words was, “Pourquoi?”

In French I replied as follows:

“Je vais au Chingola de acheter ...”

I couldn’t think of the French word for ‘food’. The two men looked at me expectantly. I had to say something. The sooner I left this place with its air of menace the better, so I said “de acheter du food”, using the English word.

“Comment food?” grunted the larger man, his small companion looking frightened and furtive as he spoke. Suddenly I remembered that Swahili was widely spoken in the Congo and I could remember the word for ‘food’ in that language “Kwa chakula” I said. This brought a rapid response in Swahili which lost me.

I continued to smile — God it was difficult — how did actors manage to keep it up on stage?

They studied my “authority” and the big man said something to his companion. He nodded then stamped the document. I was told I was free to go. An order was shouted to the recumbent group outside. One got reluctantly to his feet and lifted the red and white striped pole, as I walked out to the truck. “Let’s go” I said to the driver who promptly started the engine and let in the clutch. We left and I felt a wave of relief as we drove away.

After about a 100 yards we turned a bend and came up to a dozen or more cars, pickups and station wagons all heavily loaded with household goods. Europeans, Belgians stood around talking and smoking. They were waiting to get away from Katanga and into Northern Rhodesia.

A short way ahead there was another red and white striped pole across the road with a large corrugated roofed building nearby. There were also two flags flying — a Union Jack and the Northern Rhodesian emblem. It looked good to see them. “I suppose we had better join the queue,” I told the driver — British law abiding behaviour asserting itself.

We slowed down and were about to do this when I saw a smartly uniformed, much be-medalled soldier standing by the barrier waving us on. We speeded up and passed the Belgian cars, getting a variety of angry looks and mutterings as we did so.

As we came up to the barrier it was lifted smoothly and we were waved on by another soldier. I saw that the first one was an RSM in the Northern Rhodesian regiment. As we passed he stood to attention and gave us a salute. After the tension of Katanga it felt that we were coming home.

We continued to Chingola and I realised that the RSM had recognised our number plate which had the letters NRG (Northern Rhodesian Government), so we were official and not Belgian refugees who would have to wait for clearance to enter Northern Rhodesia.

After we had completed our business in Chingola we took the longer and rougher road back to Solwezi on the Rhodesian side — it was longer but safer and we avoided the tensions of travel in Katanga.

## Vincent Brennan Travel Article Competition — 3<sup>rd</sup> Prize

### On the Trail of Turtles and Lemurs

Jenny Chamier-Grove

I clutched onto the sides of the pirogue — a locally-built wooden outrigger canoe — and watched the waves slapping against the sides. We had motored out from Nosy Iranja, one of a loosely knit group of islands off Madagascar's northern coast, and I was hoping to swim over coral reefs.

It was a journey back to a time when Madagascar was home to ferocious pirates and superb seamen, I thought romantically. The water was fluid quartz. We anchored and I was just preparing to leap over the side of the pirogue when our helmsman said something singular.

“*Dent de Requin*,” he said cheerfully, motioning towards a huge lacerated rock which rose out of the sea in front of us.

One part of my mind was still tingling with anticipation, imagining the fish I would see underwater. The other was translating — Shark's Tooth. And suddenly my excitement was countered by a single question. If, as I'd been assured, there were no sharks here, how did this rock get its name? I thought wistfully of the giant turtle which had lumbered ashore before breakfast. Why wasn't I on shore, looking for turtles? I glanced at my travelling companion, Madeleine, but my old school friend seemed unperturbed. I fiddled with my fins and thought about our arrival in Madagascar which now seemed suffused with a rosy glow — even that unfortunate episode at Kirindy. Should I invent an excuse for not swimming? I hesitated, then, hanging on to my snorkel and my faltering nerve, I plunged over the side.

We had flown to Madagascar from Johannesburg, landing at the capital, Antananarivo, (Tana), coming in over clusters of red-clay houses, a mosaic of paddy fields and white concrete Merina tombs. In Tana we went to the main square where children crowded round us squealing: *Vazaha!* (‘Foreigner’) and tried to sell us model boats, or just held out their hands,

Next morning we flew to Morondava on the west coast, to join a camp at Kirindy, which offers a chance to see dry deciduous forest, rare trees which grow nowhere else, and lemurs such as the white sifaka and the pygmy mouse lemur.

We were met at the airport by our guide, Tao, and his driver, Robinson. We were not to know it then, but our night at the camp would not be as calm as we might expect. Meanwhile, on the often bumpy three-hour drive, Tao pointed out Madagascar's most celebrated trees, the baobabs, their massive swollen trunks topped by a frenzy of branches. The road wound through arid plains, hazardous with deep ruts and the occasional cart drawn by humped zebu cattle.

When we reached the small fixed camp at Kirindy it was almost dusk and we were looking forward to a stroll in the forest before sleeping in a two-person bungalow. But we had reckoned without the wiles of the French. A party of French visitors had arrived at Kirindy — apparently on a whim — and their ploy was simple. Reaching the camp before us they had staked their claim to all the accommodation, including the bungalow that had been booked for us. Faced with this Gallic version of gazumping, we were incensed — but powerless. Tao gallantly gave us his tent and resigned himself to a night in the truck.

We soon stopped grumbling however, as Tao led us through the forest, avidly scanning branches by torchlight. From time to time he would point out almost invisible geckos, chameleons and, once, a rare Giant Jumping Rat. But what we were really longing to see was a lemur.

It was then that we saw it. After nearly 30 minutes of padding along the forest paths, Tao was the first to spot the eyes. Peering closely, we could just make out the tiny outline of a pygmy mouse lemur, eyes bright in the torchlight, then the distant form of a sifaka.

A night on *terra firma* — and it doesn't come much firmer — the air resonant with the *ronflement* (snores) of a French usurper, dampened our spirits. Would we ever see lemurs close to, we wondered? Next morning, just as we were giving up hope, Tao directed us to a tree on the outskirts of the camp. We peered through the bracken and suddenly spotted two lemurs with thick grey fur snoozing on top of each other. One opened her large amber eyes and gazed warily at us.

“Nocturnal lemurs,” Tao explained later as we were packing up. “I don't think the French party saw them. Pity.” We didn't agree. Elated, we piled into our four-wheel drive truck and bounced off along the rutted track.

We flew back to Tana and next morning began a three-hour drive east, the road winding upwards through green hills past a graphite mine

to Perinet, a well hidden reserve in mountainous rainforest which boasts nine species of lemur including the indri.

Home here was a bungalow linked by steps and a raised walkway to the Vakona Forest Lodge, a hotel built over a lake.

That night our guide, Julienne, led us by torchlight into the forest. As the rain dripped from our noses we peered at chameleons still as cut glass and heard the eerie wail of the indri. Would we ever see them we wondered?

Next morning we followed Julienne into the damp forest startling a Paradise Flycatcher, a large flame-coloured bird with a long tail, but seeing little else. Then suddenly Julienne clambered through the undergrowth and motioned us to follow. There in the trees above us were the indri — the largest of the lemur family — white, with black and white faces, leaping from branch to branch like agile teddy-bears.

There was a murmured '*Formidable!*' — and an '*Incroyable!*' — from the egregious group of French visitors that tiptoed through the trees to join us.

Next morning we drove off to catch a plane to Taolagnaro, (Fort Dauphin), on Madagascar's south-eastern tip, to visit Andohahela, a national park which opened in 1998 in the "transitional forest" and spans eastern rainforest and the arid southwest. We didn't expect to find it exciting — after all, there would be no lemurs to look at.

But when we arrived we were struck by the astonishing landscape, and followed our guide, Christophe, removing our shoes and wading across the river Taratantsa, to climb through groves of weird didierea trees, including the octopus tree, a bizarre plant with small deciduous leaves protected by immense thorns, found nowhere else on earth. We stopped to stare at triangulated palms and the celebrity tree that drapes its droopy top over neighbouring plants and, according to folklore, can bring you success if you appeal to it through a soothsayer. Lacking a soothsayer we pressed on, reaching a remote and alluring plateau, then descending to picnic by a waterfall.

Next day as we were driving to the neighbouring reserve of Berenty, we stopped to look at a rusty remnant of faded French-colonial grandeur — a bridge built in the same style as the Eiffel Tower, badly in need of a coat of paint.

Madagascar's colourful past includes independent kings, well-meaning British missionaries, and a "wicked" queen but in the early 1880s its people proved no match for the firearms of the French. Since gaining independence in 1960 the Malagasy people have had a hard time, succumbing to plagues of locusts and economic decline.

For the first half of 2002, Madagascar had two rival Presidents. The new man, Marc Ravalomanana — sometimes dubbed the 'Yoghurt King' as he heads a large local drinks and dairy business — promised democracy and reform.

The previous President, Admiral Didier Ratsiraka, who had first come to power in 1975, disputed the Yoghurt King's claims of an overall majority. But the Admiral's credibility had been weakened by his country's economic collapse and by the actions of his presidential guards who, in August 1991, fired on unarmed demonstrators killing an estimated 100 people.

Eleven years later there were more peaceful demonstrations — this time in support of Marc Ravalomanana. The demonstrations continued uneventfully for about two months until a group of youths from the old President's rally surrounded pastors and 'exorcists' among the Yoghurt King's supporters only to flee when confronted by a female karate expert with fists and feet flying.

Admiral Ratsiraka duly retreated to the port of Toamasina east of Tana and his cohorts blew up bridges, dynamited electricity pylons and set up road blocks. During the ensuing crisis trade suffered, tourism dwindled, and supplies of medicine dried up. Then on 26 June — Madagascar's Independence Day — the United States and several other countries recognised Marc Ravalomanana's government. A week later France did the same and the Admiral left Madagascar to take up residence in his apartment in Neuilly.

On our drive to Berenty we passed occasional piles of tree trunks and logs heaped by the side of the road. Madagascar remains one of the poorest countries in the world and poverty forces some farmers to cut down rare trees to grow hill rice. But there are some hopeful signs. Since 1980 preservation trusts have been helping to train local wildlife managers, and although a 15-year environmental action plan started in the early nineties has had mixed results, some of the smaller projects have proved promising.

Our arrival at the Berenty Reserve distracted us from such concerns. Ring-tailed lemurs were everywhere, their striped tails waving triumphantly from the roof of the restaurant. They seemed equally at home on the ground or in our cabin, which was burgled while we were out, though all that was stolen was a bunch of bananas — the only clue to the culprits being a tell-tale dropping on the window sill.

That afternoon we saw the unforgettable dance of the white sifakas, the only lemurs which stand upright on their long legs and caper and leap with apparent joie de vivre. By contrast, the walk by torchlight through the spiny forest at dusk was disappointing, people outnumbering lemurs, prompting Madeleine to ask our guide, Benoir, whether too many visitors would destroy the wildlife.

“No,” he replied. “It helps. When you buy a permit to get into the reserves, half the money goes to the local community. And if Malagasy people learn their countryside has value they’ll look after it.”

In Madagascar hope is infectious.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **The Boat with Skirts**

Arthur Bromley

It’s hard to believe that at the launch of a world-shattering transport invention only 25 people bothered to turn up, and I was one of them.

Before I became a medical practitioner I was a qualified engineer and worked for a well-known chocolate manufacturer at MORETON on the Wirral.

It was 1962 and one day, just as I was about to take my midday break, one of my friends came up to me.

“I am just going to see the launch of a peculiar boat down at the LEASOWE embankment, would you like to come?”

“What do you mean by a *peculiar* boat?” I asked.

“Well, I believe it can travel on land and water,” he answered.

“You mean a boat with wheels?”



“No it’s got *no* wheels, I believe.”

I stared at him. “*This* I must see.”

We walked through the main factory gates and down the road for about half a mile until we came to Leasowe common.

As we walked onto the River Mersey’s golden beach we noted about 25 people were there, sitting on the sandy bank.

We had been there about ten minutes when a large wagon came into view pulling a massive trailer, on the back of which sat a boat about 25ft in length which was soon hoisted off the trailer and onto the sand.

“It must be a female boat,” said my friend, “it’s got a skirt on it.”

Sure enough it had a rubberized skirt which went all around the bottom of the boat and trailing about six inches onto the sand.

Behind the trailer came a car and out of it came a man who we quickly heard was CHRISTOPHER COCKERELL the famous inventor who had produced this strange craft.

He went on board this flat-bottomed boat.

Suddenly we all got a fright when a terrible noise like the sound of a massive fan hit our ears and came from the bowels of the craft. Then came a further shock, the boat started to rise from the ground to about three foot, balancing on air.

It then started to move towards the water and onwards towards the North Wales coast opposite.

We watched it until it became a small dot on the horizon.

We were all gob-struck, so I went to one of the men who had helped to launch the boat and asked him what was the name of this strange type of craft.

“It hasn’t got a name as yet,” he said, “but they will have to think one up pretty quick because this is to be a regular run between LEASOWE and RHYL.”

That evening the papers and TV had a full report and pictures of the occasion, and a few days later we heard it was to be called a *HOVERCRAFT*.

## A Christmas Tale

John Buchanan

**E**lijah was sitting in a small room with his master. The room was dull looking with just this one bench in it. A nearby window let in bright sunshine which was covering the two men.

“It is nice to be sitting here on a fine day, Elijah. I hope that your advice to me can continue for some time to come. Besides you are too intelligent to be a mere ‘yes man’ and as a result you have prevented me from making mistakes.”

“I hope that King Herod appreciates my advice as always being well-intentioned.”

“Naturally the Romans insist on having a say in what goes on here. However, they do allow us some autonomy, which means we do things to manage our own people. Of course, your sphere of influence has been towards trade with the rest of the Roman Empire.”

There was a pause here as if Herod wanted to see what Elijah might say. It was not immediately obvious to Elijah what he should say.

“Does Your Majesty wish me to advise him now?” suggested Elijah tentatively.

“I did wonder if you had any views on the way I am currently governing the country? Apart from your usual concerns for our trade with others.”

Elijah felt he was being deliberately put on the spot. Herod had begun by ruling Palestine well. He understood the ways of the Romans having spent time in Rome itself.

“Are you asking me to comment on the views of John the Baptist?”

“Elijah, a lot of people have recently been feeling that my rule has become more autocratic of late.”

“I do know this, Your Majesty,” suggested Elijah cautiously. “If I were to advise you, then I might say that a wise ruler has nothing to fear from the forthcoming Messiah. It is prophesied that his work will be in the religious field. I know of nothing of him becoming involved in politics. Of course, Herod is wise and may know something that is unknown to me.”

“A clever answer,” said Herod with a sarcastic tone in his voice.

Elijah realised there could be a problem, but was unaware of being in any danger from the King. Why, they had almost become friends over the past few years.

“I am aware that some of my close advisers have been inclined to disagree with me of late.”

Elijah knew that the King had fallen out with his old friend Jeremiah over a matter of home affairs. Elijah thought he had soothed things over, but now he suspected differently.

“Up to now Herod has done well,” said Elijah, trying to be conciliatory. “A popular ruler like yourself has nothing to fear providing he can keep in touch with the common people.”

“Are you saying I don’t know what my people want?”

Elijah was shocked by the tone in the King’s voice. Now he knew there was trouble ahead for those openly disagreeing with their King. This was confusing for Elijah as he thought he knew the King well.

“Naturally, the King keeps on top of things like any good ruler should. Sometimes unpopular things need doing.”

“Do you agree with what I am doing, Elijah?”

“King Herod could be more tactful about the way he goes about it. There is a possibility that you are moving too quickly in the direction of your choice. Perhaps you should consider bringing in your new policies more slowly.”

“Really, I hope this is not your way of telling me that I am wrong.”

“I am merely advising the King as to how he might succeed in getting what he wants.”

“Of course, I might have known that your intention was simply to provide me with the best advice.”

The tone in his voice was less hard. But Elijah had begun to realise that Herod had made his mind up already. There was a time when Herod could be prevailed upon to listen to sound advice. The King has changed, having been given more power, thought Elijah. Their conversation continued for some time, with Herod trying to convince his friend there was nothing to worry about. The King eventually left to take advantage of the hot baths.

“There are some good things about having the Romans here,” said Herod, as he went on his way.

Elijah knew Herod well enough to know that he could have upset his master. The King could be easily upset these days. It was always possible that Herod had been moderate to get power and was now showing his true colours.

When the adviser got home he was met by Mirriam, his wife. She was worried. Elijah asked her why.

“Herod has given an order that all children of a certain age be killed,” said Mirriam. “When our friend Jeremiah protested by trying to dissuade the King he was arrested. The whole family are under suspicion and have been placed under house arrest.”

“My God! That’s going far, even for Herod. I was with him this afternoon. There seemed to be something wrong, but I never imagined this.”

“Elijah, I’m frightened. If Herod can do this to Jeremiah he can do it to anybody. If there was anyone who was more of a favourite than you, then it was him.”

They were taken aback by the sound of raised voices, one of which was their servant Jacob. Soon they were confronted by four soldiers. The senior officer spoke.

“King Herod has ordered the arrest of both you and your wife, sir.”

“I am unaware of having annoyed King Herod.”

“It is my duty, sir, to escort you to Jerusalem on a charge of treason. Both of you will be given a chance to pack a few things for your journey. If you refuse my men will be ordered to do it for you.”

Elijah decided there was no point in arguing, but he knew the Captain quite well. When he had the chance, he spoke quietly to the Captain.

“I have never committed an act of treason against King Herod, as well you know. Do you really believe that I would harm my country?”

“Treason is what the King says it is, sir.”

“Yes, and the mood he’s in no one is safe it seems. Captain, what will happen to my wife? She has done nothing to harm the King.”

“If you co-operate Elijah, both you and your wife may yet come out of this with something,” said the Captain quietly.

“What do you mean?”

However, the Captain was non-committal. So Elijah and his wife went with the soldiers. When in the capital, Elijah was confronted by Herod.

“I have come across evidence of what you intend to do. There is, it seems, a conspiracy against me which includes my closest advisers. Your old friend Jeremiah has told me of your proposed journey to live with your relations in a neighbouring Roman province. What were you going to do before leaving Palestine? Really, Elijah, you are the last person I thought would betray me,” said Herod bitterly.

“But Your Majesty, I do not wish to betray you. I have your best interests at heart. It’s just that you no longer listen to good advice from your friends. The visit to stay with relatives of my wife was to be when I could negotiate a trade agreement ...”

“Jeremiah told me everything he knows,” interrupted Herod. “I know you had no intention of ever coming back. He has told me many things. Jeremiah has done me a good service today, which is why I am still considering his fate.”

Elijah tried to find things to say in his defence, but he was shocked by the actions of his friend Jeremiah. Elijah was abruptly dismissed. When he returned to his wife he was obviously shaken.

“What happened, Elijah,” said Mirriam in alarm. “Has Herod decided our fate?”

“It is not what Herod said that surprised me,” replied her husband. “I am shocked by what my good friend Jeremiah did. He has obviously got evidence on colleagues so that he can save himself should the worst happen. Mirriam, Jeremiah found out about our going to live with your relatives and told Herod. The King has assumed the worst. I suppose I would have done it had I been in his position.”

They sat together in a building used for holding important prisoners. Their meal was brought to them. When this had been eaten, they thought of having an early night. Elijah could not think of a defence that would convince the King given his present mood.

It was during the night that Elijah found himself and his wife being woken up by the Captain who had arrested them. They were apprehensive, but what was going to happen next would almost certainly save their lives.

“I want both of you to pack,” said the Captain. “I know this has come as a surprise Elijah, you are not the only one who is critical of Herod. I have a few contacts of my own, including some in another province of the Roman Empire. However, for the moment, you must get ready with the utmost urgency.”

Elijah and Mirriam were soon alerted to the sound of a scuffle outside their prison. Then the door opened. It was an army guard.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “I am Ahab, a servant of your cousin.”

“I recognise you,” said Elijah, surprised. “You are one of the soldiers who arrested us.”

“It’s alright, we really are here to help. Your friend the Captain hired some of us to help you and him escape. Herod has found out and arrested the Captain, but there is still a chance for the rest of us if we act quickly. Follow me!”

They were taken to a courtyard where two men were waiting with horses. The group rode hard for about an hour, and then came to a halt. Elijah wanted to take up something with the men accompanying them.

“We are not going due North. This is not the way to the home of my wife’s cousin. I have tried to ask you about this, but only met with a refusal to reply.”

“It’s going to be fine, Elijah. We had to get away. We have been found out, so I am taking a route away from the planned one. Hopefully, this will throw the pursuers off the scent. I understand your being concerned for the welfare of both yourself and your wife.”

“I know a good inn at a place called Bethlehem. We can stay there for the night, and then go on to your true destination. It will take longer, but it may well be safer in the long run.”

Elijah took this in, and decided to go along with it if only because he couldn’t think of anything better. After they had rested and watered the horses, the small party continued on its way.

There was room at the inn for Elijah, his wife and two of the male escorts. Ahab was to go on and have a caravan meet the rest of them the following day. Those of them staying in Bethlehem overnight came down for breakfast. Afterwards Elijah went over to the stables to check on their camels whilst the rest of them packed. Upon his arrival all seemed well until he got to his own camel.

Elijah could not help but notice that there was a bandage on one hoof. He hadn't noticed anything wrong yesterday, so he was surprised to find it there. Some noise made him turn round and he saw a moderately built man of dark complexion standing nearby. Elijah guessed he was a manual worker.

"Is this your camel?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Elijah. "Did you do this? It's just that I didn't realize anything was wrong."

"Perhaps I should explain. I was in the stable last night when I heard the camel give a sound of pain. So I came to see what was wrong. A stone had got caught between the shoe and the hoof. It was not serious, but if the camel had gone much further it would have become serious."

"I am most grateful. Is there anything I can do in return?"

"No, I did it to stop my family being kept awake."

"Your family?" queried Elijah.

"Yes, when we arrived in Bethlehem we asked to stay at the inn but it was full. The innkeeper let us stay here. I'm glad because my wife is pregnant. In fact, she had our baby during the night."

"Well, my wife and I are leaving today. I'm sure the innkeeper will let you have our room. It seems I can return the favour after all. I hope my camel is well enough."

"Yes, but keep the bandage on for another twenty-four hours. Thank you for letting us have your room. Mary will be glad of a proper bed tonight. If you don't mind, I would like to see how my family are doing, Elijah!"

"I hope both of us have good luck in the journeys we are about to make," responded Elijah. "By the way, what do you do and I've just realised that I don't know who you are?"

"My name is Joseph. I am a carpenter by trade. I had hoped to find work in Nazareth where I have cousins. What did you mean about my taking a journey? I get the impression that you are trying to warn me, Elijah."

"Well, yes, I suppose I am. I know something about the plans of King Herod. It might be best if you kept your child out of the way for a time. I won't say too much more. Now, why don't you go and see your family?"

Elijah went off to see how the others were doing back at the inn. The caravan that was due to pick them up had arrived. He found there could be a problem. Ahab told him what had happened.

“One of the wagons in the caravan was damaged when robbers made an attack during the night. The leader is wondering whether to stay the night near here or go on North.”

“What is wrong with the wagon?” asked Elijah, alarmed by the news.

“Nothing that a good carpenter can’t fix apparently. One possibility is to move the goods from the damaged wagon on to others, and leave it behind.”

“It seems a shame to lose a good wagon,” said Elijah. “I’ve just found out there’s carpenter in the stables. Perhaps he can help.”

“I’ll pass on the news to the people on the caravan. Can I rely on you to get the others ready, Elijah. My men know where you must go.”

“Naturally, I have no desire to stay here longer than necessary.”

When they were all reunited, and on their way north, Ahab had a word with Elijah.

“Did you say anything to that carpenter?” he queried.

“Oh, nothing that might give us away,” replied Elijah.

“It’s just that he said something which made me wonder what you told him. Anyway he can fix the wagon. He’s offered to take it back to the owners further south.”

“I hope they’ll be suitably grateful. If you must know, Ahab, the carpenter fixed my camel. It’s why I might reach our destination.”

“There’s no harm done I suppose.”

Elijah and Mirriam continued their journey. Sometimes Elijah wondered what happened to Joseph and his family. He was never to return to Palestine.

