With Chomsky to the World Cup

DAVID PAPINEAU

Justin Cartwright

NOT YET HOME
192pp. Fourth Estate. £12.99.
1 85702 403 6

It is now two and a half years since the first South African election, and nothing too terrible has happened yet. What the next decade will bring is anybody's guess. The ANC has promised to make life better for the impoverished township Africans. But the more it succeeds, the more it is likely to fuel dissatisfaction with the little that can be done. Set against this, though, is the large and growing black middle class. The poor may turn against the mainstream ANC, but this new black bourgeoisie is squarely behind the stability it represents. So, paradoxically, are most whites, for they know they will not find stability anywhere else. One good bet is that a conservative ANC government will stay in power until well into the next century. There will be plenty of rhetoric from all sides, but they share a common interest in not rocking the boat.

Justin Cartwright, the novelist and television documentary maker, has made a number of visits to South Africa in the past three years, on assignments for the BBC and various newspapers. *Not Yet Home* is a sort of travel diary, which mixes interviews with prominent new South Africans with reflections on the prospects for their nation. It also provides the author with the opportunity to retrace his early life. Cartwright left South Africa at the age of twenty, after school in Cape Town and university in Johannesburg, and he wonders whether his old haunts will help him to rekindle his lost sense of home.

Despite his background, he does not seem entirely well-suited to his role as anatomist of the new South Africa. Early in the book we find him suggesting to Nadine Gordimer, of all people, that writers will do well not to express their political preferences, and shortly afterwards he confesses to the view that politics is "mindless". Cartwright is interested in culture, not in politics, though he has doubts about its prospects in his old country. The motto of the new South Africa is "Many cultures, one nation", but Cartwright wonders whether any serious sense of identity is possible in so hybrid a people.

Though this question of cultural identity clearly agitates him greatly, Cartwright is rather vague about why it should be a problem. After all, it is not as if culture must always be unjointed. Many writers, for example, gain strength from being both Scottish and British, and it is not hard to think of South African artists with similarly layered affiliations. But Cartwright also has a more specific worry. Historically, any cultural unity in South Africa has depended on the Western education shared by the leaders of all groups. Cartwright fears that this common Western heritage will be trodden underfoot, as previously oppressed traditions begin to assert themselves.

This is perhaps a real worry, though it does seem odd to be defending the South African cultural heritage against the threat of political correctness. But in any case Cartwright's own narrative shows that the threat is mild. He confronts Zwelakhe Sisulu, head of the South African Broadcasting Corporation, with a letter from one of his governors calling for an end to funds for the National Symphony Orchestra. But Sisulu assures Cartwright that the orchestra is safe

A child with her nanny at a National Party meeting, Harrismith, 1994; from *Living Apart: South Africa under apartheid* by Ian Berry (256pp. Phaidon. £45. 0 7148 3523 4)

(though he thinks it might try a little African music too). Cartwright reports on the shake-up of arts funding, and worries about a general takeover by the commissars of the ANC. Yet by the end of the book he reports that the liberals have won the day, and that all the money is going to be funnelled through an independent National Coalition for the Arts.

Inevitably there have been some casualties of these new funding arrangements, most notably the old provincial Performing Arts Councils which used to bring European sophistication to the burghs of South Africa. Cartwright seems doubtful about the widespread condemnation of these bodies. I wonder if he realizes how bad they could be. Just a month before the elections in 1994, I watched *Sounds of Brazil*, a cabaret staged in Durban by the Natal Performing Arts Council, and saw men with bare torsos and spangled bow-ties miming popular Latin songs while dancing choreographed rumbas. The audience consisted mostly of appreciative young professionals, apart from a group of safari-suited beer drinkers, whom I took for misplaced rugby clubmen, until someone explained to me that they were the Arts Council's administrators.

Of course, if Cartwright were really interested in national identity, he ought to focus on South Africa's often vibrant popular culture, rather than its structure of state subsidies. But he is not the writer for this. At one point in the book, he expresses his disdain for British popular culture, and he shows no more fondness for his own country's. Indeed, he seems rather proud of the distance he has travelled from his origins. The first words of his introduction tell us he is writing in Martha's Vineyard, and his conclusion is similarly announced as from the Hotel Dahu in Chamoix. When he photographs a mushroom on a picnic, he does not simply look it up in a mushroom book, but checks it out with "Antonio Carluccio at his restaurant back in London".

In the second half of the book, Cartwright's attention turns from art to rugby. The year after the election, he was sent to cover the World Cup for the *Financial Times*. Rugby provided a central motif in his last novel, *In Every Face I Meet*, but even so, Cartwright maintains his sardonic distance on this assignment too. He potters around in search of significant incidents, without much success, and finds it hard to remember any details of the games themselves. In the end he seems to lose interest in the whole business, and leaves the country before the semi-finals. This is a missed opportunity, for sport is central to the culture of all races in South Africa, with the potential both to unite and divide the country. Rugby at present seems to be in danger of dividing it. The game has traditionally been a symbol of Afrikaner triumphalism, but President Mandela's inspired co-option of the *Amabokke* last year allowed the whole country to exult in their World Cup victory. Since then, however, there are signs that the game is reverting to type.

There are few black players, little effort is being made to widen the game's base, and many of the rugby authorities seem like throwbacks to an earlier age. If the traditional arts administrators in South Africa look like rugby men, it is easy to imagine what the traditional rugby administrators are like. Louis Luyt, the all-powerful Chairman of the South African Rugby Football Union, is given to frequent gaffes that would have been embarrassing even in the old days of apartheid. This issue erupted into public debate recently when Trevor Manuel, the ANC finance minister, and a player in the Coloured rugby leagues in his youth, himself reverted to tradition and was noticed to be cheering the opposition at the end of a long afternoon in a hospitality box watching the Springboks play the All Blacks.

The final twenty pages of Cartwright's book report on the early hearings of Archbishop Tutu's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Here at last Cartwright is shaken from his world-weariness, as he recounts the harrowing testimony of people who have been blighted by the brutalities of the old regime. But his assignment at the Commission only lasts one week, and once this is over, he is on his way once more.

Not Yet Home is in many ways a frustrating book. Cartwright writes easily, and his assignments have given him access to a number of intriguing and influential people. But in the end, the book is little more than a diary of journalistic routine. Cartwright rarely digs behind his interviewees' words, and despite the philosophical name-dropping, his judgments are often superficial. Early in the book, Cartwright confesses that television documentaries are inevitably "slivers of information . . . quickly worked up into issues of universal concern". It is a pity that he has not taken the opportunity provided by the printed page to do better.

Backwards up the Tagus

JOHN GLEDSON

Paul Hyland

BACKWARDS OUT OF THE BIG WORLD
A voyage into Portugal
269pp. HarperCollins. £18.
0 00 255556 5

In the first chapter of this travelogue, Paul Hyland gets off the boat in Lisbon, and immediately, without so much as a wash-and-brush-up, repairs to the Alcántara Mar, a night-club near the port, where "shifting lights glance off the stage-set of which all things are made, then are sucked into nothingness". Hyland's journey is, in fact, quite a short one, covering central Portugal, and taking us into Lisbon and up the Tagus as far as the Alcántara bridge, built by the Romans but with an Arabic name, not far across the border in Spain. We go as far south as Evora, where the author visits the famous Chapel of Bones, built of monks' skeletons, and north to Tomar, with its extraordinary Convent of Christ, built for the Templars in the uniquely Portuguese form of late Gothic, known as the Manueline after the king who presided over the greatest of the Discoveries. A great deal of information is packed in; the famous and the less famous are also visited. In one of the most interesting chapters, the author interviews Dom Duarte, the pretender to a throne vacant since 1910, and hears his views on the hypocrisy of world powers and the need for spiritual renewal. We are taken to look at the monument to Dr Sousa Martins, a "miracle-worker" of the late nineteenth century, over the Tagus to Montijo, where the railway to the south begins, to Vila-Franca de Xira for a rather disappointing "running of the bulls", to Vila Velha de Ródão, on the border with Spain, in search of a Roman road that appears not to exist. And we end up at the Cabo da Roca, the westernmost point in Europe, for some final speculations on Portugal's past maritime destiny and its European future.

Fascinating as much of the detail is, there is obviously some larger aim to this book, but this is hard to fathom. To an extent, this may be deliberate. The book takes itself seriously: a good deal of preliminary research has been done, into Portuguese history and literature, as well as in earlier travelogues. One particularly feels the presence of three writers: Almeida Garrett, whose *Journeys in My Native Land* is a journey from Lisbon not far up the Tagus to Santarém (visited in this book too), somewhat in imitation of Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*; Fernando Pessoa, the creator of several literary identities and mythologizer of Portugal's past; and José Saramago, whose novels (one of which, *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, uses one of Pessoa's identities as a character) have had much impact beyond Portugal. Hyland relies on the two latter writers to provide an air of evanescence and potential meaning to his description of Lisbon. Hyland, himself, gives very little intellectual guidance, in spite of his research and literary precedents. A mock-metaphysical, magic-realist tone dominates much of the book. Two emotions in particular are dwelt on: the famous *saudade* (nostalgia) for the great Portuguese past, and a rather irritating assumption that the European Union, which Portugal joined in 1986, can be summed up as a mixture of bureaucracy, uniformization and large-scale corruption. Unlike Roy Campbell, though, Hyland does not romanticize the Salazar regime: but it is a pity that he virtually ignores the recent history of Portugal, since the 1974 revolution. The present through which the author travels has little context – at one stage, "the current prime minister" is mentioned, without reference to his views or political party.

"Portugal, so great, so small, is the place where upper and lower case collide most vividly, where mundane continually rubs up against Myth." And the style and structure of *Backwards out of the Big World* are an attempt to imitate these juxtapositions and clashes. Thus, a historical section is likely to be followed by a description of a fly-blown bar, or the search for a meal. Of course, the conventions of travel-writing allow for this, but this reader, at least, became tired of its aimlessness – only in a purely geographical sense is this a journey into the interior.

Papineau, David. "With Chomsky to the World Cup." The Times Literary Supplement, no. 4880, 11 Oct. 1996, p. 36. The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive, link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200484387/TLSH?u=tlsacc&sid=bookmark-TLSH. Accessed 23 Sept. 2023.