

**AFRICAN CALLIOPE: African Calliope;
A Journey to the Sudan by Edward Hoagland**

Before one can properly assess others he must have a good idea of his own sum. In this not-so-brave post-Freudian world where self-delusion often seems the norm, Edward Hoagland knows himself. His four previous books of personal essays attest to this. And they show that that knowledge did not come without cost. A note of sadness runs through Hoagland's books, punctuating narrative like the persistent throb of an old wound.

This sadness confers authority—enforcing realities, building themes. No contemporary essayist sifting through his own experiences—not John McPhee, Edward Abbey, or Peter Matthiessen—can match the unadorned clarity of Hoagland's voice. It is a voice to trust, one requiring no throat-cleaning warmup before singing its song.

Some of his finest essays have been collected in "The Edward Hoagland Reader." Issued simultaneously with "African Calliope," they reflect not only an impressive diversity of interests but the painful way he scrutinizes himself.

A piece discussing divorce mirrors marital failure in Hoagland's own life; another on living in New York demonstrates how the urban experience agitated his bloodstream; a third focuses on the difference in the temperaments of lions and tigers, suggesting that nuance is usually present if one takes the trouble to search for it. To read Hoagland is to discover he takes the trouble.

The three novels Hoagland wrote before turning to nonfiction dealt with material much like this but he has not published another since 1965. Perhaps he feels more comfortable interposing his own life between subject and audience. The novelistic skills, though, remain evident as he easily creates a full-blown portrait or encapsulates a personality within a single sentence.

Two years ago Hoagland went to the Sudan. The Africa that existed for those of us who studied Colonial geography in the 1940s is now obsolete and seems to change daily. He went because the newness of this largest and most varied of African lands intrigued him. He is soon speculating why men explore primitive places and searching his own motivations for doing so.

"After one has read dozens of explorer's journals with the books of

contemporary wilderness enthusiasts thrown in, it isn't hard to reach the conclusion that the search these individuals have made to find the wildest areas left on earth—a kind of relay race, at best, but a lone compulsion in many cases—was really an attempt, itself, to start over. I'm not speaking of formal anthropology, but of the impetus of so much wilderness-trekking and love-of-the-primitive, the wish to go and live in the bosom of raw nature. A fist-fighter lurks just under the surface of a lot of these books. The masochism or sadism, the general tenor of choler, vainglory and self-distrust so often perceptible between the lines makes you suspect that one reason why the author sought so hard for a personal, presumptive site for the birth of man, and a feel for the circumstances of it, was that he wanted to be born again, to reexperience his own birth and thereby possibly straighten himself out – to do things over."

By rearranging the chronology of his travels, Hoagland has highlighted those events he wishes to give weight to. "Plunge straight in," he exhorts, "Life is a novel." Well, perhaps. But let us follow the author and see where he takes us.

He is constantly on the move—to Jubo, Gilo, Eritrea, Khartoum—approaching wary strangers whose language he does not speak. There is an additional difficulty. Hoagland is a lifelong stutterer, a fact no secret to his readers. Though he makes clear how painful the speech impediment has been for him, Hoagland harnesses his "vocal handcuffs" so that they work for him. He coolly analyzes the varied responses he gets to his head-whipping, spit-flying struggles to bring out words.

There is nothing wrong, however, with his eyes and ears. He is a virtuoso of the generalization that rings true. O pilot flying sheep to Jiddah is: "A Floridian with the requisite beard for adventuring in Africa, but also the curious air of insubstantiality most pilots have when you talk to them."

The oppressive details of physical hardships common to African life are concretely detailed—fathers digging chiggers out of crying children's bare feet with razors or washing their fly-sucked eyes in the absolute dryness of the desert (The flies were thirsty too.") The quality of poverty is indelibly underscored in a description of leisure activity among Kababish herders, who play a game with "48 bits of camel dung tossed into 12 scoops in the sand."

Technical representatives are ubiquitous in the Sudan, earning substantial corporate or federally funded bucks building roads, digging wells, growing flowers, rebuilding motors. (An expert was

somebody who can tell by the wrinkles in the sheets whether it was done for love or money.”)

There is political information to be gleaned from “African Calliope” but politics is not one of Hoagland’s overriding concerns. What he writes seems verifiable. President Numeiri wins points for having survived in this most volatile of political arenas. The fatalism central to Muslim belief, more than anything else, is what sustains them in their squalor. Americans are regarded as adjunct Britishers and tolerated, with the real enmity existing between blacks and Arabs.

Hoagland does let himself go on occasion (To hunker naked on a riverbank in the heart of Africa was quite dramatic if you thought about it—drama, like sex, existing primarily in the mind.”) But the unifying thread that runs through the book is Hoagland’s determination not to spare Hoagland. He admits being distracted by bare-breasted African women, having a tenderfoot’s stomach, holding up a hunt because of his slowness, carrying on a brief affair with an Egyptian girl (he makes clear that she was not pretty and that it was she who left him.

See the author sitting around with an embittered white hunter whose safari-organizing days seem over. The hunter rolls up a pants leg, revealing deep scars inflicted by a charging lion whose jaw he had shot away and who died leaning up against him. Hoagland, with the natural ear of a born reporter, knows just which question to pose.

“Who got the skin,” I asked. “My client”, he said, with the flat sort of look worn by professionals in any field when they mention the ironies they live with.”

In his field Edward Hoagland is the consummate professional. For so long he has been so very good and so few seem to have noticed.

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