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Uncertain Safari: Kenyan Encounters and African Dreams. Allan M. Winkler. Lanham, MD (USA): Hamilton Books, 2004. 149pp.

It is always a pleasant surprise to find a book that is written about one's own experiences. Many of us have taught or studied in Africa, yet accounts of that experience are rare. There is a whole industry of Peace Corps books, some of them excellent (George Packer's *The Village of Waiting* [1984], about Togo, comes to mind). There are travel books, many of them covering East Africa, some of them self-indulgent, others works of literature (take the late Shiva Naipaul's delightful *North of South* [1978]). And there are journalist's accounts of their lives in Africa, often providing a thoughtful analysis (Blaine Harden may not have invented the term "Big Man," but his book *Africa: Dispatches from a Fragile Continent* [1990] certainly brought it to a wider audience. Accounts of the teacher's experience in Africa, however, are rare.

This makes Allan Winkler's book a useful contribution. Winkler taught as a Fulbright professor in the history department of the University of Nairobi in 1995-96, and has visited Kenya for extended periods since 1990. As he puts it in his preface, his book tries to capture his love for Kenya and is "meant as an affectionate portrait of people, places, and problems" (p. 6). While the book is honest and generally readable, it isn't entirely successful at conveying the author's affection for Kenya.

The book is structured as a series of relatively independent essays. While certain themes reappear as well as certain characters (Winkler's neighbor, Mary, a fellow instructor at the university, from whom he learns about the Kenyan social context), the chapters could stand on their own—and indeed perhaps they were originally written as separate essays. The chapter on education, "Teach the Children Well," is especially refreshing, as it recounts the experiences many of us have faced teaching in a foreign environment: the lack of materials, the classes cancelled for no apparent reason, the intelligent but, by American standards, passive students. For Winkler, his encounters are generalizable: "the crumbling infrastructure at the University of Nairobi...[was] typical of the country as a whole" (p. 44). He has shipped several hundred books, intending to donate them to the university library. With help from the American Embassy, the books are traced to a warehouse at the port of Mombasa and arrive in Nairobi. But given Winkler's experiences with the university library ("It was a mess" [p.52]), he decides to contribute the books to his department to create a library, but building a few bookshelves becomes an enormous undertaking:

The entire episode was a kind of microscopic study of the problems of trying to get things done in a developing country....The bureaucracy was almost impenetrable, dominated by officials afraid to take the initiative, for fear of committing too much, accomplishing too little, and losing their jobs (p. 53).

Winkler applies this approach to most of his experiences in Kenya: based on his personal experiences, he draws general conclusions. As a historian, he realizes the risks of this approach,

and in the chapter on corruption (“The Politics of Fear”) he supports his generalizations with interviews with the editor of the Daily Nation, Tom Mshindi, opposition leader Richard Leakey, and with former attorney general Charles Njonjo, forced out of office in a power play in the 1980s. Unfortunately, the only thing we learn from the latter interview is that Njonjo was “unwilling to talk about the carefully orchestrated attack...that had brought him down” (p. 110). One does get a feel for the way the country works—the byzantine machinations of politics and power—but like the teacher who only spends a year there, one is left wondering exactly what is going on.

Winkler blames the colonial experience for Kenya’s corruption and its failure to live up to its promise at independence. By implication, this applies to all of Africa:

One autocrat after another has drawn skillfully on the lessons of the colonial past and used the patterns of repression devised then to secure personal and political advantage in the post-independence years (p. 104).

While this is certainly true in many instances, it does not explain why corruption and inefficiency have percolated to all levels of Kenyan society, and Winkler doesn’t offer other suggestions. On President Moi, who finally “retired” in 2002, Winkler gives some nice one-liners (he finds it symbolic that the monument to Moi in Uhuru Park is in a state of disrepair [p. 108]), but ultimately he doesn’t tell anything new about Moi:

I felt myself caught up in this carefully cultivated charade...I had to give Moi grudging respect for the support he demanded and received, just as I had reluctantly applauded Lyndon Johnson when he imposed his will on the United States in the mid-1960s (p. 108).

The connection to Lyndon Johnson is never explained, and the non-sequitur is emblematic of the way Winkler throws together fascinating tidbits in this book. The result of this honest book is interesting, certainly to anyone who has taught or worked in Africa, but it never really brings Kenya to life.

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