

Foreword from Shaking Hands with Billy

The Return of the Native

By **James G. Workman**

It is surprisingly easy to slip into exile. A feared future, or desire for a brighter one, turns your feet toward the exit. More often a series of events quietly gnaw at your psyche from different directions, layering on the rationales and compounding stress until you cross a tipping point and make that decision to depart.

Perhaps one day, after absorbing too much ugly news, you succumb to a general malaise and refuse to accept the risks imposed by the *status quo*. Abuse by others has revoked your psychological passport. It is effortless, and sometimes fair, to place the blame for your decision on the menace of strangers, though it often helps to keep their exact role or identity both distant and vague. Urban thugs, child soldiers, foreign squatters, corrupt officials, racist politicians – these enemies have displaced and dispossessed you of your identity, your property, your sense of place and belonging.

Maybe basic economics has pressed down your personal glass ceiling. Career limitations box you in; the push of possible unemployment combines with the pull of real or imagined opportunities somewhere else – anywhere else. In this sense exile seems an act of liberation. You convince yourself that you are not running from anything but towards something better, freed from the bonds of tradition or the burdens of history.

Guilt or shame for something you or your people have done: these too are legitimate reasons to refuse the home into which you were born, to leave life's known and familiar patterns, and assume the role of displaced outsider, pint of warm lager welded to your fist, forever muttering about how good it used to be.

Perhaps most remarkable is that, like “internally displaced refugees” of civil strife and disaster, you can now go into exile without having to cross the artificial borders of your land. You can choose to exercise your option to withdraw, curl inward, cut yourself off, turn a cold shoulder on the country and flag and people you were raised to defend and salute. You tell yourself and others: “Ag, look bru, it's just temporary. Ja, a few months, hey?” But something in their eyes reflects your own doubt. Within hours there's the airline ticket, a bus fare, a hitched ride out of town.

You are liberated. Free to go.

Yet whatever point of departure carried you away, a more riveting story emerges through answering the question of what it was, exactly, that eventually brought you home. What lies within a person that pulls some of us back, to re-engage with the community you had formerly abandoned and perhaps go so far as to embrace the very people who played a role in forcing you into exile?

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On its surface *Shaking Hands with Billy* is the story of one man's odyssey. And odyssey is, I believe, the correct word, neither overstatement nor misrepresentation. To be sure, many chapters in Anthony Turton's personal narrative describe the recruitment and work of a Cold War soldier – instilling in him a sense of detachment, manifest in that chilling, if necessary, “thousand yard stare”. Yet it is less a tactical, macho, warrior epic like the Iliad than an alienated veteran's dragged-out struggle, his repeated attempts to reconcile himself to a political landscape that is both strange and at times uncomfortable, and then to embrace the chaos and complexity as, for better or worse, his only home. The comparison is hardly a stretch. When Odysseus the warrior washes up on the shores of a rocky landscape after 20 years away, the veteran “awoke from sleep in his own fatherland, and he did not know it, having been long away.” To him, in part due to an obscuring mist the gods cast over the landmarks, “everything looks otherwise than it was.” “Ah me,” groans Odysseus, “what are the people whose land I have come to this time?”

Millions wake up asking that same question each day as they confront the glorious mess whose land belongs to the black, brown, white, Coloured, apricot, yellow and *Rooinek* people who live in the “new” South Africa. A nation of mongrels. The anthropological irony is that this schizophrenic landscape is, most likely, the cradle from which 6.8 billion people around the world have emerged, starting some 70,000 years before Odysseus plied the wine dark seas, sprung from the African loins, according to the analysis of DNA scientists, of a single genetic Adam and Eve.

Homer's ancient story still resonates today in any land touched by strife. In her recent work on Homer's epics, the scholar Caroline Alexander points out that the Odyssey is the only surviving poem of a warrior's return from the Trojan War: Agamemnon, Menelaus, Nestor and other battle-scarred veterans challenged with the task of finding a restorative peace in household routines, domestic chores, mundane labour – and notably even cultivation of the land with soil and sunlight ... and water. The warriors' homecomings are never as easy or risk-free a transition as their departure and exile. As Alexander observes: “The Greek word *nostos*, meaning ‘return home,’ is the root of our English ‘nostalgia’ (along with ‘*algos*’ - ‘pain’ or ‘sorrow’).”

Of course, the painful sense of dislocation from a native land is far from unique to returning veterans. It has been shared by anyone who ever felt pushed too fast, too far beyond – or in some cases too tightly trapped within – the mainstream political and cultural currents of the society into which he or she was born. Nor is this alienation restricted to post-apartheid black and white men of a certain age who fought, killed and died – for or against the abstract ideals of racist social engineers; for or against the abstractions of communist leaders. In short, not all casualties of war wear uniforms, and the deepest battle scars remain invisible.

The fall of the Berlin Wall was a distant political earthquake that opened an opportunity for fragile peace in many corners of the world. As South Africa crossed its own Rubicon, historians could write a relatively simple assessment of who won or lost and why. Yet embedded within tectonic events, something important was missing from that narrative;

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there was the less evident story, locked within us, that demanded a far more complex personal reckoning of what role each individual played in the unfolding events during the time South Africans lived in exile from one another, even in exile from themselves. And what, if anything, one should do to thaw that frozen state of limbo.

As a story of one modern soldier's return, *Shaking Hands with Billy* operates on many levels. Events conspire to nudge Turton into exile from his innocent, sheltered world of hothouse-grown flowers to the bleeding edge of military engagements and sabotage. He is then pushed into exile from his country, to operate behind lines in what is now Namibia, Angola, Mozambique and Europe. He lingers in exile from even his own name as he adopts an assigned identity. Turton's is also the story of a man's exile from conflicted feelings and unspoken words with his father. And then at some point of departure – again layered upon one another for a compound effect – he goes into a different kind of exile: renouncing his mission; turning his back on his brothers-in-arms; breaking away from identification with his race and cause. The trained soldier bred to divide seeks, on his own terms, to unite. For the sin of speaking his mind in an abrasive way, Turton was even, eventually, forced into exile from his chosen profession. Each chapter is thus in some way his poetic work of '*nostos*:' a sorrowful, sometimes painful, but always fascinating tale of his struggle to return to an arid and rocky native home. The bitter paradox of South Africa is that a sincere attempt to be accepted back into one 'home' may result in unintended consequences of being forced into exile from several others.

For example, Turton describes movingly and in great detail the story of his own shame at becoming involved in a particular incident, the wrongful seizing of personal property during a security force operation, and the path he took to find absolution through South Africa's extraordinary Truth and Reconciliation Commission. By the end of the narrative it appears that Turton can at last breathe easy; he has nothing left to hide, no shame left to feel, no peace left to make with others. Or does he? Far more revealing in this narrative are his repeated attempts – in the text, in footnotes, in appendices and in photo captions – to reach out to his countrymen, most especially those with whom he served behind the lines, who still to this day remain, voluntarily, in self-imposed exile. He takes pains not to identify them. He goes to great lengths not to judge them. He respects their desire for anonymity even if some have made it clear to him that they despise what they see as his betrayal of the cause, the mission, the alternate struggle. Yet it seems that as long as so many of his fellow – how best to describe them: colleagues, friends, enemies, loyalists, anti-communists, white supremacists, ideological purists? – *South Africans* turn their back on and otherwise continue to reject their democratic society, well, then, Turton cannot remain entirely at peace. They linger in the book's blank margins and the spaces between the lines of this story, much like the shades in Hades haunt the return of Odysseus. For years, Anthony Turton answered the call to arms and fought as an integral part of these countrymen and their cause. And while he answered another call, and somehow managed to return from that exile, they have not yet come home with him.

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By his own analysis Turton's inner journey is unremarkable. He is one man among ten of millions, more fortunate and privileged than most. Though *Shaking Hands with Billy* does not attempt to be literary (to enrich his story Turton goes so far to include photos, images, charts, graphs) the obvious comparisons to his memoir certainly are. To an outsider these include Mark Mathabane's *Kaffir Boy*, Riaan Malan's *My Traitor's Heart*, Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*, and Alexandra Fuller's *Don't Lets Go to the Dogs Tonight*. The distinction of Turton's story is that while he, too, is a 12th generation African of mixed race, he did not dodge the draft; he enlisted. He was not a standard "victim" of apartheid; he operated on the wrong side of history, employed by the oppressive regime and thus instilled with a genuine need for atonement. He was not merely a passive observer of reconciliation, but rather an active architect in trying to bring all sides – and in the process himself – together, most recently by weaving the increasingly thin threads of an unlikely force of unification: water. And unlike so many recent exiles, white or black, Turton still chooses to live and work in, and of, and by South Africa. From all indications it appears that to his dying day he will remain at what has always been his only home.

But Turton's decision to return and remain did not come lightly, on a whim. As he wrestles with doubt, as he seeks truce with an enemy, as he carves out a common ground in a land where the former ruling elite has become a marginalized minority, as he manages to accept society on its own messy terms rather than neat and tidy terms that the social engineers failed to impose on it, as he labours on behalf of advancing a shared, efficient, equitable and democratic water ethic – he personifies the timeless quests that elevate a personal memoir into a universal tale.

I say 'universal' because I can relate to it as an American who lived in South Africa during my own seven year exile from the United States. I can't pretend to grasp the nature of South Africa with the level of intimacy known by any person born and raised here. Nor can I claim to fathom the conflicting pressures on the mind of a soldier, trained to kill, who operates behind enemy lines. Still, I do know how it feels to abandon a country for which you feel pride and shame and love and loss and intimacy and distance, and to which you know you must somehow, one day, for better or worse, return.

For much of my own exile it was awkward to inform others of my citizenship. At home my country was holding presumed terrorists in prison without trial. Our airports and government buildings were patrolled by army troops in military fatigues. Fear was palpable. Illegal torture was redefined as a useful 'enhanced interrogation technique.' My flag was unwelcome and even endangered in some places. I endured verbal abuse from men in bars, even from taxi drivers. Unspoken policies of racial profiling were deemed necessary for public safety. Gated communities were springing up. Our currency was plummeting. Jobs grew scarce in a souring economy. Troops were fighting enemies in distant lands over national security threats that did not exist. Even today, under a black President, one half of my country demands that white leaders of the past administration be tried for crimes against humanity, while the other side urges the country to move on, forgive and forget, put the past behind us, and "just keep walking."

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Stop me, South Africans, if any of this sounds rather familiar.

It would have been easy during my exile to disassociate myself from the direction of my country. I despised and adamantly opposed the domestic and foreign policy of my country's elected leaders. I was against the wars being waged against an ill-defined abstract noun on several fronts. I felt the best way to support our troops was to bring them home and out of harms way, back from the exile we forced them into. I could and often did point out that I had voted against the regime in power.

But as Turton demonstrates both forcefully and eloquently in chapter after chapter, that explanation was still no excuse; my moral limbo could not long endure. You can't have it both ways. After all, I did vote. I paid taxes. I kept my passport. I leveraged my native education and experience into wonderful international jobs. I benefited from special privileges my country bestowed upon me. I can't reap the good without accepting also the bad and still call myself an American. I couldn't claim to be a patriot and yet distance myself from the playing field that made me who I was. Exile in Africa taught me that in order to be fully alive in this world, to know who you are, you must re-engage with your blood roots and the messy chaotic culture from which you emerged.

In *Shaking Hands with Billy*, these blood roots are not merely metaphorical. They are real. Though uprooted and transplanted, certain South African species, from the Protea to the Springbok to *Homo sapiens*, remain indigenous to the place. They need the soil of their native landscape, they need exposure to the transparency of sunlight; above all they need the security of equal access to water. That's all. And that's more than enough. For while individuals may trade loyalties, culture changes, society evolves, technology advances – the land and water and biodiversity habitats remain the resources with the capacity to renew themselves, and, in the process, to renew us, as a people. That, in essence, is how Turton grounds himself, quite literally, in the process of defining who he is and why he now fights so fiercely for the replenishing rain and soils of where he is.

This is the symmetry that drives home the story. If water is indeed life, if water infuses the vital tissues and cells of every South African of every shade and tribe and ethnicity, then what occurs through the careless loss, or deliberate denial, of water?

From start to finish the answer haunts the author. Death, like the ghostly shades of Turton's un-reconciled countrymen, hovers over this memoir. Death of his father. Death of his hothouse flowers. Brushes with death on the front lines. Potential deaths on the horizon of a country that sets human ingenuity on the cusp of chaos. Perhaps what lingers most from this memoir is the same thing that we remember from Homer's own tale: the urgency of our need to set aside the bitter – our damaged frail egos and tribal wrongs and abstract temptations – and learn to share and embrace the sweet waters we all depend on, the same waters that infused the blood of our ancestors. While alive, we may be soldier or civilian, rich or poor, black or white, male or female, victim or oppressor, Zulu or Xhosa or Afrikaner or Coloured, but we have the gift of choice. We can choose to come home. *Shaking Hands with Billy* hastens us toward that conclusion. Because for all the

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legitimate causes and consequences and grievances of being uprooted and displaced and nudged out from our home, and our land, and what we consider our rightful place in society, there remains one ultimate form of exile from which we mortals can never return.

James G. Workman is the author of *Heart of Dryness: How the Last Bushmen Can Help Us Endure the Coming Age of Permanent Drought*, the story of defiant indigenous people living in the Central Kalahari Desert who refuse – despite intense political and armed pressure by Botswana’s government, which cut off their water – to leave their only home. He was also a speech writer during the Bill Clinton Administration.