

THE RHODESIAN "SOLDIER LITERATURE"

(BY MEMORY CHIRERE)

It was Stanley Nyamufukudza who argued in 1993 that it was becoming clear that those who study Zimbabwe's 1970's war literature risk narrowing down to pro-guerilla literature only – something to that effect. The grave danger was to deny oneself opportunity to get to know how the 'man in the opposite camp' viewed the same war, Nyamufukudza continued. He was reviewing former Rhodesian soldier Angus Shaw's war novel Kandaya: Another time, Another Place.

With that in mind one gradually noticed a lot of Rhodesian "soldier literature" lying all over the country in; old book-shops, old libraries, flea-markets, treasure shops, old school cupboards, former nannies and kaddies' suitcases... Rhodesian soldier literature is everywhere in Zimbabwe and we side-step it everyday as we look for bananas, flowers or brightly coloured magazines. Some of it is just crazy and when you read it, you curse:

"Of course, their version - the terrorists—
was that we'd massacred women and
children, just to incite hate against us.
Well, maybe there were some women and
Children. I know there were. But you
can't stop shooting at terrorists if there
are women and children there, because
then you'd never win the war."

Some of it gets straight to the guts with its kind of brutal candour mixed with stony bravado:

"I often used to wonder how Kandaya felt
when we were closing in on him or his
people. Sometimes they didn't have a
chance because we had the helicopters,
the radios, the superior fire power, you
name it, we had it."

Jeremy Ford's 1975 book of poems called Hello Soldier! Is not a book you might consider going through when you come across it. It is a "hastily" written and illustrated "book of sketches and poems of a Rhodesian soldier's life". But when you realize that this could be one of the small but useful windows into the Rhodesian Front Call Up, you read it for pointers and insights.

Carrying fifty-seven poems, Hello Soldier! Is passionately dedicated "To my wife, Florence." It is a kind of Rhodesian soldier's diary in poetry form. It should be remembered that able-bodied Rhodesians dutifully went to "Call-Up." Meaning that they trained and served in their Rhodesian army for specific periods during the 1970s war which they often refer to as the "bush war". The African nationalists refer to the same as "war of liberation."

In the first poem called "Call-up" the persona who is out on call up addresses a girlfriend back home. The reason for going to war is understated:

Think of all the love we had,
Girl, sometimes think of me,
Now I'm just a soldier in
A war to keep us free."

Free from what? You ask. Obviously free from communism or black rule! Maybe it also means "free to have our kind in power." Free to continue tilling the lands usurped from the helpless natives. However that very contentious issue is given a soft touch in the poem:

"Girl, I am just a soldier with
A rifle and a pack,
Girl, you got to keep your heart
For me when I get back!"

This lends this poetry to comparing and contrasting with the black nationalist guerilla poetry by the likes of Freedom Nyamubaya and Thomas Bvuma where the war is actually "the real poetry" and the bush and struggle are "that open university."

For Jeremy Ford's persona call up is just duty, something you can go in and out of. It is only a rite of passage and an initiation into manhood. It is not further than a physical experience. In "Fit Enough" the doctor insists on the mere physicality of the venture and the war is not associated with clear-cut ideals:

"The Doctor says I'm fit enough,
They say he ought to know-
Two feet, two hands, a steady gaze
To carry on for days."

If you are looking for the Rhodesian soldier's ideals in this anthology beyond "keeping us free," you are bound to be disappointed. The poems are about "training" only as an external experience. However the sense of thrill such poems could instill in a white boy-reader cannot be over-emphasised. As a

romance/mobiliser genre, this book must have been very useful to the Rhodesian cause. It is a book that can drive any boy to the barrack. There is a lot of "wheeling", "marching" "muttering" in these poems and at the end of the day, there is always "time to eat." The sense of picnic in the Call-Up barrack is portrayed as over-powering:

"Now Army food is not too bad
When you've been out all day,
For then you eat what they dish out
In lumps upon your tray.

The weight of it is quite enough
To keep a man content,
It weighs him down like may tons
Of healthy grey cement."

There is a mixture of both the spartan and 'soft' adventure. The comfort strikes a direct opposite with the hunger and disease of the ZANLA and ZIPRA camps in Mozambique and Zambia, respectively. One senses that the "Rhodesian war" dependent on a regular fat bill. The illustrations to this collection show young soldiers in pretty tunic, fitting caps, barrack beds, well oiled guns and the occasional acoustic guitar.

Interestingly there was time to write letters to "Dad, mum, Pete and Joe back home." Mum and Dad could even come visiting. There was time to listen to radio Jacaranda's "Favourites in the Forces," a programme on which girl-friends would phone in or write to tell Jack to "give the terts a hard-time." Or one could phone in to pass "all my love to Frikkie du Toit – somewhere in the bush."

One's duty in this war was "timed" and one marked the passing day on the barrack calendar. You "did your bit" and went back home or to college a true patriot. This was a leisure trip and when it ended, one turned one's back and moved on. One was only "a rifleman" who received money on pay-day:

"Pay checked and found correct sir!
Is what they make you say,
And that's enough to last you till
It comes to next pay day"

But then, throughout, you don't find a black face in this one hundred and twenty three paged book of poems! But one knows that the cooks and care-takers in these barracks were blacks. The black characters have been very unskillfully erased from the whole picture. This is however part of the well known Rhodesian lie or myth – that the blackman is not worth seeing. This is not only

evident in Rhodesian literature. It is also the same case in Rhodesian paintings. In 1995 Tim McLoughlin was to write:

"This point becomes clearer if we compare landscapes (paintings) by white painters like Alice Balfour and others who are fascinated by the vast unpeopled spaces which they see (and not people). Much attention, Particularly in water colour painting, goes into the brush-work details of long winter grass or aloes. (and not people), contorted shapes of branches..."

There is, in Jeremy Ford as in Rhodesian psyche, an excitement with the self. The none but ourselves syndrome. And even after the training, the young soldier persona is not portrayed as properly defining his (guerilla) enemy. At best the man on the other side is a monkey:

"We're leaving in a week or so
To go and earn our keep
Away there in the valley where
The monkeys lie asleep."

Towards the end of this "amusing" book of poems one comes across the only contact in a poem called 'Contact.' You think - now I will "see" the guerillas. But the guerillas are not given shape. There is a single guerilla gun-shot and before the Rhodesians respond, the guerillas disappear:

"We all skirmished forward
And sank to one knee
As they ran away through
The forest of trees."

The guerillas remain simply as "they" and their association with the bush and darkness have been typical as far back as Peter Halket of Mashonaland. The African guerillas rush back into the unchristian bush where they belong. The young Christian Rhodesian soldiers remain and continue to preserve their "freedom." Part of Ian Smith's U.D.I. document does not mince words:

"We have struck a blow for the preservation of justice, civilization, Christianity and in the spirit of this belief we have this day assumed our sovereign independence. God bless you all."

As Jeremy Ford's soldiers go deeper and deeper into "their country", they get lost in it! They say, "We are miles away from nowhere." They miss "a smoke, a wash, some good hot food and a sleeping tent." They are stranded until an army helicopter finds them.

The "bush war" remains an adventure until the young soldiers return home. The Rhodesian soldier literature, music and life-style has retreated from the public sphere but it is very much alive. Today the Rhodesian web-sites receive poems continuously from Rhodesians in Zimbabwe, South-Africa, Canada, Britain, Australia and New-Zealand. What unites the Rhodesians, as seen in their literature (both in print and today's web-sites) is the theme that "Rhodesians never die." The physical Rhodesia was overtaken by 'terrs' in 1980 but the Rhodesians the world over have created a nation in their minds.

They are watching us. They hear what we say. Stanley Nyamufukudza's warning is important: Let us keep them in sight. Let us understand them through what they wrote and are still writing.