My Traitor's Heart

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Vintage UK 1991
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The Zulus were too polite to say so, but they thought this white man was mad. He claimed it was possible to grow food in the dust in waterless places without spending any money. Even a child *knew* that was nonsense.

So Neil (Adcock) and some helpers set out at Mdukatshani to prove them wrong. They purloined some railroad tracks from an abandoned siding and built a towering scaffold on the riverbank. Then they took a tractor tire, cut it into scoop-like segments, and bolted it spoke-wise onto the hub of an old tractor wheel. A system of pulleys lowered the wheel into the river. The rubber scoops dipped into the swift brown torrent and spun the tractor hub, which turned the differential from a scrapped Land Rover, which drove a pump, which delivered water to a dry, stony garden site hundreds of yards away. There, in soil fertilized by dung and the ash of cattle bones, some Zulu women planted and reaped a bumper crop of vegetables. Surrounding communities were hugely impressed. From that point, the scheme started moving forward.

Neil organized a committee of tribal elders to run the project, casting himself as their humble servant and technical adviser. The committee was nominally in charge, but it was Neil who really made things happen. He was a man who could stand on a barren, eroded hillside, miles from the nearest water, surrounded by incredulous peasants, and say, 'There will be a dam here.' And lo, a dam there would be, or a weir across the river, or an irrigation furrow to carry a trickle of precious water from a distant spring to tiny patches of tillable land.

Bankrolled by donations from churches, foreign governments, and the Angio American conglomerate, he hired armies of Zulus to work on a vast iron-age engineering project-laying furrows, stringing fences, blocking dongas with dikes of stone. Dams were dug with shovels, the dirt carried off in buckets on women's heads. Neil drew plans in the dust with sticks, and judged levels with his naked eye. If a boulder lay in the path of one of his furrows, Zulu women built a bonfire under it, heated it until it glowed, then doused it with pails of water. *Voila.* The rock shattered. Zulu dynamite, they called it.

In the spring of 1977, the first water came trickling down the furrows and into the pioneer gardens, and for a while, the dream seemed to be coming true. In her monthly newsletter to donors and supporters, Creina wrote, 'We sense the beginning of a small revolution.' Mdukatshani became a place of pilgrimage for young white volunteers yearning to atone for the sins of their fathers. A steady stream of foreign diplomats and new missionaries came to see the project for themselves.

The man who met visitors at the project's gates was getting on toward sixty now, completely grey, and balding. Neil was always wearing dusty jeans and car-tire sandals, and the first thing he showed off was always his waterwheel; he was immensely proud of his waterwheel. After that, visitors were escorted through a complex of eleven houses, huts, and workshops, all built in the Zulu fashion of mud, stone, and thatch, and costing less than $125 apiece. In the workshops, Zulus were assembling experimental solar cookers and beating old oil drums into prototypical methane digesters. There was a fish pond stocked with bass and *tilapia,* and an earthen cave full of glowing glass beads, the raw materials of a thriving craft project. Under Creina's direction, the beads were turned into Zulu jewellery of astonishing beauty and sold in the distant cities.

As visitors did the rounds, they were introduced to tongue- tied black men who turned out to be the leaders of the project. Mdukatshani's dignified chairman, Petros Majozi, was formerly a cook in a Johannesburg hotel. The resident engineer was Mphephete Masondo, who had never seen the inside of a school, a former police constable, the flamboyant Elijah Mhlongo, was chief of security. The general manager, Bokide Khumalo, couldn't read or write, but he gave orders to white volunteers with impressive university degrees.

At some point, you might have seen Neil scribble his daily love letter to his wife and hand it to a herd boy, who scurried off to deliver it. Creina spent her days in a mud 'office' on the cliff top, bashing away on a portable typewriter on a 'desk' of river stone.

She was still editing *African Wildlife* by mail, and in her spare time writing reports and newsletters to the project's supporters. At the outset, her newsletters were quite dry and factual, but as she and Neil got to know Msinga better they evolved into literature. Fantastic characters moved across her pages, engaged in utterly improbable undertakings. An ancient Zulu gunsmith sat under a thorn tree in the bush, fashioning scrap-metal shotguns with his bare hands. An illiterate dope farmer in the high ravines devised an automatic irrigation system that would have earned a masters in engineering at any Western university. The newsletters were a window into a secret world — the world of rural black South Africans, the country's invisible people. Creina refused to allow them to be published, so they were passed from hand to hand until they fell apart at the staples. If the visitors were really fortunate, Neil might row them across the river to see the work being done in Msinga itself.

They saw irrigation furrows leading water from springs in the hills. They saw the first crops coming up in tiny gardens, fenced against goats with loans from the project's Small Farmer's Trust.

They sometimes met ragged black men and women who made solemn statements in broken English. They would declare, 'We are weak, but when Neil is with us we feel strong. We cannot write, but he is teaching us to write with grass on the hillsides.' Or simply: 'God is sending *Numzaan* to help the people.' *Numzaan* is a Zulu honorific meaning squire.

Come sunset, visitors met the rest of the Alcock household-the white sons, GG and Rauri, and the black sons, seven barefoot Zulu herd boys whom the Alcocks had more or less adopted. Mboma, the eldest, had red hair when he first moved in with the Alcocks—a symptom of the nutritional disease kwashiorkor.

He soon recovered) though, and blossomed into an artful dodger, an exceptionally bright child who swiftly mastered English and the allied art of manipulating white volunteers. Creina's sister Cathy wrote a children's book about Mboma's life and hard times, which included a spell as a ten-year-old laborer on a white farm in the district. *The Story of Mboma* became a minor best-seller in the world's progressive bookshops. Mboma Diadla's name was even mentioned in the United Nations, in the course of a debate on 'slave labor' in South Africa, Mboma was GG's best friend. Among Rauri's best friends was a boy named Sensilube, who had been caught milking the Alcocks' cows under cover of darkness. It turned out that his parents had been murdered, leaving Sensilube to fend for his younger siblings and himself. A third boy was Ndudu, a witty little spiv who dreamed of going to Soweto when he grew up and becoming a fancy bootlegger. The black sons and white sons slept in adjoining huts, ate and played together, and explored the surrounding countryside on horseback.

In many ways, the white boys were assimilated Zulus. They spoke Zulu like Zulus. They knew how to suck sweet jelly from a hole in the stem of an aloe flower, how to set snares for birds and small game. From Mboma, they learned the best game of all—riding the raging river on driftwood after a summer thunderstorm. It was only in their teens, when they went away to high school, that GG and Rauri realized how unorthodox their childhood had been.

And finally, of course, there was Creina. She was the last person you expected to meet in a mud hut. She wore rags and tatters, eschewed makeup, and never shaved her legs, but she remained truly beautiful. She could talk knowledgeably about almost anything — literature, science, the arcana of apartheid legislation, the botany of the thorn veld, agricultural production in the Sudan, There you were in a mud hut, with ants in your food and tadpoles in your coffee, making small talk with a ravishing intellectual who graced her wisdoms with quotes from great philosophers and poets.

It all seemed highly improbable. After supper, Neil sank into the depths of his wicker chair and told stories in the firelight. He'd talk about-oh, the history of the tribes in the region, or the inner workings of the local dope trade, or hapless secret policemen he had known. Some of his best yarns concerned his white neighbours, many of whom referred to him as the master terrorist, supposedly trained in Red China. It was said that he and his wife had 'kaffir' lovers. It was said that Creina stripped naked and washed in the river in full view of any black man who happened to be passing by.

And finally, it was said that the Alcocks were stirring the Zulus to revolt, even arming them. From time to time, the secret police picked up the project's Zulu staff and interrogated them on that score. What did Alcock say? Was he a Communist? Why did he live like a kaffir? What was wrong with him? Was he mad? Lots of whites thought he was mad, living the way he did, in a mud hut, eating 'bloody plant soup' or whatever it was that Africans survived on. Come bedtime, visitors groped their way up a dark footpath and into a mud hut, where they lay under coarse woollen blankets, listening to the river roaring over rapids and staring at the smoke-darkened thatch.

Later, many would struggle to describe what they'd experienced that day. They were white, and came from a culture that had lost the ability to discuss matters of the heart without diminishing them inside quotes or disarming them with cynical asides. One such visitor was a former Rhodes Scholar who held very high office in a multinational corporation. When I asked what he made of Neil Alcock, he vacillated, coughed embarrassedly, and said, 'One was struck by his non-materialistic attitude.'

Well, that was certainly true. Mdukatshani was arguably the most cost-efficient development project in Africa. At one point, the project's funding level was $1,250 a month-just about enough to cover the salary of a single United Nations development worker. In Neil Alcock's hands, it kept an entire project running, paying the salaries of sixty-nine black and five white staff members. The Alcocks' cut was about $50. On that kind of money, you lived in a mud hut, very simply, and were liable to be mistaken for a saint, a missionary, a man of God, and all sorts of other things that Neil Alcock wasn't.

He was a complete stranger to sanctimony. He mocked self-righteous solemnity and cracked jokes about bearded liberals behind their backs. He didn't mind living in a mud hut. If anything, he liked it. He liked farming, liked cattle, and like nothing better than sitting under a thorn tree, disputing with Zulu men. There is a Zulu saying ‘I see you with my heart.' Neil saw Zulus that way, and that was the way they saw him.

His arrival in the district, in 1975, had caused fear and consternation on the far side of the boundary fence.

Most Zulus had long since ceased to trust whites. When Neil announced that he'd come to help them, they listened impassively, then went home and tried to divine the trick.