NOT FOR PUBLICATION
WITHOUT WRITER'S CONSENT

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BSQ-41

c/o Tourist Mail
U.S. Embassy
P.O. Box 554
Lagos, Nigeria
September 26, 1981

Reflections from a Train Window

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Dear Peter,

"My name's Mr. Ugo," he said, smiling broadly. "I'm a private businessman." Despite his bonhomie, he seemed ill at ease. He's not thrilled about sharing a compartment with a white man, I thought. "British?" he asked. A sigh of relief partially deflated his protuberant midsection when I said I was an American. The former colonizers are not loved in Nigeria, just as the French are disliked in the francophone West African countries.

"I respect Americans," he said. "When they want something, they ask for it." I got the feeling he admired this quality at that moment because he was about to make a demand of his own. For the first time in his 34 years, he was going to visit the north of his native land, delivering equipment to television studios. He had decided to go by rail for a better view of the countryside, and he wanted to make a holiday of it. "We're going to have a good time. When we get to Abeokuta, I'm going to pick up a girl for the night. I hope you don't mind."

My acquiescence lowered the barriers restraining his expansive personality. He bought beer, and when I called out the window for some peanuts, he insisted on paying for them. The train had begun to crawl out of Lagos, past miles of metal shacks surrounded by mud, refuse and people. When we stopped, women and children converged on the train with trays of food on their heads. Ugo bought some oranges. My appetite was curbed by a strong smell of excrement. The tracks serve as a latrine.

We were joined by a friend of Ugo's named Victor, who was taking his son to a secondary school in the north. At last we escaped the urban sprawl and, almost immediately, entered the forest. The trees that provide much of Nigeria's food grow wild here: the palm from whose juicy, red nut comes a nutritious oil, the banana and its cousin, the plantain. The only cultivated areas I saw were plots of cassava, and these were hardly the product of back-breaking labor. The cassava plant is so hardy that cast-away stems often take root. From the root grows the tuber that, in one form or another, fills many Nigerian stomachs, but does little else, for it's one of the least nourishing foods known to man.

Only about one-third of the land in Nigeria is cultivated.

Bowden Quinn is an Overseas Journalism Fellow of the Institute studying colonial influences on West African nations. His current interest is the government of Nigeria.

The country spent $2.75 billion on food imports last year. Once a major exporter of cotton, palm oil, peanuts and rubber, its share of these commodity markets has dwindled, and in some cases it imports native raw materials to keep its agro-industries operating. I saw no plantations, as I did on my trips upcountry in the Ivory Coast. The Nigerian government launched an agricultural development program last year that it optimistically labeled the Green Revolution, but already critics are saying the campaign is as half-hearted and misguided as past efforts to stimulate crop production have been.

Ugo didn't make his connection at Abeokuta, but at Ibadan he came in chortling. "I've got one," he told me. Bola and I exchanged one glance and I knew Ugo's joy was premature.

"What's he doing here?" she demanded.

"Don't worry, he's a friend." He probably whispered that I was one of the good ones. Bola sullenly dragged her bags into the compartment and went to the bar car with Ugo, who, as he left, looked back and said, "We're going to have a gooood time. This is NIGERIA." I felt like I was back at college with one of those classmates who were sophomores from matriculation to graduation. I looked back out the window.

The declining agricultural production is blamed on oil. Too many Nigerians are going to the cities to get a share of the easy money it brings. I wondered how many people in the teeming slums we passed saw any of that money. I have read that the willingness of these people to endure such appalling conditions in the cities proves how harsh rural existence is in Africa. For a country like Nigeria, spared the worst of the Sahelian drought, I can't accept that explanation. I think of the pioneers who settled our country. The hardships they faced were as severe as those endured by most African peasants, yet for two hundred years they came, until they had put almost an entire continent under the plough.

Night fell. Ugo came back glum. Bola hadn't responded to his advances. He hadn't let his disappointment detract from his generosity to me. He had paid for my dinner. I met Bola in the corridor and decided to give Ugo one last chance. Victor saw me lingering over my meal and assumed responsibility for keeping me entertained. He bought me a beer. I learned he was separated from his wife. He met the woman he was traveling with at the station. She too was escorting a son to a boarding school. The boys shared the compartment with their philandering parents. Africans aren't hypocritical about sex. Youngsters learn early that their parents, especially their fathers, take pleasure where they find it.

Ugo hadn't found it. He was in the upper berth, trying to sleep, while Bola was curled in the lower berth, reading. Her refusal to join him was not due to their having just met, nor to his married status, but because he was an Ibo and she was a Yoruba. Ugo said tribalism is the great evil of Nigeria, but I suspected his reason for believing this was less than lofty. I sat in a chair across from the berths and fell asleep. Bola woke me and insisted I take the bed, while she spent the night in the chair.

Ugo got off the train at noon the next day, and I passed into Victor's care. Africans can think of little worse than being alone, and he wouldn't inflict that torture on me. He

brought in some friends and a bottle of gin. They began talking about football. I gazed out the window, hoping I wasn't being too impolite. Like many Americans, I enjoy solitude, and find the Africans' persistent attentions to be annoying at times. Resistance to loneliness was essential for our country's development. Few Africans could have endured the isolation of the American pioneers.

The settlers had one big advantage over the southern Nigerian farmers. The disease-carrying tsetse fly makes it almost impossible to keep cattle or horses, which deprives farmers of a means of communication as well as a method of expanding cultivation. The north has had cattle and horses for centuries, yet its farmers still turn the soil by hand and live in villages, not homesteads.

When Victor got off the train, Bola was left with the task of seeing me safely to my destination. We arrived in Kano at midnight, five hours behind schedule. Victor had given me the name of a hotel where he said he would meet me the next evening. Bola led me through a station filled with travelers, vendors, touts, beggars and thieves, and got us a taxi. Before we drove off, a person in the crowd had his bag snatched.

Victor had chosen the Red Lion for our rendezvous because of its adjacent brothel, which I mistook at first for the hotel proper. After knocking on a few doors, I saw a yellow-skinned woman appear out of the rain-swept night, her head wrapped in a veil. Did I want a room with or without a girl, she demanded.

I had expected no less from Kano, a thousand-year-old trading center on the edge of the Sahara that has existed in a corner of my imagination shared by such shadowy cities as the Alexandria of Durrell's quartet. I was disappointed with the real Alexandria after gorging myself on those four novels, and I was disappointed with Kano. Instead of mystery and intrigue, I found well-lit avenues, banks in new buildings and civil servants in Peugeot 504s. Not a camel in sight. The wall around the old city has melted to a ten-foot hump of red clay; an ancient gate has been replaced by a cement arch.

I took away a few impressions. The children, as everywhere in West Africa, smile and wave and practice their "good mornings". In the old city, bags of grain labeled Product of Uruguay are carried into a shop. Food is as expensive as in Lagos. I buy a meal in a chop shop for almost $5; the same meal in Sierra Leone costs less than $1. In front of the city's maternity hospital, a public transport van has a warning painted on its door: NO WOMAN WILL SIT FRONT. At least in this, Kano retains its link with the past.

Victor never showed up, so I made the return journey by myself. At the end of the rainy season, the land was green, and much of it was cultivated. We passed acres and acres of sorghum, looking like corn that really could obscure an elephant's vision. I saw patches of rice, peanuts, okra and melons. Snow white cattle marched in stately procession or lay in corrals made of sticks. People stopped working in the fields to watch the train pass. Children waved and counted the cars. They all looked healthy and happy. Why do so many insist on going to the cities?

The United States may have benefited from a kind of natural selection for farmers. So many people came to our country to

get land. The sons and daughters of the first colonists who inherited this craving for land moved west, and were joined by more immigrants with the same yearning. Nigerians are tied to the land because it represents the link with their ancestors, but they don't seem to love the soil the way our farmers do. So a lifetime of planting and harvesting may not seem rewarding enough when set against the chance, however remote, of quick wealth and varied entertainments in the cities.

As evening approached, we stopped at a remote construction site. Vultures swooped out of the sky to alight in shade trees over the workers' zinc-roofed bungalows. Swallows and dragonflies zigzagged through the cooling air in search of insects. Women came down from the fields carrying bowls filled with brown yams for sale. The idyll ends at the train window. So important are these transactions to ease the deprivations of rural living that at every stop all through the night, women were trying to sell their wares.

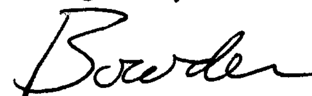
We reached the thick brush of the south the next day. This vegetation helped stop the advance of the northern armies, which relied on cavalry. The decisive battle was fought in 1840 not far away. How has the land changed since then? A rail line, some paved roads, a few modern cities, but in between it must look much as it did then, and the people live in much the same way.

At dusk, we stopped at another small station, where women sat on the rails surrounded by baskets of yellow guavas. A little girl with one silver earring waved at me. I waved back, making contact with the group. A woman held out some guavas and said the two words she hears from white people—"how much". This elicits much laughter from the crowd. The little girl especially enjoyed it, clapping her hands and doubling over in mirth. I waved again as the train pulled away, and several women joined the child in waving back.

The waving continued as we entered the horrid slums of Lagos. Not just the children, but the tough-looking youths smiled and waved when I acknowledged their shouts of <u>oyinbo</u> (white man). Despite their friendliness, I was anxious about getting home safely. For the past two months, I have been the guest of a Nigerian who scarcely knew me when he invited me into his home. He lives in a poor section of town and has warned me against returning late at night, which even he fears to do.

I should not have worried. Although I spent most of the journey alone in my compartment, as we neared its end my fellow travelers took up their communal obligation to the stranger. A man I didn't recognize, though he seemed to know me, asked where I was going. He enlisted a fellow from the second-class, who probably hadn't seen me before, to escort me. Though it took him well out of his way and made him several hours later than necessary getting home, he saw me to my door.

Regards,



Bowden Quinn

Received in Hanover 10/6/81