

Book Reviews

A Life of Faith: Review of Betty Emslie's *An Autobiography: One Beggar to Another*

Book Review

*An Autobiography: One Beggar to Another*¹

by Emslie, Betty L

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To be given a book is a rare treat but when the book given is one written by the donor, the treat is a double one. Such was my fortune with the book under review.

I was first acquainted with Betty (Beatrice) Emslie through the church—St. Mary's, Greyville, Durban—at a time when South Africa was undergoing transition from the Nationalist Government to democracy under Nelson Mandela. Although I did not socialize with Betty outside the church, I

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was always in awe of what I perceived as her vast biblical knowledge, her ability to deliver coherent and interesting sermons and teachings, and her apparent spirituality. My relationship with the author, while not an intimate one, enriched my reading experience considerably.

Having said this, the ease of slippage from page to person—that is, my sense as reader of moving through and beyond the text to the people and events depicted therein—is not consistent. Betty begins her narrative by telling something of the story of her late paternal grandfather, Hyman Levenson. He is a man she greatly admires. Indeed, she describes a ‘psychic’ (5) bond with him which seems unlikely given their extremely infrequent contact during her life and also her staunch Christianity and his Jewish faith. She knows little of his life, she says, having established meaningful contact with him only when he was in his nineties, but finds herself compelled to recount his life of hardship: he escaped from Czarist Russia to settle in Lithuania and then Britain and finally South Africa. It is this part of the story, the early part devoted to her grandfather’s life, in which the narrative style is most disruptive of the communication process: because Emslie’s facts are somewhat sketchy, she spoils the story by interjecting with too many questions. She wonders what sort of work motivated Hyman’s father to travel to Britain. What made Hyman return to England from Glasgow? Did the Leveson family emigrate to South Africa after the Anglo-Boer War, and did the British Government fund their trip? The questions punctuate this early part of the narrative. I found such questioning when no answer was possible an annoyance. One is pulled away from an engagement with the story to be reminded of the writer’s own difficulties in the construction of the account. However theoretically interesting such counterpointing of *writing* as production of meaning with *reading* as production of meaning with may be, the effect is obtrusive and frustrating: the reader cannot possibly guess the answers or ponder on possible solutions. This criticism aside, and the fact that the writer spent too many pages on her grandfather’s history when a paragraph or two would have done, I found myself impatient to discover Betty’s own life story.

Life stories are voyages of exploration not only for readers, but for writers too. Emslie introduces her autobiography (typed on the laptop her daughter gave her for her seventy-third birthday!) with a brief discussion of the role of life writing as a tool for self-discovery:

People write autobiographies to find out who they are. I was not aware of this as I set out to put down the story of my life, but I know that as I

have spelled out certain incidents, I've gained an insight into my psyche (n.p.).

The nature of the insights, the truths, are inextricably tied to the nature of the writer at the time of writing. Thus a writer may, at thirty, interpret certain events and experiences differently from the way she does at sixty. In *Recent Theories of Narrative*, Wallace Martin observes that whereas we often conceive of truth as unchanging, in narrative—all narrative, fictional and non-fictional—truth is time-dependent. This means that the significance of events may change when they are viewed in retrospect (1986:76). The fact that this applies especially forcefully in life writing indicates just how widespread and fundamental is the practice of conceiving of one's life as a story—a story whose meaning changes as does the narrator's consciousness.

Like most people engaged in life writing, Emslie works through her memories in chronological sequence. After leaving her grandfather's story, she begins with her background in Durban, the poverty of her family situation and her schooling at a number of different schools during the time of the 'Great Depression'. Emslie gives an evocative look at family life during this time of great hardship for many people. An historian herself, she places her family's travails in the context of world disorder by embellishing the account with historical information. The marital discord of her parents, the constant moving from rented rooms to rented houses and back to rooms left the young Betty, a dreamy child, reliant on her own concept of what constituted 'life' when she and her siblings were placed, 'for their own safety' in the Ethelbert Children's Home in Malvern, Durban. She and her brother and sister were sent by train to join their mother in Johannesburg for a holiday and then sent, unescorted, back to Durban. The family was, finally, re-united in 1930. They settled in Johannesburg. Life, however, was not to be easy. For instance, Emslie's parents' loved bridge and every Saturday evening they would leave their children unattended for long periods of time as their bridge partners lived two or more bus rides away from the Levenson home. The look at the Emslie's family life from the inside is privileged viewing but at the same time presents a sample of lives lived by many people during the trying 1930s.

Fortune came to Betty in her final year at primary school when her godmother Aunty Lily stepped in and arranged for school fees to be paid by her brother-in-law, William Macfarlane. The Macfarlanes, being childless, honoured their benevolent gesture and saw Betty through high school in

Johannesburg. She was also given a bicycle by the Macfarlanes which she used to cycle many miles to and from school. To her own surprise, Betty matriculated well and began her working career as a 'secretary' to an irascible Dean of Dentistry at Wits University. She says of this: 'I was to take the plunge into working closely with a man who did not enjoy good health and had a terrible temper' (77). Also, on Mr. Macfarlane's insistence, she trained as a radiographer.

The turning point in Emslie's life had come earlier on, in 1941, when she was just sixteen: one Sunday she felt compelled to attend the service at Johannesburg's Central Baptist Church. Once there (to the acute embarrassment of her brother) she answered the call to know God better. Her father's disgust at her having 'gone and got religion' (64) was no deterrent. Thus began a life committed to missionary work, a commitment shared with Rex Emslie, the man she married in 1946, and their three children.

They first devoted their lives to work on mission stations amongst the Bapedi people. Away from schools in remote and very primitive homes (one of which could only boast of a long-drop toilet after her father-in-law insisted that this was necessary!), Betty taught her firstborn child, Megan, at home using the correspondence method used in Australia for children living in the Outback. (Coincidentally, I, myself, in the same year, was taught by my own mother using this method.) At around this time, suffering the after-effects of the recent birth of her second daughter and third child, Betty found the 'Bagananwa to be very slow to respond to the gospel message' (147). She was alarmed to discover that the local people called themselves 'the Refused Ones'—she was to learn that this meant they doggedly refused to listen to new ideas which included the message of Christianity. There were few converts, although they were there for ten years. She says, 'As for me, my heart was overwhelmed with despair—maybe because I could understand their words as they shouted them and could detect the defiance in their voices' (148). Betty tells of her descent into depression and wretchedness and the final 'cry for help' when she attempts to take her life by way of taking an overdose of *phenobarbitone*.

The Emslie children were, before too long, sent off to boarding school in Pietersburg. Their fate echoes my own so I found myself paying close attention to this period of Emslie's story. She asserts that the closeness of her life with her children was not compromised by their being apart from her—I would like to ask her children if they agree with this statement. My own disjunctions resulting from ten years in boarding school have echoes and resonances lasting into my near old age. Also striking a very personal chord in

me was Betty's account of how she would leave her children with others in the school holidays, justified since she was teaching a five-hour day of 'vacation bible school'. Like Betty's children, in the school holidays I was left to my own devices as my mother was busy playing golf, bridge, tennis and poker. I found company and distraction playing with the children of my father's employees (that is, only the white ones, in accordance with our colonial mindset). There is a section in the boarding school anecdote when Betty tells how every time they had to take their son, then aged six and a half, 'back to boarding school after the holidays he would scream blue murder and Rex would have to carry him into the dormitory kicking furiously' (164). That's more like my memories of such incarceration!

Emslie offers some overview of South Africa during the apartheid years and the ways this impacted on missionary work. She was critical of the system but confesses that, being something of a coward (her own assertion) she avoided making direct confrontational comments or taking any pro-actively anti-apartheid action. Nevertheless, she did not share the view of her missionary husband, Rex. He was of the school that thought that a Christian intervention would be the only action needed and God would see to the restoration of a fair system of government. 'Rex had complete confidence that the preaching of the Christian Gospel would eventually solve all problems because it would advance peoples' way of life, values and economic conditions' (171). This reminds one of the legacy left by Livingstone when he saw the two-pronged solution of Christianity and commerce being the 'civilizing' force that would see Africa become an extension of European democracy.

Neither is the itinerant nature of Livingstone's existence in Africa all that dissimilar to that of the Emslies. They left the Elim mission in 1962 and relocated to Cape Town for a short while. It was during this period that Betty renewed her acquaintance with her ninety-eight-year-old grandfather, Hyman Levenson, who was resident in a Jewish Old Age Home. She recounts an occasion when the children accompanied her: 'the children stared aghast at the strange sunken-faced individuals lying in their beds who were following their every move with protruding eyes. Donald and Jenni cowered behind me, trembling and tearful' (180). Moreover, Hyman, who had no visitors, was suspicious of her motives. However, Betty continued with her visits until the Emslies relocated to Durban in 1963. He died soon after, just months before his one hundredth birthday.

In Durban, the family moved into a church house in Glenmore. Their missionary work centred around the Indian areas of Merebank and Chatsworth.

Emslie talks of her work with the children and her 'Pied Piper of Hamlyn' experiences in calling the children to her open-air pavement Sunday school by means of the ringing of a large hand bell. (An interesting aside is that a local parson, the Rev. Tibbs Naidoo has completed a masters thesis on this work and quotes the Emslies extensively and describes their work at length.) In 1971, Betty herself undertook to study at Natal University and earned the degree of Bachelor of Arts. She went on to take a Bachelor of Theology degree which she completed in 1978. She and her husband were sent again to Cape Town where their final term of missionary work was completed among the coloured people of the Cape Flats (1974 - 1977). It is at this juncture that Emslie confesses to what she perceives as her lack of courage. The year was 1976, the time of the uprisings in Soweto and elsewhere, when school children objected to the enforced use of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction. This led to the killing of many unarmed school children, and Emslie says, 'For the first time in my life I learned how great a coward I was. I became afraid to drive daily to the Bible College because it took me through Athlone and other suburbs where riots were taking place. I asked Rex to drive with me and even then we made a long detour in order to avoid trouble spots' (233). Emslie mentions the effect on her of the later killing of the American student, Amy Biehl: this frightened her greatly.

The Emslies retired to Durban in 1977 and started worshipping at the Church of the Nazarene. In 1978 she completed her Honours degree through Unisa and made plans to begin a Masters degree in New Testament theology. She tells of a brief period in Port Elizabeth (1979) when she and her husband taught at a bible college. In 1980 the couple returned to Durban and, since she had received an offer of a lectureship at Unisa, left for Pretoria for a two year stint of studying and teaching. It was while she was there, in 1982, that her husband died of a heart attack. Rex's funeral was held at the Chatsworth church that he himself had built. She recounts the many positive sentiments professed by those attending, including converts of his ministry.

Even as a widow, Emslie's life continued to be characterised by change: her retirement to a flat in Durban, in 1987, was shortlived: she lived for three years (1994 - 1997) at the Casa Robles Missionary Retirement Centre near Pasadena, California, teaching English to Armenian women and biblical studies to other students. Betty could not settle in America, however, and after three years she accepted her son and daughter-in-law's invitation to live with them in Westville. Although happy with them, independence once more beckoned. She now lives in a retirement home on Durban's Berea, and spends her days in taking 'weekly Bible study meetings' at the retirement home, visiting family,

writing and reading, and generally enjoying her well-earned relaxation after a life of hardship and self-sacrifice.

As I was, and still am, a member of the Church she attended at that time (1987 onwards), I had the privilege of hearing her preaching. I also attended the Women's retreat at Fort Nottingham to which she alludes. Her mention of Rev Rogers Govender, at this point in her story, is apposite to my own experience of attending a church whose mission it was—and is—to be a non-racial body of Christians worshipping and living without recourse to *apartheid* policies.

It is pity that the book, as a private publication, is relatively difficult to come by. With some minor editorial amendments, the book would be a worthwhile publication. The story is of interest to those who would like to learn about how a life lived in terms of Christian principles of self-sacrifice can be one of fulfillment and security. But I also recommend this book to any reader who might assume the opposite, namely, that a missionary life is glamorous or, perhaps, easy. Emslie's story might also interest readers who are informed by a postcolonialist theoretical approach. Broadly, in this view, the western need to change those unenlightened peoples they encounter (through religious conversion amongst other means), is anathema; nevertheless, the *ways* in which such projects are implemented and the justifications for such interventions are of great concern in postcolonial analysis. Such readers might find Emslie's life story—a life wholly devoted to the spreading of the Christian gospel, mostly amongst Africans and Indians—rich for examination. For better or for worse, the missionary enterprise in Africa continues to demonstrate its effects and influences. History will be the judge of whether or not it was a worthwhile endeavour; but history, as we know, is an inconsistent interpreter.

References

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