

Maes-Jelinek, Hena: Clive Barry. In Vinson, James (ed.). *Contemporary Novelists*. London: St. James Press, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972, pp. 83-85.

BARRY, Clive. Australian. Born in Sydney, New South Wales, in 1922. Served in World War II; prisoner of war. District Education Officer in East Africa since the mid-1950's.

Since 1961, United Nations Representative in the Congo. Address: c/o Faber and Faber Ltd., 3 Queen Square, London W.C.1, England.

PUBLICATIONS

Novels

The Spear Grinner. London, Faber, 1963.

Crumb Borne. London, Faber, 1965.

Fly Jamskoni. London, Faber, 1969.

* * *

Clive Barry's first and third novels are comedies animated by the adventures of the same hero; they are, however, unequal achievements. In *The Spear Grinner* Hector Reed, a gruff though well-intentioned Australian, comes as an Administrative Officer to the small imaginary state of Jamskoni in East Africa. His duties are ill-defined but in his one week stay he manages to kill an elephant and just escapes being killed by another; he prevents a whole cargo of hemp from being smuggled to Yemen, takes part in a ludicrous election campaign and avoids being knived by gangsters by blowing up part of his own house. The only real authority in Jamskoni seems to be exercised by the District Commissioner's office boy, an ex-public-school native called the Ostrich after the emblem of his political campaign for the coming elections. He is a pleasant rogue, the "spear grinner" of the title, who in defiance of the proverb "Only a fool laughs at the spear" cultivates a savage grin and thrives on everyone else's inefficiency. The story is told with brilliant gusto. Barry's dry humour, his elliptical style and the detachment with which he frames the most absurd situations, are well suited to his rendering of the anarchy and inverted sense of values that prevail in Jamskoni. Sheer farce alternates with more subtly satirical scenes. In the end, however, the tragic reverse of amusing chaos, which has been played down through most of the novel, is allowed to emerge: Reed's beautiful housekeeper is found killed and horribly mutilated by the gangsters. There is a suggestion throughout the novel that Reed needs Africa as much as Africa needs him. Yet as an uncommitted witness of other people's predicament, it is without remorse that he flies back to the security of a modern suburbia.

In *Fly Jamskoni* Hector Reed comes back to the small newly-independent state as a United Nations Officer. The Ostrich is Minister of Aviation and apparently still runs the show by himself, though he spends most of his time piloting the country's one biplane. Gangsterism has been eradicated by making the head gangster superintendent of police. The one remaining problem for Reed is to stop the camel-herders from smuggling hemp. As his job depends on the continuance of the trade, he befriends the herders and even helps them to smuggle their hemp by aircraft rather than on camels. He has at last learned from the Ostrich the art of compromise. Unlike *The Spear Grinner*, Barry's third novel is hardly more than a succession of loosely connected farcical incidents. His style has lost nothing of its vividness, and he still relies on the paradoxical to raise an occasional laugh. But it is often hard to make head or tail of what is happening, and the reader is more confused than Reed himself about what the latter is doing in Jamskoni.

Crumb Borne portrays an altogether different world: the hopeless society created by a hundred starving prisoners-of-war on a freezing plateau in the middle of nowhere. Their microcosm reproduces the hierarchical functions of the ordinary world even to the need for a scapegoat. The outsider is Frugal, whose quiet self-sufficiency and capacity to survive through strict self-discipline are interpreted by his fellow-prisoners as a threat to their own survival. Actually, Frugal alone remains human while the others' meanness increases with

their physical degradation. The cold, matter-of-fact precision with which Barry describes the isolated camp and the prisoners' permanent near-hysteria further enhances the depressing character of the underworld he creates.

—Hena Maes-Jelinek