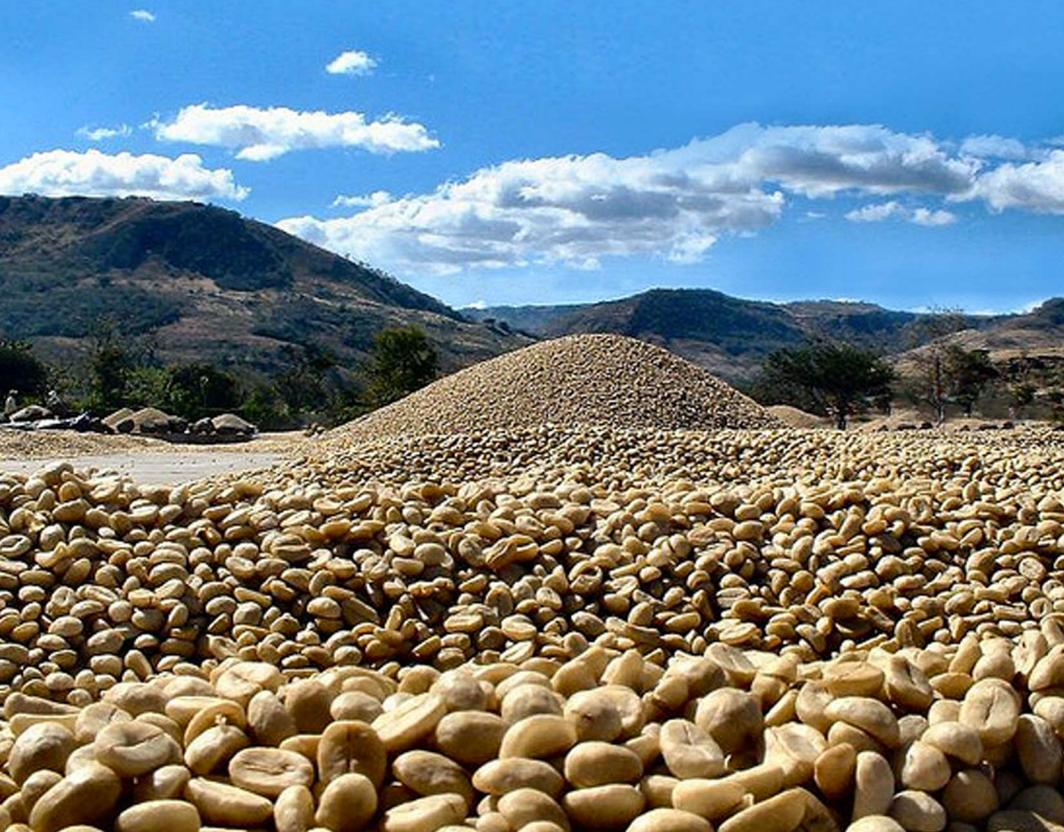


Travel Diary

Billy Moon



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Introduction

Still recovering from Typhoid, four months after I discovered it in my blood - I am feeling too unwell to continue my work, and too healthy to lie down - so I thought I might write a book. It will start as a document of my temporal and geographic travels, but I don't know how it is going to end yet, we can save that for the foreword - which is apparently written last - I always thought that was a bit back to front, which reminds me...

How it all begins

I had arrived in Cairo, at the beginning of a hot summer - it is always hot in Cairo, except when it is cold and raining. I was looking around all the small villages within an hours crow-fly away from the City, but with winding roads, this could be between one and six hours fox-trot. I had chanced upon a charming little village, with a charming little cafe, with a charming little coffee, brought to you by a charming little waitress. I was browsing the repaired and second-hand electrical shop next door, and when I tried one of the last century looking tape machines, it occurred to me that the tape was running in the opposite direction to what I would expect.

More precisely, the magnetic tape, when you look from the front of the machine, was running from right to left. The voice was some Arabic narration I didn't understand. It occurred to me that it was probably something to do with the language and the way it is written from right to left, it makes sense to play it that way too. Because the machine had not been fully repaired yet, or at least after I got my hands on it, I was able to gently tug the reel backwards, and simulate playing in the opposite direction. My hand was not so steady and even, but I was quite sure I could discern some words in English talking about a fountain in the town square. I know there is a fountain in the town

square of this village, so I can safely assume the tape is a guide to the town I was in. It is all fitting into place...

This sparked my curiosity, and I immediately went to have another stimulating coffee, and to muse over and daydream about this new discovery with a pen and paper. I rarely write anything in my notebook, but I find holding it really helps me to think things out in a clearer, more structured way - as if someone is taking and collating notes. On this occasion however, I did write and draw several diagrams and notes. I quickly started to come to an understanding about the language, that now I have seen it, seems so obvious I am amazed nobody has noticed before. It turns out that Arabic is just English, but written and spoken backwards!

With this revelation, I was enthused, so ordered an ice cold water. They did not have any, so I hopped onto the next transporter into Cairo. After I found a nice cold water, which I mixed with some whiskey and absinth for flavour, I headed directly to the central library. I started comparing books, and trying to further understand what I had discovered. I started reading books that I could find in both English and Arabic, of which there were many. I quickly found that the reason it is so hard to see the connection between the languages, is because it is not only backwards, but upside down too. Once I figured this out, I did not need to find books in both languages, as I was quickly able to learn to read backwards and upside down without checking for a translation.

Learning to read the words was the easy part, the hard part however comes in orientating your mind to work in compatibility with the very foreign culture of backside-up (upside-down and backwards). The problem is, that because it is all written backwards, you start at the end, so you must know what you are going to say before you start. This is true for both sentences, conversations, and even entire books. This means you must have a very clear, well thought out idea of what you are going to talk about before you start. This is not so hard when you only have to make one short declarative sentence - like "I am going to the coast tomorrow", which in backside-up would be "tomorrow coast to the going am I" (some words in backside-up are grouped for conceptual convenience, which is why 'to the' stays the same way round). It becomes more difficult - and requires a total re-wiring of your brain - to have conversations with people, something I started to do little by little. This is due to needing to know the end of the conversation before you start. This means you must have an intimate knowledge of the culture, history, and current affairs - and a sharp wit to piece it all together, so you can accurately judge how your conversation is going to turn out before you begin.

The first conversation I ever had in backside-up was to buy a train ticket to the middle of Africa. It went something like this... "go you here yes", "Africa middle of to the ticket train a have I can?". Not the longest - or most interesting conversation, but to me, at that time, it sent shivers through my body that came out as a tingling all over my skin. Of

course, that might also have been down to the rancid goat meat I had been eating in the village.

N.B. A few years later I was talking to a linguist professor in Rome, who pointed out that it was more likely that English is a backside-up version of Arabic, and that my revelation had cast a new light on the origins of all Roman script languages, but they had not quite worked out the inconsistencies yet - that as it stood now, it appeared that the origin of language comes from two sources, both with equally compelling historical evidence. I told him I could see no problem with there being two sources, like a river can have two sources, but he seemed to think it was much more complex than that. I left with the feeling that the revelation I had those years ago was simple, and that it had somehow spun into some elaborate and unnecessarily complex chunk of academia that I could no longer take full ownership of in my mind.

Africa - the middle

So here I was - in the middle of Africa - not a care in the world. I was kind of wishing I had got off at the train station about thirty miles back, but I had come all this way , and wanted to see the actual middle of Africa. I later discovered that the continent had not been measured for some years, and due to movements of tectonic plates, the middle could be anywhere within seventy miles of this spot. There was also some debate over what the middle actually was, with various methods of measurement preferred by various people. It seemed that people tended to favour a method that brought the location closest to their own - regardless of how preposterous this method might be. There was one guy who was telling me that the true middle of Africa landed near the edge of his back yard. He said that you can calculate this if you take a regular map of Africa, and rotate the land mass, so that the lines of longitude align with magnetic north. Then simply draw a box around the continent (he was very careful to ensure I understood that by continent, he meant tectonic plate), and finally, connect the corners of the box to find the middle. I was however, far from his back yard, and far from anything of note, so I started walking.

I walked first along the railway tracks that had brought me, deciding it was better to walk thirty miles in a direction I

knew would bring me to a town, with a nice little cafe, with a nice little coffee, in a nice little cup, brought by a nice little waitress, than to walk an unknown number of miles the other way to reach much-of-a-muchness. I had calculated the average distance between stations was fifty miles, which meant that my best guess was that it was only twenty miles the other way, but then it could be ninety. So for the sake of caution, I started walking back the way I came.

I walked for an hour, then seeing that the sun was hovering low, pushing ripples of heat that turned the sky into a tranquil pool, I felt I wanted to arrive a little sooner than I was going to. I decided to take a shortcut. I saw the way the track was bending, so interpolated the curve beyond what I could see, and made a bee-line to my new destination. I expected this would shave off at least two hours from my journey, but it did not. Instead, I found myself cold and alone in the dark near, but not exactly at, the middle of Africa.

Being in the middle of Africa was not really a problem in itself - it is just being somewhere that is so unfamiliar that can be troublesome - and so interesting at the same time. The sun had dropped quickly out of the sky, as it does near the equator, and the mood of the land changed just as fast. Dusk is a good time for the hunters, not the hunted - and I could not make up my mind which I was - but on this occasion I guess it was neither, because I really was alone.

I thought it best to try and find some shelter, and warmth

and wait it out until morning. I also thought it would be better to make it to higher ground, so as to keep a lookout for dangers. With some careful planning, I broke off a few branches from dying tree, so the branches would be dry enough to burn, and I brought a handful of dry grass with me to use as kindling. I even chanced upon some flint as I started climbing to the top of the ridge that formed my horizon - although I thought the flint would not be necessary as I have seen fire being made by that pompous prick on TV who went to south America and re-taught the natives to make fire from jungle material.

When I reached the crest of the ridge about an hour later, I could suddenly see for miles - well actually I mean I could see the lights from towns that were miles away. The small towns were dotted like star constellations, which were also very clear that night, so the sky appeared to wrap around underneath me, like I was floating in space and there was no world around me. These thoughts started drifting around my mind, but I was brought swiftly back by noticing the pattern of large towns, bright clusters with an ominous glow. They lined up straight, and were separated quite regularly - not by the haphazard rise and fall of the land, but by the measured grid lines of the map they conformed to.

I decided it was too long a walk to make at night time, but it was a great comfort to know how I could find my way when I wanted to. I quickly abandoned my idea to make a fire, remembering that it just can't be done,

and that the guy on TV must surely have used computer generated imagery to achieve his fire lighting. I came to the conclusion that man did not invent fire at all, but simply kept a forest fire alight, like an olympic torch being passed through generations. I laid the sticks I had collected out in a criss-cross pattern to use as a bed - just to keep me raised off the cold rock floor, and used three of them to make an arrow pointing to my target town - in case it was not so easy to spot in the morning light. I remember some of my dreams from the brief and disturbed sleep that night being about Robinson Crusoe, and how quickly his thoughts turned from mundane to mortal - and back again.

I half awoke, as I was only half asleep, to a beautiful sunrise. From my vista, I could see the coarse desert spread out before me like the wooden floor of an old gymnastics hall, broken by veins of water pushing life into the disgruntled soil. The vivid colours were in direct contrast to the stark and dark night before. I would have enjoyed the moment much more if I was not so extraordinarily hungry and thirsty. I walked uncomfortably to the town directioned by my arrow, where I finally I enjoyed the coffee and a cake much more than usual, and I usually enjoy it much more than most, as it contained the most succulent ingredient that no chef is able to add - hunger. The coffee was not the best I have ever had, but that coffee in that place, at that time - was the best I have ever had.

The best coffee I have ever had

I was in Florence, in the main town square, sitting in a quaint little cafe, with quaint little coffee cups, brimming with quite luscious dark, aromatic coffee, served by a queer little waiter. I was reading a leaflet left on my table, advertising the amount of preparation that had gone into making my coffee - fifteen bars of pressure, yay many degrees temperature, super purified water, single source beans roasted to temporal perfection. Between paragraphs, I was watching the queue to the Ufizi gallery, where Michelangelo's statue of David is housed. I was keeping an eye on the couple who had arrived at the back of the queue as I sat down. They were wearing brightly coloured sports clothes, which seem so inappropriate whilst they were doing the hundred meters in four hours flat. I was imagining that after the long wait, if they would think it was worth waiting for - to see the statue of David, completely mis-proportioned and out of context. He was meant to be atop a building, and Michelangelo was a master of his work, so foreshortened the figure to compensate for the withering of his torso and head by perspective as viewed from down on the ground. This is why he has such a bug head and little skinny legs - and looks quite silly when seen up close. I had spent some time walking around,

trying to get a lower vantage point to see one of the many replicas of the statue that are dotted around the city. I had not managed to find an accurate location the whole time, but the coffee was good. I was bored of looking at people standing in a queue, so paid and left. Retrospectively I realised that it was probably the best cup of coffee I had ever had, but I was not really in the mood for it at that time.

Coffee is always a disappointment, due to the smell holding so much promise... coffee is such a liar, but we forgive it when it promises again with such sweet sincerity to fulfil our dreams, or more precisely - improve any situation we find ourselves in. I therefore think it is vitally important to carry a thermos flask with hot coffee at all times - just in case you are about to have the best moment of your life, without coffee, you are not quite going to reach the full potential.

Another time I was having the best coffee of my life was in Ethiopia. I was playing chess online with a Sudanese guy whilst being served by an Ethiopian girl with full and proper ceremonious pomp and dressing, including grass adorning the floor, with small yellow flowers because it was just after new year, and the pungent thick clouds of frankincense that drift in and out of your awareness. She would talk to me in English, but would call coffee by her own language and would round her full lips to say with such love the simple word 'buna'. After my game, I started drinking my second cup, which I always like the most - I am always in a hurry for the first one, and by the third one, I am

just trying to cling onto the feeling that is slowly slipping away like a dream slips away from your waking memory. I was chatting with the Sudanese guy about normal things - where and when, what etc... and he was surprised that I had heard coffee comes from Ethiopia as he was quite sure it originated in Sudan. Luckily I don't care, so it did not disturb me to not know this trivia.

The best cup of coffee I have ever had at all though - will be the next one. That is the nature of the promise of it... which reminds me of another false promise.

Education

I remember being told year after year during education, that I was being given the tools to properly succeed in life - by what measure I am not sure, but success was the promise. This always seemed a bit fishy to me at the time, but it is not something you can properly challenge until you have completed your education, which of course does not end until you quit, because you can not take it any further or any more.

Having thought on the matter deeply, a few things just don't add up. It seems that if everyone is educated equally, then nobody gets a competitive advantage for employment. So if this is not the goal, and passing knowledge onto us all is, then why are we taught such useless things. Why was I never taught how to calculate a mortgage in maths, or how to fold a t-shirt like the guy on the youtube video, or how to cook normal food in home economics that I might make for myself when I go to university to continue my education.

I think the objectives of education have changed over the years. I guess it all started, in England anyway, with the closure of the land act. The purpose of which was to squash all the healthy and happy English peasants into vast cities capable of manufacturing boats that can not sink. By making life in the countryside near impossible to manage, there became a very business friendly labor market in the

cities, where people would be willing to do almost anything to earn some money - or what was often the false promise of some money.

What seems to have happened now, is that this condition of living piled on top of each other seems to have become normal, or at least what people expect, and that living an old fashioned lifestyle in the countryside is somehow now deemed an inappropriate way to live. Therefore the status quo must be maintained at all cost - in this case, the cost is our education.

It became necessary to prepare people for a life of work in what was becoming an ever more complicated business to administrate. The solution was quite simple - introduce job training into education, make it compulsory for all members of society. So that is what happened. At first, it did not have much impact, but year by year the curriculum becomes more vocational, and less educational until we think that the vocational training given in schools today is education.

So the question now is where to get a good education from...? And my answer was history. I don't mean that pointless sequence of numbers they spout off about in schools, I mean books of words. Old ones. Scrawny ones, pocket books - frayed and torn, with a large section that keeps falling out and you have to prop it into place whilst you read the preface. All of them.

The great thing about books, is that they are truly interactive - you can choose your own learning. With cross

referencing commonly listed in the back, and books written about other books - like a tour-guide, you can find anything you are looking for. Books are like a web which you can travel along, choosing your own path, or a map that you can only see where you have already been, so you are always lighting the way and pioneering into a new understanding.

I like to mis-quite Marcus Aurelius on this matter, and say that he said "When it comes to the matter of learning, it is important to trust your instincts, question everything, and not to read too much - for you are in danger of making an academic activity of something that in its nature is not academic". He did say something vaguely similar to this, but I think about philosophy, but the lie usually works, because it is based on the truth. That is a good lie.

Short Stories

During my various travels, I have picked up many short stories, and often parts of longer ones which I feel you might enjoy.

The fox and the scorpion

One day, a whiley fox (aren't they all) was walking along the bank of a river. He decided to cross over, and have a snoop around the shaded forest on the other side. Stepping into the water, he heard a small voice calling him. He looked round, and saw a scorpion sitting on a rock at the waters edge. "Please Mr Fox, would you carry me on your back, I need to cross this river, and there is not a bridge for hundreds of miles". "Are you kidding me?" asked the fox, "you are a scorpion, I know your behavior, you will sting me for sure!". "Ah, but Mr Fox, if I were to sting you whilst you are swimming, we would both fall by the water, and I can not swim, so together we would drown". The fox, thinking carefully about the logic of this problem, a little hesitantly, finally agreed. "Hop on my back, I will drop you on the other side, and I will stay in the water and climb out a little further downstream". And so, the scorpion climbed onto the back of the fox, and the set off across the river. Somewhere in the middle of the journey, the fox felt a sharp

pain in his back, and his body became paralysed. As the fox and the scorpion were tumbling through the swirls of cold water, to the hard stone riverbed, the fox asked angrily, “now we will both drown - why did you sting me!?” and the scorpion simply replied, “it is my nature..”

What next..?

I am very interested in feedback at this early stage in writing. I am new to this game, and have no idea where the book is going at the moment. If you have any comments, please share at leanpub.com/traveldiary/feedback¹.

Credits

The cover is a modified version of William Neuheisel's photo "Fair Trade Coffee Beans" (<https://flic.kr/p/FSAgJ>).

¹<https://leanpub.com/traveldiary/feedback>