

Halcyon days and brutal war in Rhodesia

'Peter may have shot me. We were on different sides', writes Michael Holman on a poignant account of growing up in Africa

I must declare an interest. Peter Godwin is a friend of mine, although I did not meet him until after Rhodesia's guerrilla war was over. Just as well, really. Reading his book makes me wonder whether he would have shot me. Or at least arrested me, since there came a point in our lives when he would have been duty-bound to do so. For we were on different sides in the war.

Peter was a manuscript policeman, called up at 21. I was a journalist in my twenties. I ended up on the run from Ian Smith's white minority regime, while Peter turned himself into more than a policeman, he became a counter-intelligence expert, who was advised the futility of the war to keep majority rule at bay. At about the same time as Peter was being billed up by guerrilla leaders in Mafikeng, I slipped out of hiding to test a possible escape route through the province he was patrolling, into neighbouring Botswana and Zambia.

We have much in common, Peter and I. Before "Rhodesia", who is my childhood friend, the halcyon years of white rule. We both ended up at universities in Britain, Peter at Cambridge, I at Edinburgh, both of us because journalists have 20 years after war police might have crossed in Mafikeng, he has written a book that served me to learn, so much for what might have been so far the war that caused such pain. The result is a fairly extensive, poignant account of growing up in - and fighting for - white Rhodesia, as revealing as his own way about that society as Don's *Leading the Green* is striking was of an earlier era.

Peter enjoyed a childhood as regal as if it was privileged. Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, he was as privileged as it was possible for a middle-class boy to be in those days, speaking fluent and learning the values and cus-

oms of the local people. We explored the beautiful eastern highlands of what is today Zimbabwe, and followed his father's mother as she did her rounds.

Death and illness was treated matter-of-factly in the Godwin family, and Peter grew up looking on, whether his mother was performing surgery or dispensing penicillin. So when she was called to the scene of a guerrilla ambush in 1964, a traumatic event which marked the beginning of the end of the golden era for white Rhodesia, the 16-year-old Peter was quite unshaken by what he saw.

Pat Chubbler had been stabbed to death with a bow-handled sh-

MUKWA, A WHITE BOY IN AFRICA

by Peter Godwin

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his hunting knife, victim of the Cronkite Gang, early members of what was to become a 100,000 strong guerrilla army. Fifteen years later a formal law court in capital.

It was on the banks of the Orange River that Peter, just 18, learnt the facts of life. They had nothing to do with the police-force machine that presented his copy from the heavy counter nose. The war, he was told by his instructor, was more serious than had been admitted, indeed it was probably unnecessary.

It is at this point in the book that Peter declares the war option. He could have professed as an agonised man in pain, exonerating himself for his role in the war.

Neither side had much regard for the Geneva Convention. The Rhodesian army regularly returned civilians in an effort to extract information about their opponents. The rival guerrilla armies - the one loyal to Joshua Nkomo, the other to Robert Mugabe, who was to become

Zimbabwe's first leader, but may do dreadful things to each other. They often made life hell for poor and families caught between the guerrillas and Rhodesian army, the former seeking food and shelter, the latter extracting information.

He has chosen instead a far more subtle and inconspicuous course. He has managed to write as he felt at the time, often exasperated, determined to stay alive, capturing the atmosphere with some wonderfully observed vignettes, made all the more illuminating by his honesty.

I missed the full portraits - of Sergeant Major Gwelo, the tough black professional, the soldier - also a black Zimbabwean under his command, who saves his son Godwin; the chief whose Peter tentatively presented, and whom he eventually has to arrest the dignified old man, finds his apology contemporarily rejected, or the world account of how Peter, expelling with anger, made a hapless black youth he was interrogating eat his pants with fear.

The frankness with which Peter tells his story leaves him vulnerable to those who may be tempted to condemn him. Only his adherents have the right to pass judgment, and if the guerrilla commander with whom he exchanged fire in the field holds no grudge, that should be good enough for the rest of us.

Mukwa has an epilogue. Peter returned to Zimbabwe as lawyer, shortly after independence, before becoming a journalist. His reports for the London Sunday Times exposed the brutality of the North-Lovan-trained 57th brigade in Mafikeng. These things explored methods as brutal as the Rhodesian army at its worst when they persecuted civilians in their hunt for escapee guerrillas in the early 1980s.

There is no happy ending. The stories that were in print then are still to change today, old, new, someone who betrayed their just cause.