From Scotland to Timor

by Theodore Dalrymple (July 2015)

Once you have reached a certain age and experienced the majority of all that you will ever experience, almost everything reminds you of something else. It is as if the world were full of *double entendres* in which nothing meant only what it appeared to mean. The association of ideas becomes so strong that the past becomes almost as real and living as the present: you experience two realities simultaneously. This is pleasurable and is one of the compensations of age. It deepens and enriches life.

The other day I happened to be re-reading a favourite story of mine, Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Body Snatcher*. One of the reasons, no doubt bad, that it is a favourite of mine is that I think that I discovered the identity of one of the main characters in it. Not being any kind of scholar, let alone that of the life and works of RLS, I cannot be sure that my discovery was original rather than a rediscovery of what was already well-known: an overestimation of one's originality being the occupational hazard of the unlearned.

The story begins in the inn of a tiny Scottish settlement called Debenham. Four of the locals are sitting drinking, one of them the narrator and another a man called Fettes who studied medicine at Edinburgh University but never practised medicine. A local landowner and Member of Parliament has been struck down by apoplexy *en route* for London, from which his very grand and important doctor has been summoned to treat him. He arrives.

The great man is called Wolfe Macfarlane, and he was a close acquaintance earlier in life of Fettes, whom he is far from pleased to meet again. Now this Macfarlane, at least according to me, is clearly Sir William Fergusson, surgeon to Queen Victoria, who died seven years before the story was published. Stevenson would never have dared publish it, even had he written it, before Fergusson's death.

In the story which unfolds, Macfarlane was in earlier years teaching assistant to an anatomist in Edinburgh named in the story simply as K. In those days, before the Anatomy Act of 1832, the only legal source of bodies for dissection by surgeons and anatomists in Britain was that of hanged criminals. Indeed, so hated was dissection of the human body at the time that to be condemned to be anatomised after execution by hanging was regarded as almost the worse part of the punishment.

The shortage of bodies for dissection was rectified by body-snatchers, men who dug up the

freshly-interred and delivered them (at a high price) to the anatomy schools such as K's. It was profitable for all concerned, for the anatomy schools were also private institutions that charged students for the privilege of dissecting.

Again according to the story, Macfarlane, whose duties at the time included accepting and paying for bodies for dissection on behalf of K, knew perfectly well that some of the bodies were of people murdered specially for the purpose. One of the delivered bodies was of a young woman well-known on the streets of Edinburgh who had been seen alive and well on the very day before her delivery to the anatomy school as a corpse. Macfarlane knows perfectly well that she has not died of natural causes but says nothing: once she is dissected no one will be any the wiser. He is completely without scruple.

This is a retelling of the history of Burke and Hare, who extended body-snatching to murder in order to supply the famous (and soon to be infamous) anatomy school of Dr Robert Knox—the K of the story. Knox was suspected all along of having known that some of the bodies sold to his school for dissection were murdered, not body-snatched from the grave. He had to flee the city, his activities and those of his suppliers giving rise to a children's ditty:

> Up the close and down the stair,
>
> In the house with Burke and Hare.
>
> Burke's the butcher, Hare's the thief,
>
> Knox, the boy who buys the beef.

Now Dr Knox's assistant at the time was one William Fergusson, who a little later in life moved, just as Dr Macfarlane did in the story, from Edinburgh to London, where he became a famous surgeon knighted and appointed to the household of Queen Victoria. According to his obituaries, Fergusson's personality was exactly as Macfarlane's is described in the story. A short biography of Fergusson was published in 1961 in the journal *Medical History*, written by another very distinguished surgeon, Sir Gordon Gordon-Taylor:

> William Fergusson became a pupil of Robert Knox who appointed him a demonstrator in 1828 at the early age of 20… just after Fergusson joined him, the period of the 'Burke and Hare' affair [began], when it transpired that 16 people had been murdered for the sale of their bodies to unwitting anatomical teachers.

But were they really unwitting? Gordon-Taylor absolves Fergusson by quoting William Burke's confession before he was hanged:

> That worthy gentleman, Mr Fergusson, was the only man that ever questioned me about the bodies. He inquired where we got that young woman. Mary Paterson, because she would seem to have been well known to the students.

This does not seem to me very strong evidence of innocence, and could just as well be used against Fergusson. Stevenson in effect accused Fergusson of having been an accessory to murder, indeed an accessory to serial murder, and in so doing was pulling down a pillar of Victorian respectability.

But the association of Wolfe Macfarlane with Sir William Fergusson was not the one that I made as I re-read the story this time. It took me back instead to my brief time in East Timor during the Indonesian occupation of that unhappy land. I was there to help in the making of a clandestine film about the atrocities committed by the Indonesians with the blessing, and even the actual connivance, of western powers. The Indonesians were favoured because they were firmly anti-communist and East Timor was a former Portuguese colony. Former Portuguese colonies had an unfortunate propensity (unfortunate for their populations as well as for the western powers) of turning communist. The strange thing was that the Indonesians had succeeded in creating an atmosphere in the capital city, Dili, that was almost East European. The pall of tyranny hung over it as if it were Prague circa 1954; the deadness in the streets was extraordinary. It turned the tropics grey.

The pretence of the Indonesians at the time was that its occupation of that part of the island of Timor was perfectly legal and that everything was proceeding normally. The East Timorese, according to them, welcome the opportunity to be part of Indonesia. They therefore had no pretext for keeping foreigners out, though very few indeed wanted to go, thanks to the stories of massacre that emerged intermittently from the island. The Indonesians were imposing their language on the territory and it was illegal there to speak Portuguese: an overheard word of that language could get you disappeared for good, especially if you were Timorese. I had come to interview a dissident in the capital, whom I interviewed in that dangerous language which I do not speak at all well, but on which I had brushed up a little at the time. I had a video camera with me, an implement that I wielded even worse than I spoke Portuguese, and smuggling it round the island was distinctly dangerous. One of my few appearances on the silver screen, then, has been as a voice asking questions in bad Portuguese.

One of the more extraordinary experiences of my life was being serenaded in the best hotel in the capital by drunken Indonesian army officers who, like me, were staying there. Every evening they had a karaoke session in the bar, after a hard day’s oppression. I was the only other guest in the hotel, and one of the officers, drunk, would approach me to ask me whether

he could sing a song for me. It was, I suppose, a mark of friendliness of a kind, but one that I could have done without, first because I have a horror of karaoke as a genre and second, and more importantly, because I did not wish to be befriended by officers of an army rightly accused of many massacres and much cruelty. Luckily, difficulties in communication prevented me from having to choose a song from the officers' limited repertoire; they favoured songs of the most saccharine sentimentality. Ever since, I have associated such sentimentality with the worst kind of brutality and bad conscience.

One of the reasons, perhaps, why I got away with it all was that I made much of the fact that I was a doctor. Indeed, that was my pretext for entering the territory in the first place: I was supposed to be producing a report on conditions for a medical charity that was going to provide help to the population. The Indonesian authorities, on the pretence East Timor was now fully integrated into Indonesia, could not very well refuse a fact-finding mission without giving the game away.

When I arrived in villages, the news that a doctor had come spread very quickly and before long a great queue of people formed to consult me. Tuberculosis and other diseases were rampant, but of course there was little I could do. Medicines were in short supply and auxiliary assistance non-existent. However, if there is one faith that unites mankind it is faith in medicine, and the mere fact of having been examined, however briefly, by a doctor no doubt raised the spirits of many of the people who queues. Perhaps it helped to relieve the monotony of an existence in which the boredom of subsistence farming was normally relieved only by terror of the occupying force. It helped also to throw the Indonesian authorities off the scent.

Now, you may ask, how and in what way did *The Body Snatcher* put you in mind of East Timor, and all the memories that you have of it? Well, in the story Wolfe Macfarlane is called all the way from London to attend the local landowner and Member of Parliament who has had apoplexy (a stroke). Given the means of treatment available to the great doctor, his journey would have been a complete waste of time and effort; there was nothing he could have done for the patient. Indeed, the chances are that there would not be much he could have done in these circumstances even today. Macfarlane would have known his uselessness even before he set out, but it would have faltered his self-importance; to have refused the call on the grounds of impotence would have exposed his pretensions to greatness.

When I was just about to leave Dili for the much greener pastures of Bali, where I had arranged to meet my wife for a short holiday before travelling across the Pacific, I was asked to go to a Chinese merchant's house. The capital was a small enough place, and visitors so

few, that the presence and profession of someone like me would have become common knowledge in no time.

The merchant, I was told, was very ill. Would I accept to attend him?

I went. When I reached his house, luxurious in the sense of being spacious but bare of those many electrical and electronic appurtenances that (falsely) we believe necessary for a decent existence, I found him deeply unconscious on his bed. He had clearly had a catastrophic stroke—apoplexy, in the language of *The Body Snatcher*. I was in the same situation as Wolfe Macfarlane, important but impotent. I thought the man would die, but his family, who were watching me from around the bed, were desperate that something should be done. He was a rich man, possibly the richest in the city and territory, and clearly there was no point in being such if nothing could be done for him. There was no hospital in East Timor, but there was one in Kupang, the capital of West Timor. I advised the anxious family to take him there. They put him in a pick-up truck and prepared to take him by rough roads to the metropolis of the island. It was evidently important to the family that every straw had been clutched at.

Of course, the Indonesians—by which I meant, essentially, the Javanese, who were in charge of the archipelago country—had no particular love for the Chinese, to put it mildly. But I trusted that even in these circumstances medical ethics would triumph, and my unknown colleagues would do their best for the stricken merchant, though it would almost certainly be of no avail.

And that is how, by reading RLS's *The Body Snatcher*, I was transported ten thousand miles in my imagination.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is here.

here to see all his contributions on which comments are welcome.