Standards and Judgements

by Theodore Dalrymple (August 2023)

Muddy Alligators, John Singer Sargent, 1917

I cannot say when the importance of the preservation of present ephemera for the sake of future understanding of the past first struck me. For long, it did not occur to me that a great deal might in the future be deduced about the past by a person of imagination from a document unworthy of preservation from a purely literary or intellectual point of view.

When I look back, the document that I most wish I had preserved is that which was handed to me in 1976 as I checked in to a hotel in Lilongwe, in Malawi (formerly Nyasaland). It was for the benefit of the few tourists to that country such as I—though in my heart I have never really been able to think

of myself as but a tourist, but rather as an inquirer into the world. Mere tourism degrades almost everything it touches and has a marked tendency to narrow the mind, both of the tourist and of the person who provides services for him. I want to have nothing to do with it but have been unable to avoid it altogether.

The president of Malawi at the time that I was handed the document was His Excellency the Life-President, Ngwazi Dr H. Kamuzu Banda. It informed me that if anyone had come to Malawi to assassinate His Excellency the Life-President, Ngwazi Dr H. Kamuzu Banda, the people of Malawi would be so incensed against him, such was the love they bore His Excellency the Life-President, Ngwazi Dr H. Kamuzu Banda, that they would rise up, cut him into pieces and throw him to the crocodiles in Lake Malawi.

As tourist propaganda, this struck me as distinctly odd.

The only other time I have been even at remote risk of being chopped up and thrown to carnivores (in this case, though, the sharks) was in Equatorial Guinea, about ten years later, when I was told that if the authorities knew that I wrote, that is what they would do to me. The country at the time was the perfect place from to disappear without trace, voluntarily or involuntarily.

The single page document I received in Malawi was cyclostyled—I don't suppose that anyone under the age of sixty would recognise this Stone Age technology—and by now, if it had survived, it would have been yellowing and fragile. I read it through with more amusement than horror; it was absurd rather than menacing.

(There was a time when immigration forms to the United States asked the would-be visitor whether he had come to assassinate the President. Someone I know wrote 'Sole purpose of visit' in reply, but the immigration officer, instead of taking this as

a satire on the absurdity of the question, took it very seriously. More recently, visitors have been asked whether they have ever been involved in genocidal activities or intended to become so in the future, the desired answer to which question was not very difficult to guess. And six months after the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September, 2001, I received an official form in the prison in England in which I worked as a doctor—a copy of which I wish now I had also kept—asking me whether I had ever been a terrorist or intended to become one in the future: and I was warned that if I did not reply to these questions, presumably with the right answers, I would be sacked. What struck me most forcefully about this idiocy was that it was not spontaneously generated, that there must have been persons paid from the public purse to devise such questions, persons who probably considered that they were very hard-working and even overworked.)

Ngwazi Dr H Kamuzu Banda with Queen Elizabeth II, 1979

But to return to His Excellency the Life-President, etc.. I hired a car while I was in Malawi and now wish I had kept a copy of the contract. It included an extraordinary clause to the effect that if, on my peregrinations, I happened to cross the presidential cavalcade, I agreed to drive on to the side of the road, stop the car, get out and stand to attention as

it went by. I've hired a few cars since, and no other contract has contained a remotely similar clause.

An item that I wish that I had bought was the kind of printed cotton cloth that the women wrapped around themselves, in this case bearing a roundel with a portrait of His Excellency. I did not go into the laws relating to the wearing of this garment, but I imagine that it had to worn in such a way as not to offer an insult to the image and therefore to the man of whom it was the image.

I suppose it is a sign of advancing age that figures who seemed colossi when one was young are all but unheard of by subsequent generations. I have not done the experiment, but I would imagine that of 1000 educated people aged 30, I would not encounter more than one or two who had heard of Dr Banda. And yet, in his day, he was immediately recognisable to any reader of a serious newspaper.

To some, he was almost a figure of fun, being a strange and deeply exotic figure. Under the tropical sun, he always wore an extremely well-cut, dark Savile Row suit and homburg hat, in the circumstances a one-man uniform not to be imitated, which he completed with a flywhisk as a symbol of chiefly authority. He rode in a Rolls-Royce and was the object of official, and at least in part popular, veneration.

He was an amalgam that would now be thought impossible, that did not because it could not exist. Our official multiculturalism and post-colonialism have stunted our ability, and even our willingness, to try to understand and put ourselves in the place of such a person as Dr Banda. He was an anti-colonialist and African nationalist with a genuine admiration for the culture and achievements of the colonising countries—in this case, of course, Britain.

His worst detractors could not deny that he was a most remarkable man, whose life would make a wonderful film if

anyone were interested. By force of determination, courage, personality and intelligence, facing obstacles that most of us would not even try to overcome, he became a doctor, first in America and then in Britain, where he was deeply respected and even loved by his patients.

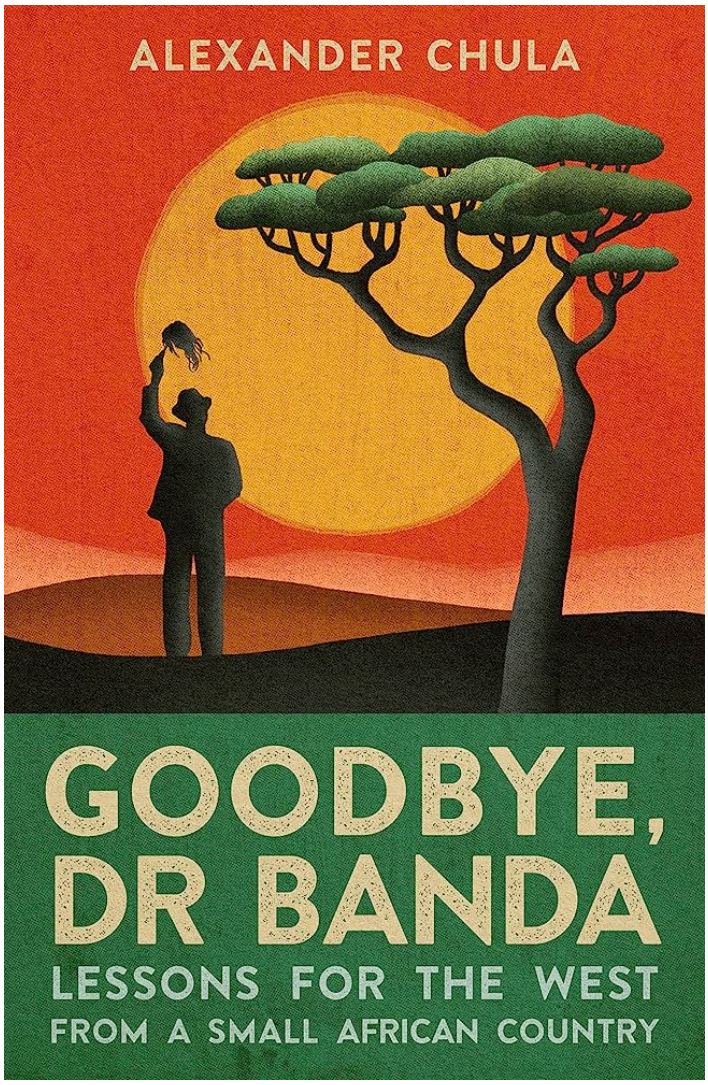
This would have been achievement enough for a person of such humble birth that his date and place of birth in rural Malawi are not known for certain, any more than the identity of his father. But he was not only a doctor; he had studied the humanities, including classics, for which he had so profound a respect that that he considered that no person was educated who had not studied them. An elder of the Church of Scotland, which he became in Edinburgh, and which had furnished so many devoted missionaries to Malawi, he was a stickler for learning, discipline and correctitude, while at the same time being proud of his native culture, its humanity and wisdom. To have made of him a figure of fun, as he tried to amalgamate these two traditions, taking the best from each, was condescension of the meanest-spirited kind.

After forty years' residence in America and Britain, he returned to what was then Nyasaland and after a brief conflict with the colonial authorities, led it to independence. In politics, he was a Platonist, and wanted to educate a cadre of philosopher kings. To this end, he set up the Kamuzu Academy, a purely meritocratic secondary boarding school that would train them, so that eventually his country would flourish under their direction or rule. Latin and ancient Greek would form the core of their curriculum and the teachers, all from Britain, would be the equal of any from their home country. The school was soon nicknamed 'the Eton of Africa.'

It was, perhaps, a mad or quixotic scheme, but it was surely not one without nobility. It was disinterested, and His Excellency, etc., displayed a faith in the value of the western tradition and culture that puts to shame many, if not most, humanities' departments in western universities today.

Dr Banda’s vision could not long retain its purity after his political demise, which came a few years before his death aged nearly a hundred. Very few idealistic institutions can long retain their idealism in this vale of woe and cynicism, and there were besides rational arguments that could be made against an elitist (though not socially exclusive) school that was said to eat up a third of the educational budget of the whole country—not, of course, that it was these rational arguments that led to the dilution of the original purity.

At any rate, the school struggled on, even if only as a shadow of its former self. But Latin and Greek are still taught there, and if it is a fee-paying school that caters to the children of the Malawian elite, no doubt furnishing them with a list of social contacts for use later in their lives, scholarships are still offered to clever children of whatever background, even the humblest.



A young man who has become my friend, Alexander Chula, was recruited to teach at the Kamuzu Academy after having graduated in classics from Oxford. He has just published a book, *Goodbye, Dr Banda*, which is at the same time memoir, travelogue, history of Malawi and serious attempt to understand that great, if flawed, man. To do so, the author had to shed the current orthodoxies about colonialism in Africa: that it was simply a tale of good and bad, of innocence and guilt, of victim and perpetrator. In current circumstances, not to take a Manichaean view of this history is an act of considerable intellectual and moral courage, and indeed the author had difficulty in finding a publisher for his extremely rich and interesting book, precisely because it does not conform to what is now received unchallengeable opinion.

For example, he restores the reputation of certain early missionaries to Malawi, university-trained classicists and philologists, who devoted, and often laid down, their lives to bring about the peaceful elimination of the multi-secular Arab slave trade that had plagued the region, and to bring education and skills to the people. Far from being the racists of modern caricature, they assumed that Africans were capable of all that Europeans were capable of. It is true that they were impelled by a religious faith that they held with what to most modern intellectuals now seems a mysterious certitude,

and which we are inclined to deride; but a man like Hastings Banda was very much aware of the good they had done, in a way that our shallow historical moralists make no effort to understand. When Banda first visited the tomb of Dr Livingstone, he was so moved that he prayed aloud, and swore to continue his work. Unusually—and bravely—for the present day, Chula tries to enter Banda's mental world.

This does not mean that he turns Banda into a plaster saint. Banda was a dictator who declared himself president for life; he enriched himself and, worse still, locked up his opponents, usually in abominable conditions. None of this is denied or extenuated, but it does raise important questions to which I confess that I so not have the complete answer.

By what standards should we judge Banda? By those of post-independence African dictators, in which case he comes out rather well? By those of a perfect polity, in which all receive justice and none suffers from governmental corruption, incompetence or malice, in which case he stands condemned? Or by some unstable oscillation between these two extremes of complete relativism and moral absolutism?

Chula's book, it seems to me, navigates successfully between such close sympathy with its main subject that it abrogates all critical judgment of him whatever, and the finger-wagging moral disapproval of many intellectuals, who are omniscient because they have decided everything in advance according to a dogmatic historical schema that has given them the right to judge everything and everybody by their own current standards. To avoid, if not to resolve, this dilemma requires both historical imagination and moral sophistication which it often seems to be the purpose of modern tertiary education to prevent and eliminate wherever found.

Malawi is a far-away country of which we know nothing, to coin a phrase. It is a purpose of reading, however, to extend our knowledge of the world, the better to reflect on the meaning

of our lives and of life in general. Many people, alas, read to confirm their prejudices; this book will make people reflect on and *think* about what they have never considered before.

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are *Neither Trumpets nor Violins* (with Kenneth Francis and Samuel Hux) and *Ramses: A Memoir* from New English Review Press.

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