

BOOK REVIEWS

Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*. Penguin Books, 2013. 352pp, ISBN-10: 014312403X

There once was a country called the Republic of Biafra. Its brief existence, from May 1967 to January 1970, was an affront to the leaders of Nigeria, from which Biafra, occupying the nation's southeast corner, had seceded. Nigeria, which had gained independence from Britain just seven years prior, took military action to suppress Biafra's bid for sovereignty. In a brutal civil war that lasted thirty months, perhaps as many as 2 million Biafrans perished -- directly from the violence or from the starvation and disease resulting from a blockade imposed by Nigerian forces. The Biafran War was, according to the most famous Biafran, the writer Chinua Achebe, "a cataclysmic experience that changed the history of Africa." Before the humanitarian disasters in Congo, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, and elsewhere, it was one of the first dirty wars to run its course on the world's TV screens.

One of the authors of the Ahiara Declaration, proclaiming the new nation's liberal founding principles, Achebe also served Biafra as a diplomatic envoy. His absorbing new memoir, *There Was a Country*, recounts the doleful history of Biafra from the perspective of a disappointed partisan and within the context of the author's life through 1970. Although Achebe has been living in the United States -- currently resident at Brown University -- for more than twenty years, this is a book about Africa and its author's experiences there. He begins by recalling his childhood at the crossroads of traditions, in the town of Ogidi, where he was open to the influences of his father, a Christian teacher and evangelist, as well as to the ambient Igbo culture. He praises the British colonial system, in particular an educational infrastructure that celebrated hard work and high achievement. Achebe, who earned the nickname "Dictionary," excelled within this meritocracy, as a student and then as an employee of the Nigerian Broadcasting Service. In 1958, he outdid Amos Tutuola and Cyprian Ekwensi, the only Nigerian novelists to have gained significant recognition, by publishing *Things Fall Apart*, the most influential novel ever to come out of Africa.

The memoir's account of Achebe's early life is perfunctory, lacking the rich textures that vivify his fiction. Recalling University College, Ibadan, he notes that his brother Augustine provided him with funds "so that I could pay the university tuition and continue my studies, which I did, very pleasantly." No details explain what made the studies pleasant. Achebe does offer an anecdote about how the manuscript of *Things Fall Apart* was almost lost when he mailed it off to be typed by a shady outfit in England, but it only whets one's appetite for further insights into the writer's life.

However, the focus of this book is Biafra, as refracted through Achebe's experiences and beliefs. Though he clearly favors the secessionist cause, he attempts to present the complexities of national identity in Nigeria, a construct of colonialism that encompasses more than 250 ethnic groups. Of these, the largest are the Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo. Achebe praises the Igbo, his own people, for their industriousness, individualism, and respect for learning; he lays much of the blame for Nigeria's woes on resentment of Igbo achievements. He admits that Igboes led what he calls "the naively idealistic coup of January 15, 1966." That bid

for power triggered a violent counter-coup that was accompanied by anti-Igbo pogroms. Biafra, where Igbos constituted about 65 percent of the population, was a refuge against genocide. Achebe views the ensuing war as a personality clash between two rival graduates of Sandhurst -- General Emeka Ojukwu, the son of wealth and privilege who led Biafra, and General Yakubu Gowon, the opportunist who took control of Nigeria. In his own family's close calls with death, Achebe reflects the ordeals of millions.

Now eighty-one, Achebe has been a public figure for most of his life, called on for fifty years to make pronouncements about his native land. Much of *There Was a Country* consists of recycled riffs on set subjects. The book's 377 footnotes acknowledge not only that Achebe draws on outside sources but that much of the text is a verbatim sampling of what he has already said in essays and interviews. The name of a prominent figure often generates two or three sentences of canned description. Awkwardly interpolated, one too-tidy paragraph sums up Achebe's crucial founding of the African Writers Series. What might have been a vivid record of a literary artist's personal experiences instead too often reads like a compendium of well-rehearsed position statements.

One in four Africans lives in Nigeria, whose population may well exceed 1 billion by century's end. Achebe, who defines himself as "a protest writer, with restraint," concludes his anguished memoir by denouncing the "decadence, corruption, and debauchery" that continued to worsen after 1970. Things fell apart, perhaps irreparably, in the carnage of Biafra.

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