

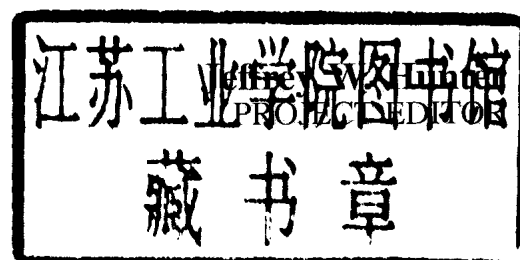
☐ Contemporary  
Literary Criticism

**CLC 231**

Volume 231

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works  
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and  
Other Creative Writers



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## Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 231

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## Preface

**N**amed “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

### Scope of the Series

*CLC* provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

### Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

## Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Thomson Gale, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, films, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Thomson Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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# Giles Foden

1967-

English novelist.

The following entry provides an overview of Foden's life and works through 2003.

## INTRODUCTION

An author of several highly regarded historical novels set in Africa, Foden has garnered praise from critics for the manner in which he presents a variety of viewpoints on a range of characters from different cultures. His first book, *The Last King of Scotland* (1998), was exceptionally well received and concerns the relationship between its narrator, Nicholas Garrigan, and Uganda's infamous dictator Idi Amin, who ruled from 1971 to 1979. Foden's central concern in the book is the relationship between the two men, which eventually guides Garrigan's decision not to assist the forces seeking to overthrow Amin. Another novel, *Zanzibar* (2002), focuses on Islamist terrorism, specifically the bombing of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania on August 7, 1998. Foden's novels are recognized for their descriptive narratives, especially of historical events in Africa, as well as his focus on social issues that are pertinent to his settings.

## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Foden was born in Warwickshire, England, in 1967, to Jonathan, an agricultural advisor, and Mary, a farmer. The family moved to Malawi, in southeastern Africa, when Foden was five, and later lived in other African countries. In 1980 they returned to England, where Foden attended Malvern College and Cambridge University. He worked for the magazine *Media Week*, for the *Times Literary Supplement*, and the *Guardian*. His first novel, *The Last King of Scotland*, brought him success as a novelist, including numerous honors such as the 1998 Whitbread Award for First Novel and a 1999 Somerset Maugham Award. Foden continues to contribute material to the *Guardian* and is a book reviewer for *Conde Nast Traveler*.

## MAJOR WORKS

*The Last King of Scotland* focuses on a Scottish doctor, Nicholas Garrigan, who accepts an assignment as personal physician to Ugandan dictator Idi Amin.

Through the course of the book, Garrigan becomes emotionally attached to Amin despite the atrocities Amin inflicts on others. Foden's next book, *Ladysmith* (1999), is also set in Africa, this time in a South African town of the same name during the Boer war of 1899. Foden offers portraits of a large cast of characters involved in the four-month siege of Ladysmith, then under British control, by the Boers. Fictional characters are presented alongside historical figures such as Winston Churchill and Mahatma Gandhi. Foden jumped forward a century for his next work, *Zanzibar*, an international thriller. *Zanzibar* features a pre-September 11, 2001 Osama bin Laden; a marine biologist and his love interest; and a one-armed CIA agent, Jack Queller, who tries in vain to warn of rapidly approaching acts of terrorism. Foden's fourth work, *Mimi and Toutou Go Forth* (2004), is an historical novel of World War I, set in East Africa. Its central character is Geoffrey Spicer-Samson, an eccentric English military officer who is assigned the task of eliminating the threat of German ships on Lake Tanganyika. The actual events had previously inspired C. S. Forester's 1935 novel *The African Queen* and the classic John Huston movie of the same name in 1951, starring Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

For critics, much of the interest in *The Last King of Scotland* is due to character analyses of its narrator, Nicholas Garrigan, and his decision to stand by Amin despite the atrocities committed by the dictator. For example, Hilary Mantel has speculated that Garrigan's Presbyterian background has gravely influenced him, and describes him as not good, and not especially evil, but ultimately "a man unequal to the times he is living through." Similarly, Merle Rubin debated whether Garrigan's refusal to harm Amin was due to the dictator's charisma, Garrigan's humanity, or Garrigan's cowardice. Brooke Allen called Garrigan "almost entirely unadmirable," a man corrupted in his "ignoble failure to act." In 2006, *The Last King of Scotland* was adapted as a feature film. *Ladysmith* was generally compared unfavorably to *The Last King of Scotland*. Although many reviewers found *Ladysmith* ambitious in its historical scope and well researched, critical consensus about its overall level of characterization was negative. Barbara Trapido found that the characters are "subservient to the story" and speak unnaturally. Toby Mundy

praised *Ladysmith* as “a meticulous recreation of the Boer war” but found the characters often flat in their responses to events. Brooke Allen called *The Last King of Scotland* nearly ideal, but described *Ladysmith*’s story as heavy-handed and plodding, its characters as abstractions. Jonathan Levi suggested that *Ladysmith*’s faults may stem from Foden’s “multicultural thoroughness,” and from attempting to show the viewpoints of more than a dozen significant characters; other critics have argued that this awareness of diversity is one of Foden’s strengths. Neal Ascherson declared *Ladysmith* much more ambitious than its predecessor, believing that the dialogue is effective enough, and that the siege that constitutes much of the “intricately engineered novel” is “superbly described.” Neil Gordon also lavished praise on *Ladysmith*, calling it “a highly accomplished historical novel, superbly researched, rendered with skill and confidence.” Foden had almost completed work on *Zanzibar* when terrorists attacked the World Trade Center in 2001. Since the book features Osama bin Laden, Foden took extra time to update the events in the book in order to reflect what had happened. Critics praised Foden for taking an additional year to finish his work properly and not rushing it to publication. William Skidelsky pointed out Foden’s “grasp of the complexities of this world” and his “even-handedness.” James Franken called it a “tense, involving, well-constructed book” and congratulated Foden for not applying September 11 hindsight to the text. Charles Briffa found it “an absorbing novel” and, along with other critics, described its characters as much more interesting than those in *Ladysmith*.

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## PRINCIPAL WORKS

*The Last King of Scotland* (novel) 1998  
*Ladysmith* (novel) 1999  
*Zanzibar* (novel) 2002  
*Mimi and Toutou Go Forth: The Bizarre Battle of Lake Tanganyika [Mimi and Toutou’s Big Adventure]* (novel) 2004

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## CRITICISM

**Hilary Mantel (essay date 19 March 1998)**

SOURCE: Mantel, Hilary. “Number One Id.” *London Review of Books* 20, no. 6 (19 March 1998): 21.

[In the following essay, Mantel profiles Foden’s main narrator—Nicholas Garrigan—in the novel *The Last King of Scotland*.]

When in the mid-Eighties I lived in the port of Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, I lived in a city policed by gossip and run by rumour. While its citizens, flapping in white robes and black veils and wrappings, glided through the streets like formal ghosts, its guest-workers crept through their contracts, guided by intuitions as evanescent and mysterious as those of spiritualists. Perplexing questions hung in the still air. Some hung there year after year: who killed the nurse Helen Smith? Some were of immediate import: where has the main post office gone this week? Some were insoluble, questions almost too puzzling to pose: where, oh where, is Idi Amin?

The Uganda dictator, driven out by Tanzanian troops in 1979, had been offered refuge by a regime more merciful than others—or perhaps by a regime that was beyond embarrassment. But where did the Saudis hide him? How in that monochrome urban habitat would you disguise a streak of equatorial virescence, and how would you muffle behind the walls of a Red Sea villa the roaring of an imprisoned bull-elephant? The district where he lived was known; or at least, people mentioned it to each other, as if they knew it. Standing outside the Safeway supermarket, liquefying in the evening heat, waiting for prayers to end and the metal shutters to rattle up, I sometimes used to imagine I might see Idi pushing a trolley, among the counters of pallid veal and the glossy flavourless vegetables. Perhaps he had dwindled in exile, I thought. Perhaps his skin is grey and dusty now, and too big for him, perhaps he wears it in swags. Perhaps his many wives bully him and send him out to shop. But I never saw him, and I never heard anyone claim they had: we caught not a glimpse of the manic, blood-stained days of glory of ‘His Excellency President for Life Field Marshal Al Hadj Doctor Idi Amin Dada, Conqueror of the British Empire in Africa in General and Uganda in Particular’.

To perceive Amin as something more than a fugitive wraith, or a sick joke, you must turn to Giles Foden’s first novel. Its title suggests the endless scope for macabre comedy that Amin provides. As a former soldier in the British Army, he had done part of his training in Stirling, and admired the Scottish officers he had met; he understood the part that empire-building Scots had played in Uganda’s history, and recognised their pioneering qualities even if he was forced, as an anti-imperialist, to deprecate them. These Caledonian connections were enough for Amin to proclaim himself a proponent—indeed a leader—of Scottish nationalism, and of Welsh nationalism and Irish nationalism, just by the way. But it was the Scottish tradition with which he most identified, and with which he identified his hapless countrymen. One of the most bizarre moments in *The Last King of Scotland* occurs when the narrator, Nicholas Garrigan, is picnicking out in the hills with his Israeli girlfriend, Sara:

as if from nowhere a detachment of soldiers in full Scottish paraphernalia—kilts, sporrans, white-and-red chequered gaiters, drums and pipes—appeared over a hill . . . Around their tunics of khaki drill were navy blue cummerbunds, and on each head sat a tall red fez with a black tassel . . . we might well have thought they were nothing but ghosts . . . Except that the music kept on for miles later . . . Dumbstruck, we watched them march down the track to town, their outlandish figures getting smaller and smaller.

'Dumbstruck' is an adjective that suits Nicholas, one he would choose. Paralysis is his mode, and there is a corresponding numbness in the telling of his story. Foden has had to make difficult choices, and has veered away from comedy. Perhaps it is crass to make comedy out of Amin. After all, in the eight years of his reign, Uganda's economy was crippled, the rule of law broke down, and a very large number of people were killed.

How large? Well, between 80,000 and 500,000, suggests the press release which comes with the novel. An approximation so wild tells its own version of the truth. Any account of these years will be approximate, patchy, partial, both because truth is the first casualty of war and because the desire to find patterns, to impose patterns, is more driving and insistent than the desire to assemble facts. In the face of violent death, whatever the numbers involved, we do tend to demand explanations. Garrigan is short of them. That this should be so, testifies to Foden's seriousness of purpose. It does mean, however, that at crucial points his novel has a flatness that leaves the reader stranded.

Nicholas is a young doctor sent to Uganda to work for the Ministry of Health on a contract from the Overseas Development Agency. He arrives in Kampala on the very eve of Amin's coup, in January 1971. From his hotel room—he is slightly drunk, and fighting off cockroaches—he hears Amin's tanks rumbling through the night. Seconded to a clinic in the west of the country, he spends two years in the bush, wearing his 'undertaker's suit' of sweat and his expatriate uniform of bland conformity. When a British diplomat asks him to keep an eye on the local situation and report back, Nicholas doesn't see that there's anything to keep an eye on. When he complains that 'something in me had begun to close down,' the reader wonders: 'when was it open?'

What has made Nicholas as he is? There are hints at a repressed Scottish childhood, conventional enough. He is not successful with women, perhaps because he misreads signals and moves towards them at the wrong time. He is a list-maker, a bit of a bore; his company can be wearing. When he is recalled to Kampala to become the President's personal physician, we know that he will not be adequate in any way to meet the surprises that may lie ahead. There is a vacancy in him, a hollow that we know will be filled up by the overflowing charisma of what he calls 'the number one id'.

Garrigan's new master is six foot six inches tall and weighs 20 stone. He is in the rudest of health. There is no truth, Garrigan says, in the popular rumour—popular in the West, anyway—that Amin is syphilitic. This is the explanation that the white world contrived for his grandiloquence, his grandiosity: that these traits are manifestations of tertiary syphilis. It is a folk-belief that might have merited more attention from Amin's doctor, more comment. For it introduced two comfortable notions: that Amin's famous sexuality was poisoned and that he would soon be dead. But it avoided the more uncomfortable question of how far the dictator's pomp mirrored and mocked the pomp of the British Empire. Where else did he learn the style? That Amin should sport a row of medals (including a fake Victoria Cross) is not inherently sillier than that a row of medals should be worn by, say, Prince Phillip, or the Grand Old Duke of York. Medals mean what you want them to mean, and Amin is sincere in his desires. He is sincere when he lectures or comforts other rulers, when he suggests to Richard Nixon that he should come to Uganda to recuperate after Watergate, when he congratulates Mrs Thatcher on her fresh, charming and attractive appearance in her victory photographs. Her election as Tory leader exercises his mind, and the fall of Mr Heath is constantly before him: by Mrs Thatcher's triumph, he mourns, Heath was 'consigned to the obscure rank of bandmaster'. There is something almost loveable in his determination to understand the world in his own way; until one reads of the secret torture cells, the mutilated corpses found in the bush.

Amin is complicit, in his lordly way, with the white myth of the out-of-control black man. What makes Nicholas Garrigan so peculiarly suited to his role as Amin's puppet? Is it the determinism of his Presbyterian background? Amin believes the will of God propels him through this world. Foden does not suggest that Nicholas does anything wicked—not on his own account. But he is Amin's witness: what is the role of witnesses? When Amin finds he is keeping a journal he imprisons him for one night, under horrific circumstances, but shortly afterwards contracts to tell him his life story, which Garrigan will record on tape. He will be at Amin's side until his downfall, a court jester with no jokes, a fool with no repertoire. Was he complicit? This is the question the world is going to ask him, when finally he arrives back in Britain, a sick and stateless refugee. At the least, he has been a bystander, he did not speak out at the time, and will not speak out in the future, because the British Government has gagged him.

Nicholas Garrigan is not a good man, though not an especially bad man either. He is not admirable, and not sympathetic; by the end, we see that he is not despicable either. Foden is taking a risk in making him the narrator of his own tale. He knows that only a straightforward and rather plodding manner will suit Nicholas, and this

makes for a single-paced narrative that fails to generate excitement. So what is the use of Nicholas as a narrator? He is the young Englishman abroad, white-skinned and squeamish despite his profession; the reader can squirm along with him. He is naive: while he is being told things, the reader can be told things too. Foden exploits this convenience a little too often. The newly-arrived doctor hears two people talking in a bar (in English, we presume) about the merits and drawbacks of the new guy, Amin, as against his predecessor, President Obote; for our benefit they rehearse it like two practised dialecticians.

These characters are devices. It is good to meet Angol Steve, proprietor of the 'Uganda equator refreshment centre'—which is to say, a cool-box: he is the book's chief charmer. He is an interlude, and we are soon being bored back into Garrigan's version of the world. Foden's expatriates, though, are not formulaic. They are credible, not caricatures. His own family went to Africa when he was five years old, and he has lived in various countries, including Uganda. He knows how white expats keep their careful blinkers on, and he understands that blinkers are a useful device: they stop you from jumping out of your skin at every half-seen thing.

Out of my own experience of post-colonialism overheard, I jibbed only once at Foden's account. When Nicholas arrives in his bush-clinic, having witnessed Amin's coup, the senior doctor asks him: 'Were you scared?' I do not think that in the Seventies this was a possible question for one Brit to put to another. What if the answer was 'yes'? The proper formulation for this discussion is:

'Were you worried at all?'

'No, I wouldn't say exactly *worried* . . .

Behind Garrigan's whole life—even when he is up-country, absorbed with innocent parasites and worms—there is a set of entanglements darker than any to be found in the deepest recess of a suffering African belly. When Amin displaced Obote, the British welcomed him, they ushered him in. He is described to Nicholas as 'one of our own. If not too bright.' Foden describes sharply the diplomats who stand on their dignity, the diplomats who, when that dignity is injured, turn malign. First they entice Garrigan. He is Amin's doctor, his personal servant. Could he not tranquillise him daily? Perhaps that would make him less interested in nationalising British companies. But then: could he not kill him?

Nicholas refuses. His motives are always ambiguous, even to himself. Fear of the consequences? Respect for the rules of his profession? A perverse love for Amin, with 'his jaunty sophistry, his brilliant tongue'? In the

end, the reader falls into a perverse fellow-feeling with a man who admits so much ill-use, who is so unequal to the demands made of him. Nicholas Garrigan is a man unequal to the times he is living through. A state apparatus is used without mercy, first to entice him, then to scare him, then to silence him. It is used twice over, first in Uganda, then in England. He is, in both cases, a colonised person, and his lack of assertion may reflect it. He ends in solitude, back in Scotland, hiding out in an island bothy: 'I know that most of my life is behind me now, just as Amin's is. I wonder how he will live, what shape that life will take.' It is an unemphatic, jaundiced conclusion, and unheroic, as it must be: a conclusion that seems to prepare Nicholas Garrigan for the silence of history, and Amin for Jeddah's sickly light.

#### Merle Rubin (review date 17 December 1998)

SOURCE: Rubin, Merle. "Charisma Overwhelms a Good Man's Revulsion." *Christian Science Monitor* (17 December 1998): 20.

[In the following review, Rubin considers the question of why Nicholas Garrigan does not participate in a plot to poison Idi Amin in *The Last King of Scotland*.]

The story told by British journalist and first-time novelist Giles Foden in *The Last King of Scotland* is about a distinctly unheroic hero, a Scottish civil servant, who becomes the personal physician to the Ugandan dictator and mass killer Idi Amin.

The son of a Presbyterian minister, Nicholas Garrigan arrives in Uganda fresh out of medical school in 1971.

He is looking for exotic adventures and an opportunity to help people. Before long, he is called upon to leave his clinic in the countryside to serve as Amin's personal doctor.

When the horrors being perpetrated by the dictator become known, Garrigan is asked to participate in a plot to poison the murderous megalomaniac. But Garrigan can't bring himself to harm this charismatic man he has come to think of as his personal friend.

Even later, when he sees firsthand evidence of the atrocities, Garrigan can't bring himself to act.

Still later, in a Hamlet-like moment when he actually finds himself really wanting to do it, he decides against it, telling himself that such a deed would make him too much like Amin.

Now, as he recounts his story years later, having returned to his native Scotland, Garrigan is a broken man, haunted by memories of Amin, Uganda, and his own inadequacies.



In Garrigan, Foden has created a character whom many may find uncomfortably close to home: a well-meaning individual who becomes an accomplice to evil.

Garrigan himself is not quite sure how he ended up in this position. Was he, as he might wish to believe, too humane a person to injure anyone, even a mass murderer? Or was it, as he also suspects, a combination of simple cowardice and not wanting to get his hands dirty? And might it not have been his own lack of a moral compass and sense of identity that made him so susceptible to the dictator's charisma?

An incident in a bus when he first arrives in Uganda serves to epitomize Garrigan's problem. He is the only white passenger on a crowded, ramshackle bus, which is stopped and boarded by some rag-tag soldiers bent on intimidation and robbery. Garrigan gives them the money they demand.

They proceed to bully the only other well-dressed passenger, a black man who says he is a Kenyan diplomat and refuses to let them have his briefcase. The soldiers beat him savagely, grab his case, and make off with it.

When Garrigan goes over to minister to the wounded Kenyan, the diplomat fiercely rebuffs him: "What good are you to me now? You said nothing when you should have come forward. . . . You did not step forward when you had the power."

Although the novelist exercises some measure of restraint in dealing with the gruesome subject matter he has chosen to treat, this is not a novel for the squeamish.

It does, however, raise interesting—and disturbing—questions about why good people sometimes lack the will to prevent what they know to be evil.

### Brooke Allen (review date April 1999)

SOURCE: Allen, Brooke. "Illustrations of Inertia and Compromise." *New Criterion* (April 1999): 60-4.

[In the following excerpt, Allen discusses Garrigan's failure to intervene in the events described in *The Last King of Scotland*.]

With his dark and gruesome first novel *The Last King of Scotland*,<sup>1</sup> the young British author Giles Foden has created a complex picture of one man's corruption, corruption in the form not of an ignoble act but of an ignoble failure to act. Like Germany under Hitler, Uganda under Idi Amin was a country of unimaginable horror and bloodlust, eerily like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Why did so many people who were in a position to resist Amin fail to do so? Why, for that matter,

did the international community allow him to hold on to power for so long? The question seems unanswerable; Foden's thoughtful novel, though, hazards a guess.

It is 1971 and Nicholas Garrigan, a recent graduate of the medical school at the University of Edinburgh, has arrived in Uganda to work as a Ministry of Health doctor in a bush station. He has left home under a cloud; his father, a strict Presbyterian minister, had hoped that he would stay and practice in their native village of Fossiemuir. Nicholas arrives in Kampala on the very day that Major General Idi Amin and the country's armed forces seize power from Milton Obote, a putsch condoned and supported by the Western powers made nervous by Obote's pro-Russian leanings. As the novel opens, riots and skirmishes are breaking out all over the country.

Nicholas's mettle is tested almost immediately, as he travels up-country in a crowded *matatu*, or bush taxi, and a marauding soldier holds up the vehicle and brutalizes one of the passengers, a visiting Kenyan. Nicholas, as the sole *mzungu* (white man), could probably have safely spoken up for the Kenyan, but he chickens out. His failure to act, unfortunately, indicates the course his life will take throughout his residence in the country.

A couple of years after his arrival in Uganda, Nicholas by a fluke happens to be on the scene when Amin is slightly injured in a car accident, and he is brought in to attend to the wound. The dictator takes a shine to the young man, partly because Amin perversely insists on identifying Uganda with Scotland—both long-suffering victims, as he sees it, of British imperialism—and invites him to Kampala to become his personal physician. Thus Nicholas finds himself at Amin's side as the infamous reign of terror begins.

Like Hitler, Amin has a sick charisma, and Nicholas finds him hard to resist. "My life had already fallen into a pattern that concentrated on Amin," he recalls. "The closer I got to him, the fewer my illusions about him—and still I stayed, more fascinated than frightened." Nicholas's closeness to Amin could make him uniquely useful to the latter's enemies, and before long he is approached by the intelligence man at the British High Commission, who asks him to administer tranquilizers to the tyrant. A not unreasonable request: but Nicholas, or so he claims, is "shocked." Later, as Amin's madness intensifies, the British go further and ask the doctor to kill him outright. Again he professes shock: "Doctors don't do that sort of thing. We take an oath, you know."

"I'm just doing a simple job," I said. "I'm not getting in anyone's way."

"Well, you should be getting in the way. You should be getting in the way of the killings. The PM says that he must be stopped. It's atrocious what's happening. Law

and order have collapsed, people are disappearing every day. We keep getting reports of massacres of soldiers, they're dumping the bodies in the lake or in mass graves in the forests. It's like Hitler."

"You're exaggerating," I said, irritably. "Nothing is like Hitler."

That statement is untrue, of course; there have been other Hitlers before, and no doubt still more will rise to power in the future. They are inevitably abetted—or "enabled," as the current jargon has it—by lackeys like Nicholas Garrigan, whose failure to intervene, Foden implies, is not due to the understandable impulses of apathy or fear, but to a positive, if hardly conscious, impulse of rage. A dream of Nicholas's foreshadows his complicity: in it, he witnesses "a horrible, Godzilla-like encounter between a cricket and bullfrog—the saw-bones legs of the one, the glaucous eye and long tongue of the other. Where I was in it, spectator or actor, I didn't know, I couldn't tell."

Foden has created a genuinely interesting character in Nicholas, a man almost entirely unadmirable but for whom the author nevertheless retains a certain affection. He doesn't fall into the easy trap of blaming Nicholas's chilly character on his environment, although that environment certainly had a share in forming his largely negative precepts and values: his father, for instance, taught him that the most important thing in life is to minimize the harm done to others (as opposed to giving him the more positive injunction to actively help others). Back in Scotland, after his final and humiliating departure from Uganda, Nicholas is at last able to confront what he is. "Not once, I thought, have you snatched anything glorious or courageous from the world as it passed you by." . . .

#### Note

1. *The Last King of Scotland*, by Giles Foden; Alfred A. Knopf, 336 pages, \$25.

#### Barbara Trapido (review date 4 September 1999)

SOURCE: Trapido, Barbara. "Buller, Beer and Biltong." *Spectator* 283, no. 8926 (4 September 1999): 31.

[In the following review, Trapido praises the meticulous research that Foden completed for *Ladysmith* but finds some of the dialogue labored.]

The Boer War is still with us. It is the reason why English football grounds have terraces called 'the Kop' and why so many people still live in Ladysmith Road and Kimberley Close. It was a large-scale imperial war fought against determined guerrilla soldiers and Britain finally won it only by pouring in some 600,000 troops

from Great Britain and Ireland, New Zealand, Australia and Canada. It was won by a policy of herding Boer women and children into concentration camps, along with their black labourers and servants, followed by wholesale burning of fields and farmhouses. Thirty thousand Boer women and children died in the camps and at least as many blacks.

Only when they perceived that the fabric of their entire society was collapsing, and that the war's continuation threatened to strengthen dispossessed blacks who saw the opportunity to retrieve some of their land, did the Boer leaders finally surrender. It was a war fought, on the British side, with the intention of replacing the inefficient, rural, racist oligarchies of the Boer republics with a more efficient, modern and equally racially oppressive administration, better able to regiment black labour in the interests of the gold-mining industry. The war settlement left black South Africans more denuded than before and set the pattern for the post-1948 apartheid state.

In October 1899, the Boers made a pre-emptive, tactical error by laying siege to Ladysmith, a one-horse, landlocked town in northern Natal. The British, in turn, began the war effort in a spirit of bungling inefficiency and it took General Buller four months to relieve the siege. In dramatising the story of these months Giles Foden has assembled a nicely balanced cast of characters: a one-time Irish Republican activist who keeps the Royal Hotel with the help of his young adult daughters, Bella and Jane, and who works secretly for the Boer cause in a double act with the real-life MacBride, later of the Easter Rising; Torres, an immigrant barber from Portuguese East Africa with a mysterious past; and Tom Barnes, a British trooper caught in the siege, whose letters home to his sister Lizzie provide the book's [*Ladysmith*'s] liveliest sequences.

The migrant Zulu Maseku family is poignantly drawn. Torn apart by the war when Maseku is pressed into service by a Boer commando, [his] only son Wellington concludes the novel by reporting from the cells during the Treason Trials in 1960. His whole life as a black South African has, he writes, been 'one long siege'. Churchill features here as the bold young journalist-impresario, and Gandhi has two walk-on parts: An unnamed British woman radical—presumably Emily Hobhouse—visits a concentration camp and expresses the view that the British are pursuing a policy of extermination. In addition, the author has made good use of his family papers and those of three journalists who reported from the besieged town.

*Ladysmith* is fascinating on period detail; on the telegraph and on early war photography and, as the siege begins to bite, on daily life spent enduring grey trek-ox stew and shellfire and waterlogged tunnels. The

book has been scrupulously researched, even down to Wellington Maseku's mission school in Groutville, but it doesn't always avoid the problems that attend historical novels. A well-researched story can read more like research than like real life at times, and the characters here are often subservient to the story. Stylistically, *Ladysmith* is not equal to Foden's brilliant and original first novel about Idi Amin, *The Last King of Scotland*. All its authentic references to Castle beer and biltong are somewhat laboured compared with the glories of the first novel's 'Shongololo Bar and Eating House', or with the way Amin's egomaniac and brutal charm serve to drive that story. Some of the characters here talk in sentences that read as if plucked from their own written memoirs and occasionally they speak merely to inform the reader. This is Bella at the hairdresser:

I think the gold people and the diamond people in the Cape want to get their hands on the Boer fields. Father says that Sir Alfred Milner, the Cape Governor, is in cahoots with them, to get money for Empire and that's why he's so keen on the war.

*Ladysmith* is ambitious, lively and readable. It isn't *The Last King of Scotland* and will attract a different readership. Given its coinciding with the centenary of the siege, that readership will be large. And the movie will be the biggest thing in Kwa-Zulu Natal since Stanley Baker's *Zulu*.

#### Toby Mundy (review date 6 September 1999)

SOURCE: Mundy, Toby. "Siege Mentality." *New Statesman* (6 September 1999): 56-7.

[In the following review, Mundy argues that, in *Ladysmith*, Foden is more successful in describing story and plot details than in creating vivid characters.]

When the Boers declared war almost exactly 100 years ago, propagandists in Britain declared confidently, as they would do again 15 years later, that it would all be over by Christmas. Instead, as Thomas Pakenham has shown in his classic history of the conflict, the South African war that began in October 1899 cost more than £200 million and ended the lives of 22,000 British soldiers, up to 35,000 Boers (including as many as 28,000 men, women and children in British concentration camps) and at least 12,000 black Africans. It was the bloodiest, most expensive and, at two-and-three-quarter years, longest war in which Britain was involved between 1815 and 1914. In its immediate aftermath there was a deluge of diaries, multi-volume histories and novels. But now the South African war has been all but erased from the British popular imagination, its moral ambiguities overshadowed by the two huge conflicts that subsequently dominated the 20th century.

One suspects that few today learn at school about the confrontation that its contemporaries misrepresented as "a gentleman's war" and "a white man's war". Giles Foden's second novel [*Ladysmith*], following his prize-winning debut, *The Last King of Scotland*, is an audacious and valuable corrective: a meticulous recreation of the Boer war and a memorable panorama of a world in transition.

Ladysmith is the Natal town where, for 118 days, a population of nearly 14,000 British soldiers and 5,500 civilians (including nearly 2,500 Africans and 300 Indians) was pinned down by the Boer General Joubert and his huge artillery batteries. Foden tells the stories of a great gang of characters, some fictional "and some drawn from history", among them the radical journalist Henry Nevinson of the *Daily Chronicle*, the *Daily Mail*'s George Steevens, who died slowly of typhoid during the siege, a gnomic Mahatma Gandhi and the young Winston Churchill in swashbuckling mode.

The white-hot pieces of shrapnel that burst out of the Boer shells slice through the thin membrane enclosing Victorian civilisation. The old order of deference, privilege, decorum and cleanliness is fleetingly swept away, affording the people of Ladysmith a glimpse of the new ways in which races, classes and sexes will relate to each other in the 20th century. Two sisters are able to give expression to their budding sexuality, while a young homosexual is drawn out of the closet. Foden summons up effectively the claustrophobia of life under siege and the humiliation and dreadful expectation it engenders, while his descriptions of the sound of a shell screaming through the air, the bloody mutilations of battle and the surreal horror of what happens to people's bodies when a missile packed with metal shards explodes overhead are vivid.

*Ladysmith* bears comparison with J. G. Farrell's Booker prize-winning novel of the Indian mutiny, *The Siege of Krishnapur*, even if it does not quite match Farrell's for wit or grandeur. And Foden's themes are very different: *Ladysmith* is an enclosed order, a means by which to investigate the deontic values of obligation, permissibility and loyalty. As events develop, the fidelity of individual characters to the ideals of empire and country, comradeship, community and family are tested to breaking point. Yet Foden's own fidelity to his characters, their humanity and three-dimensional integrity, is found wanting in *Ladysmith*. His pellucid account of the material effects of the siege is impressive, but his characters' responses to it seem strangely flat. True, there is an outbreak of sensuality among the young, but older figures seem oddly robust and consistent. One can understand why Foden allows his great historical actors to speechify; what is more difficult to grasp is quite why he is unable to represent with full emotional and moral force the effects that