

All Our Yesterdays

by Richard Dawkins

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Evolutionist Richard Dawkins found heroes and inspiration for the future, too, when he returned to Kenya to search for his roots, our species' ancestors, and a well-loved childhood garden.

EARLIEST memories can build a private Eden, a lost garden to which there is no return. The name Mbagathi conjured up myths in my mind. Early in the war my father was called from the colonial service in Nyasaland (now Malawi) to join the army in Kenya. My mother disobeyed instructions to stay behind in Nyasaland and drove with him, along rutted dust roads and over unmarked and fortunately unpoliced borders, to Kenya, where I was later born and lived until I was two. My earliest memory is of the two whitewashed thatched huts that my parents built for us in a garden, near the small Mbagathi River with its footbridge where I once fell into the water. I have always dreamt of returning to the site of this unwitting baptism, not because there was anything remarkable about the place, but because my memory is void before it.

That garden with the two whitewashed huts was my infant Eden and the Mbagathi my personal river. But, on a larger timescale, Africa is Eden to us all, the ancestral garden whose Darwinian memories have been carved into our DNA over some 15m years until our recent worldwide Out of Africa diaspora. It was at least partly the search for roots, our species' ancestors and my own childhood garden, that took me back to Kenya last December.

My wife, Lalla, happened to sit next to Richard Leakey at a lunch to launch his *The Origin of Humankind* and by the end of the meal he had invited her (and me) to spend Christmas with his family in Kenya. Could there be a better beginning to a search for humanity's roots than a visit to the Leakey family on their home ground? We accepted gratefully. On the way, we spent a few days with an old colleague, the economic ecologist Dr Michael Norton-Griffiths and his wife, Annie, in their house at Langata, near Nairobi, which proved to be a paradise of bougainvillea and lush green gardens, marred only by the evident necessity for the Kenyan equivalent of the burglar alarm the armed askari, hired to patrol the garden at night by every householder who can afford the luxury.

I didn't know where to start in quest of my lost Mbagathi. I knew only that it was somewhere near greater Nairobi. That the city had expanded since 1943 was only too obvious. For all I could tell, my childhood garden might languish under a car park or an international hotel. At a neighbour's carol-singing party I cultivated the greyest and most wrinkled guests, seeking an old brain in which the name of Mrs Walter, the philanthropic owner of our garden, or that of Grazebrooks, her house, might have lodged. Though intrigued at my quest, none could help. Then I discovered that the stream below the Norton-Griffiths' garden was named the Mbagathi River. There was a steep red-soil track down the hill and I made a ritual pilgrimage. At the foot of the hill, not 200yd from where we were living, was a small footbridge and I stood and sentimentally watched the villagers returning home from work over the Mbagathi River.

I don't, and probably never shall know, if this was "my" bridge, but it probably was my river, for rivers outlive human works. I never discovered my garden and I doubt if it survives. Human memory is frail, our traditions as erratic as Chinese whispers and largely false; written records crumble and, in any case, writing is only millenniums old. If we want to follow our roots back through the millions of years, we need more persistent race memories. Two exist, fossils and DNA hardware and software. The fact that our species now has a hard history is largely to the credit of one family, the Leakeys: the late Louis Leakey, his wife Mary, their son Richard and his wife Maeve. It was to Richard and Maeve's holiday house at Lamu that we were going for Christmas.

The engagingly filthy town of Lamu, one of the strongholds of Islam bordering the Indian ocean, lies on a sandy island close to the mangrove fringes of the coast. The imposing waterfront recalls

Evelyn Waugh's Matodi in the first chapter of *Black Mischief*. Open stone drains, grey with suds, line streets too narrow for wheeled traffic, and heavily laden donkeys purposefully trot their unsupervised errands across the town. Skeletal cats sleep in patches of sun, black-veiled women, like crows, walk obsequiously past gentlemen lording it on their front doorsteps, talking the heat and the flies away. Every four hours the muezzins (nowadays they are recorded on cassette tapes concealed in the minarets) caterwaul for custom. Nothing disturbs the marabou storks at their one-legged vigil round the abattoir.

We left the high plateau of Nairobi for the heat of Lamu in a creaking, wartime Dakota that had first seen service when I was crawling out of the Mbagathi River. The unpaved landing strip is across the water from Lamu, and Richard and Maeve Leakey met us in a small motorboat. We beached below their house some way from the town and their younger daughter Samira (an appropriately pretty Swahili name) waded out to help carry our luggage up the sand. At the veranda we dropped our shoes and rinsed our feet in stone troughs before mounting the steps.

There we met Samira's equally delightful sister, Louise, who is studying fossils at Bristol University, and the other guests of this hospitable family.

The Leakeys are white Kenyans, not English, and they built their house in the Swahili style (this is native Swahili country, unlike most of Kenya where the Swahili language is a lingua franca spread by the Arab slave trade). It is a large, white, thankfully cool cathedral of a house, with an arched veranda, tiles and rush matting on the floor, no glass in the windows, no hot water in the pipes and no need for either. The whole upstairs floor (reached by irregularly cut outside steps) is a single flat area furnished only with rush mats, cushions and mattresses, completely open to the warm night winds and the bats diving past Orion. Above this airy space, raised high on stilts, is the unique Swahili roof, thatched with reeds on a lofty superstructure of palm logs, intricately lashed together with thongs.

Richard Leakey is a robust hero of a man, who actually lives up to the cliché, "a big man in every sense of the word". Like other big men, he is loved by many, feared by some, and not over-preoccupied with the judgments of any. He lost both legs in a near-fatal air crash in 1994, at the end of his rampantly successful years crusading against poachers. As director of the Kenya Wildlife Service, he transformed the previously demoralised rangers into a crack fighting army with modern weapons to match those of the poachers and, more importantly, with an esprit de corps and a will to hit back at them. In 1989 he persuaded President Moi to light a bonfire of more than 2,000 seized tusks, a uniquely Leakeyan masterstroke of public relations that did much to destroy the ivory trade and save the elephant. But jealousies were aroused by his international prestige, which helped raise funds for his department money that other officials coveted. Hardest to forgive, he conspicuously proved it possible to run a big department in Kenya efficiently and without corruption. Leakey had to go, and he did. Coincidentally, his plane had unexplained engine failure and now he swings along on two artificial legs (with a spare pair with flippers specially made for swimmings). He again races his sailing boat with his wife and daughters for crew, he lost no time in regaining his pilot's licence, and his spirit will not be crushed. If Richard Leakey is a hero, he is matched in elephant lore by that legendary and redoubtable couple Iain and Oria Douglas-Hamilton. Iain and I had been students of the great naturalist Niko Tinbergen at Oxford, as had Mike Norton-Griffiths. It was a long time since we had met, and the Douglas-Hamiltons invited Lalla and me to Lake Naivasha for the final part of our holiday. He is the son of a dynasty of warlike Scottish lairds and, more recently, ace aviators; she, the daughter of equally swashbuckling Italian-French adventurers in Africa. Iain and Oria met romantically and lived dangerously. They know wild elephants better than anyone and raised their baby daughters to play fearlessly among them. They fought the ivory trade with words and the poachers with guns.

Oria's parents, explorers and elephant hunters in the 1930s, built Sirocco, the "pink palace", a stunning monument to art-deco stylishness on the shores of Lake Naivasha, where they settled to farm 3,000 acres. When they died, the place fell into disrepair for 10 years, until a determined Oria, against all economic advice, returned. The farm, though no longer 3,000 acres, now thrives again,

at immense cost in hard work. Not content with this load, Oria has founded a family planning clinic for thousands of working women from the surrounding area. She takes paying guests (mostly small groups or honeymooners seeking and finding their own Garden of Eden) in Olerai, an idyllic smaller house, whitewashed, covered with flowers and set amid yellow fever trees, separated from Sirocco by the magnificent jacaranda avenue. Iain flies his tiny plane home every weekend from Nairobi, where he runs his newly formed charity, Save the Elephants. The family were all at Sirocco for Christmas and we were to join them for New Year.

Our arrival was unforgettable: music was thumping through open doors (Vangelis's score for 1492 I later chose it for Desert Island Discs), and the assembled company of 20 guests was about to sit down to a characteristic lunch of lake crayfish risotto. We looked out over the terrace at the small paddock where, 25 years before, uninvited and unexpected, Iain had landed his plane to the terrified incredulity of Oria's parents and their guests at a similarly grand luncheon party. At dawn the morning after this sensational entrance into her life, Oria had, without hesitation, taken off with Iain for the shores of Lake Manyara, where the young man had begun his now famous study of wild elephants, and they have been together ever since. Their story is told in their two books, the idyllic *Among the Elephants* and the more sombre *Battle for the Elephants*.

Lalla and I both fell in love with the Douglas-Hamilton daughters, Saba and Dudu, now grown up. Wild elephants must make wonderful nursery companions for young humans. On the veranda, staring towards Mount Longonot, is the skull of Boadicea, giant matriarch of Manyara, mother or grandmother of so many of Iain's study animals, victim of the poaching holocaust, her skull devotedly strapped into the back seat of Iain's plane and flown to its final rest, overlooking a peaceful garden.

Every night during our stay at Naivasha, Iain led out a party with torches to spot the hippos rumbling and grunting up from the lake to graze the garden (and, on one occasion before we arrived, fall into the swimming pool). Our time at Naivasha was paradise. The only false note in its music was an ugly rumour that a leopard had been snared on a neighbouring farm and was painfully dragging the snare somewhere in the area. Grown quiet with anger, Iain took down his gun, called for the best Masai tracker on Oria's farm, and we set off in an ancient Land Rover.

The plan was to find the leopard by tracking and by questioning witnesses, lure it into a trap, nurse it back to health and release it again on the farm. Knowing no Swahili, I could gauge the progress of Iain's cross-examinations only by facial expressions, tones of voice, and his occasional summaries for my benefit. We eventually found a young man who had seen the leopard, though he denied it at first. Iain whispered to me that such initial denials baffling to my naive straightforwardness were ritual and normal. Eventually, without for a moment acknowledging that he had changed his story, the youth would lead us to the scene. Sure enough he did, and there the Masai tracker spotted leopard hairs and a possible spoor. He bounded, doubled up, through the papyrus reeds, followed by Iain and me. Just when I thought we were hopelessly lost, we re-emerged at our starting point. The trail had gone cold.

By similarly roundabout verbal skirmishings we tracked down a more recent witness, who led us to another clearing in the papyrus, and Iain decided that here was the best site for a trap. He telephoned the Kenya Wildlife Service and they came, within the day, with a large iron cage filling the back of a Land Rover. Its door was designed to clang shut when the bait of meat was tugged. At dead of night we lurched and bumped through the papyrus and hippo dung, camouflaged the trap with foliage, laid a trail of raw meat to its entrance, baited it with half a sheep and went to bed.

The next day, Lalla and I were due to return to Nairobi and we left with the trap still baited, having attracted nothing more substantial than a marsh mongoose. Iain flew us in his little plane, hopping over steaming volcanic hills and down lake-filled valleys, over zebras and (almost under) giraffes, scattering the dust and the goats of the Masai villages, past the hilltop graves of Diana Delves-Broughton and most of the characters in *White Mischief*, skirting the Ngong hills to Nairobi. We buzzed the ever generous Norton-Griffiths in Langata as the signal to them to meet us at

Wilson airport, where we also chanced to run into Maeve Leakey. She has now largely taken over the running of the fossil-hunting work from Richard, and she offered to introduce us to our ancestors in the vaults of the Kenya National Museum. This rare privilege was arranged for the next day, the morning of our departure for London.

The great archeologist Schliemann "gazed upon the face of Agamemnon". Well, good, the mask of a Bronze Age chieftain is a fine thing to behold. But as Maeve Leakey's guest I have gazed upon the face of KNM-ER 1470 (*Homo habilis*) who lived and died 20,000 centuries before the Bronze Age began. Each fossil is accompanied by a meticulously accurate cast that you are allowed to hold and turn over as you look at the priceless original. The Leakeys told us that their team was opening up a new site at Lake Turkana, with fossils 4m years old, older than any hominids so far discovered. In the week that I write this, Maeve and her colleagues have published in *Nature* the first harvest of this ancient stratum: a newly discovered species, *Australopithecus amartensis*, represented by a lower jaw and various other fragments. The new finds suggest that our ancestors were already walking upright 4m years ago, surprisingly close (to some) to our split from the lineage of chimpanzees. Since we left Kenya, Richard Leakey has founded a new political party, dedicated to destroying corruption in Kenyan public life. He and his party have been subjected to a sustained campaign of vilification and verbal attacks. He has been accused of everything under the sun including colonialism, "atheism" as though it were a crime and, absurdly, "racism". Apart from being famously incorruptible and unracist, this third-generation Kenyan's unique appeal in his country's politics is his conspicuous immunity from the tribalism that is Africa's dominant form of racism. Recently he was dragged out of his car a man with no legs and only one (donated) kidney, a scholar and scientist of international distinction and savagely whipped on his back and shoulders. Lalla telephoned him when we read the news (in a tiny inside-page paragraph, for the outrage was strangely under-reported in Britain) and found him insouciant as one has come to expect. Not a well-chosen candidate for political intimidation. The leopard, Iain later told us, never came to the trap. He had feared that it would not, for the evidence of the second witness suggested that, fatally hobbled by the snare, it was already near death from starvation. For me, the most memorable part of that leopard-tracking day was my conversation with the two black rangers from the Kenya Wildlife Service who brought the trap. I was deeply impressed by the efficiency, humanity and dedication of these men. They were not allowed to let me photograph their operation, and they seemed a little reserved until I mentioned the name of Dr Leakey, their former leader, now in the political wilderness. Their eyes immediately lit up. "Oh, you know Richard Leakey? What a wonderful man, a magnificent man!" I asked them how the Kenya Wildlife Service was faring nowadays. "Oh well, we soldier on. We do our best. But it is not the same. What a magnificent man!"

We went to Kenya to find the past. We found heroes and inspiration for the future, too.

TRAVEL BRIEF Getting there: British Airways (0345-222111), Air France (0181-742 6600), Kenya Airways (0171-409 0277) and KLM (0181-750 9000) all fly scheduled services to Nairobi; fares from about Pounds 900 in January. Several consolidators including Trailfinders (0171-938 3366) and Travel Bug (0990-737747) have a special fare of Pounds 299 on Air France from January 11 to the end of March, travel must be on Thursdays. Air Kenya (00 254 2-501421) flies daily from Nairobi to Manda island, the nearest airport for Lamu, prices about \$112 (Pounds 73) each way. Health precautions: consult your GP before travel for the necessary vaccinations. You will need to take antimalarial tablets. Tour operators include: Abercrombie & Kent (0171-730 9600), Bales Tours (01306-885991), Elite Vacations (0181-864 4431), Kuoni (01306-740500), Somak Holidays (0181-423 3000), Thomson (0171-707 9000) and Worldwide Journeys & Expeditions (0171-381 8638). For a complete list of operators call the Kenyan Tourism Office. If you would like to stay at the Douglas-Hamiltons' home, Olerai, rates are from \$180 (Pounds 117) per person per day. For further details, call 00 254 2-334868 or fax 332106. Further information: Kenya Tourism Office on 0171-355 3144.