

Dr. Schweitzer of Lambarene
Norman Cousins

A fruitful meeting of two semi-forgotten men of the 1950s, and insight into the sentiments and issues of their age.

This long review covers (1) the book itself, (2) two great figures of the era who are now somewhat obscure, Schweitzer and the author himself, Norman Cousins, and (3) the era. I first read the book as a teen, in 1960. The passage of fifty four years puts its importance in better perspective, and allows me to put the key ideas of the book into historical perspective.

Norman Cousins was the editor of the influential Saturday Review (of Literature) from 1940 to 1971. He was also a dedicated pacifist and crusader against nuclear testing. He had several objectives in visiting Schweitzer's hospital in Lambaréné in 1957. He wanted to interview the great man; he wanted to make photographic copies of two of Schweitzer's books in progress, started a quarter century earlier and existing only in manuscript form, he was delivering greetings from President Eisenhower and a boy who wanted support in saving a historical church organ, and lastly, he wanted a statement from Schweitzer supporting a nuclear test ban. He was successful on all counts.

By his mid-30s Albert Schweitzer, born in 1875, had become a renowned organ interpreter, especially of Johann Sebastian Bach; a physician and surgeon; a respected Christian philosopher and writer on the early church; and most recently, the author of a well-received book on Bach. He used the royalties from that book to launch a fifth career, that of a missionary. He built a hospital on the Ogowe River, about 100 miles inland from the Atlantic coast of French Equatorial Africa, now Gabon.

Lambarene

Already by the time of Norman Cousins' visit in 1957 Schweitzer was something of an anachronism. He was a throwback to what one might benignly call the White Man's Burden. He ran his hospital in an authoritarian fashion, a fact which excited, even in the 1950s, some criticism. His professional staff appears to have been entirely white. Cousins does not report any meetings with native-born professionals in any capacity. Though the French had established some institutions for training their subjects in various professions, Schweitzer did his hiring from the developed world, through a process involving the extensive exchange of letters.

Schweitzer's ability to attract people to his mission and to get them to stay is one of the remarkable things which comes out of this book. Many spent the better part of their lives with him serving the Africans. There was no glory in it to speak of. They worked hard, got no pay, and they did not even get to spend a great deal of time in the presence of Schweitzer himself. There was simply too much work to do, as Schweitzer with his five careers had more than enough to keep himself busy. He died at 90 with incomplete manuscripts that had been hanging fire for decades.

Visitors to the hospital were impressed at how simple it was. It did not have the usual accoutrements such as clean sheets and separate wards. His philosophy was to make it as fully African as he could. He admitted not just a patient but the patient's entire family. He accepted the fact that they cooked their own food and used the jungle for sanitation.

Schweitzer represents the best of the missionary spirit of Christian Europe in the Victorian era. One can ask why these people would spend a lifetime serving Blacks who only sometimes seemed appreciative. The answer has to be a dedication to the Christian life. Cousins does not make any accounting for the number of African souls brought to Christ through this ministry. Instead, the emphasis is on the ennoblement of the Europeans' souls through their selfless work on behalf of the Africans.

One of the most striking and repeated features of the book is the constant battle between the hospital staff and the witch doctors in the surrounding forest. It was a battle for the hearts and souls of the people, one which Schweitzer never won even after 50 years. The natives would come to the white people for treatment often only after all else had failed and it was a true emergency. It appears to have been always against the desires of the witch doctors, and his staff had to be personally quite strong to chase away the fetishists and set things straight.

There is a lesson in this book for people who think of Christians as aloof, holier-than-thou types. There was no chapel at the hospital. Religious services were held out of doors. They were short. They were matter-of-fact. The music was provided by Schweitzer himself on a decades-old, dilapidated upright piano, and by choirs of African lepers who had learned from the Europeans how to sing Western hymns. In any case, there is no account of attempts to evangelize the hospital patients. Permanent residents of the leper colony did put on a nativity play.

Cousins makes an interesting digression about the problems of traveling, such as exposure to exotic diseases and to dysentery and to crowds. This is a valuable insight into the times. 1960 was at the very dawn of the jet age, a time when casual international travel was not very common. Travel to the places that Cousins went, such as Southeast Asia and Africa, was out of the question for almost all of his readers. Reading his observations on international travel give the reader a pretty good insight into the times.

Philosophy

I excerpt here two of Cousins' paragraphs on the philosophy behind Schweitzer's mission:

"There were other thoughts that occurred to me as we flew over the jungle hills of French Equatorial Africa. I considered the matter of Dr. Schweitzer's relationship with the Africans, and the many misconceptions about it that had found their way into print. When the Doctor first came to Lambarene the life of the African had barely been touched by industrial civilization. It was difficult to get Africans to work steadily in putting up the buildings and in doing hard jobs for the Hospital. There was the temptation at first to think that the Africans were naturally lazy. But Dr. Schweitzer very early realized

that it made a difference when one lives in a climate and in an environment where the needs are few. Living close to nature, the African saw no need to work beyond that which was necessary to the immediate well-being and the minimal needs of his family. The idea of putting up extensive buildings, making concrete piles, sawing and storing woods—all this seemed to have little connection with reality as the African lived it. But the lack of incentive did not mean, as Dr. Schweitzer soon came to realize, that the Africans would not work hard under any circumstances.

"Thus, Schweitzer's main achievement is a simple one. He has been willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for a moral principle. Like Gandhi, the power of his appeal has been in renunciation. And because he has been able to feel a supreme identification with other human beings he has exerted a greater force than millions of armed men on the march."

Insights into the 1950s

The book opens with a chapter on Cousins' experiences getting to the hospital in Lambaréné. He traveled to South Africa. This was 1955, a time when apartheid was at its strongest. He writes very perceptively about the internal contradictions of apartheid. He met with white publishers and black reporters working together to attempt to get news distributed to black citizens during this troubled time. He points out the contradictions and ironies, the difficulties encountered such as when his black companion had to cross the street in one place and he had to cross it in another. He talks about the undercurrents of resentment, and the ways in which the Africans even in the mid-50s were no longer content with the relationship that they had long had with the whites.

Contrast this with scientist Richard Dawkins autobiography, [[ASIN:0062225790 An Appetite for Wonder: The Making of a Scientist]]. Dawkins writes of the simple open way in which Africans accepted him and his family in Kenya, and of the freedom with which they could travel everywhere. At about the same time, Cousins is reporting from South Africa, from an adult perspective, about nuances in the changing relationship of whites to blacks. I would recommend this book as a source for people who are interested in how modern Africa evolved to its present state. The seeds were there, and Cousins had a fairly good glimpse, albeit only for a short time. I recommend other books on Africa in these times: Emanuel Derman's [[ASIN:1439164991 Models.Behaving.Badly.: Why Confusing Illusion with Reality Can Lead to Disaster, on Wall Street and in Life]] and Ilana Mercer's [[ASIN:0984907017 Into the Cannibal's Pot: Lessons for America from Post-Apartheid South Africa]], and books by archeologists such as the Leakeys.

According to Wikipedia French Equatorial Africa was founded in 1911. The French administered it until 1958, after Cousins' visit, when it split into independent states. Cousins reported that the staff spent an inordinate amount of time filling out paperwork for French social medicine. He says that the natives enjoyed French citizenship. This appears from the Wikipedia article to have been only partially true. They did, however, have representation in the French Parliament. It is a reminder of the degree to which France attempted, however unsuccessfully, to integrate possessions such as Algeria into the French Republic. It was simply not what the indigenous peoples wanted, anywhere.

In another historical reflection, test ban advocate Cousins writes extensively about the dangers posed by nuclear fallout, especially strontium 90. I was a child in the 1950s, and I remember the high level of fear. I now live in Kiev. Strontium 90 and cesium 137 were the major contaminants produced by the Chernobyl incident in 1986. Fortunately, despite this massive release of dangerous isotopes, only 50 people died at the time and the United Nations puts the excess cancer deaths due to exposure to these contaminants at fewer than 5000. People in Kiev do not pay any attention to it.

Every era has its own worries, its own bogeyman, its own Armageddon scenario. The scenarios in Norman Cousins' time were a nuclear holocaust in which everybody was blown up, and the twin threat of nuclear radiation, by which we all would die from mutations and radiation poisoning. Neither happened. Other menaces were DDT - Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring," the Red Chinese and smog. Somehow we survived. This is not to say that real dangers do not exist, only to note that it is part of the human condition to always worry about something.

Cousins spent a lot of ink on world communism, which was seen as a major threat. That also turned out not to be the case. Today's political threat appears to be Vladimir Putin. Though I live in Ukraine, I'm not overly concerned.

Two other concerns appear very differently now than they did in 1958. The first is racial diversity. Europe is dealing with large numbers of very different types of immigrants. Just as the Gabon natives did not want to remain French in 1958, they are not doing very well at becoming French when they live in Paris, or elsewhere in Europe, in 2014. This failure to assimilate is prompting nationalist movements in every European country to limit immigration. They should have taken a harder look at the lessons of their own history which were quite clear to Cousins half a century ago.

The other major issue, which would not even have crossed Schweitzer's mind, is sexuality. Cousins notes how many attractive single men and women were drawn to Lambarene, then notes that there was no time for romance. He does not record any marriages; I am sure he assumed that they remained chaste. That is what was expected in that age. Throughout the West, he would say that what he would have called the gift of human sexuality is being perverted. Instead of using sexuality to reproduce ourselves, it has become simply a vehicle for amusement. And, in the process, our society is not reproducing itself either in numbers or in spirit. We are not producing new Schweitzers, or even people who would find Schweitzer particularly admirable. If he were listing his worries in 1955, it seems clear that these latter two would have been more appropriate than the ones he was actually concerned with. I'm sure that our descendants will conclude that we also have been worried about the wrong things.

Schweitzer did finish a fairly lengthy article entitled "Peace or Atomic War?" in April 1957. Cousins includes it as a lengthy appendix. He got the letter he sought in favor of saving the historic organ, though there is no note of its effect.