

Somewhere in the atlas

The road to Khe Sanh and other travel pieces

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FRESHWATER BAY PRESS

SOMEWHERE IN THE ATLAS

Perth — Canberra 1956

I had a geography teacher at my school in Perth who used to keep the class awake by a simple gambit. If the eyes in front of him were glazing over, or if something unruly was happening at the back of the room, he would turn to the blackboard and chalk up ‘Samarkand’ or ‘Kathmandu’ or ‘Nairobi’ or some other tantalising name, then call on a member of the class — usually a troublemaker — to say where the place in question was to be found.

When the inevitable head scratchings and series of increasingly wild guesses had run their course, our good-humoured teacher, with the eyes of the class now fully upon him, would inform us sagely that the place was bound to be somewhere in the atlas. One amongst us was delegated to look it up and deliver his findings. I was left with an impression that the atlas contained not only an array of places with unlikely names but was even the key to many riddles.

Since then, in planning a journey or in talking to a travel agent, whenever the name of an obscure destination or departure point floats into view, I confront the problem by uttering the reassuring phrase from schooldays: it’s bound to be somewhere in the atlas. I’m not sure what exactly I mean or hope to gain by

saying it. Perhaps it is simply an incantation, a kind of prayer — the troubles of the soul can be eased by turning to the atlas in the same way as a novice resorts to a revered text. To find out where one is at a given moment bears upon the mystery of who one is — or even of what one may become.

Perhaps that is why my teacher liked the phrase. His name was Harvey Barnett, but it turned out that at the time I knew him he was poised to abandon the role of geography teacher in order to assume a new and more exciting identity. In 1957, as I discovered upon reading his autobiography many years later, he left our school to become a spy. He must have used his atlas and other tools of trade effectively for in due course he was appointed Director General of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation in Canberra. It seems that the title of his memoirs — *Tale of the Scorpion* — was inspired by ASIO's telegraphic address.

The Scorpion! If only I had known this about my geography teacher when I moved East, in the same year as he did, to become a boarder at the Canberra Grammar School. It would have made my last meeting with him less puzzling.

One Canberra morning, soon after my older brother had obtained his driving licence, we set off for Kingston in the family car and finished up in the vicinity of the Russian Embassy. Suddenly, to my astonishment, I saw Mr Barnett (or was it the Scorpion?) sloping along the footpath. I told my brother to stop the car and leapt out, calling my former teacher's name out aloud.

Perhaps he was on his first undercover assignment. Good-humoured and friendly as a rule, on this occasion Mr Barnett seemed slightly flustered, almost furtive. We exchanged a few stilted words and went our separate ways. Somehow I felt reproved.

Now, having read his book, all is forgiven. I like to think that concealed within our brief exchange was a coded message:

‘Leave me. I have important work to do.’ It pleases me to recall that in response to his carefully calibrated body language, my schoolboy self withdrew, tactfully, unobtrusively, leaving him to complete his mission.

And now, since reading *Tale of the Scorpion*, the phrase ‘somewhere in the atlas’ has acquired an extra resonance. In addition to conjuring up images of far places, it hints at information to be gathered, sorties to be undertaken, surveillance to be accomplished, diaries to be kept and decoded. It promises adventures and misadventures.

What has all of this got to do with a book about four journeys undertaken over a period of forty years in different corners of the world — Papua and New Guinea in 1963, China in 1981, Vietnam in 1998 and Bolivia in 2004?

In each case the opportunity to make the journey arose by chance. When I glanced at the itinerary, took in the list of unusual names and places, I murmured my customary incantation and reached for the atlas. In each case I kept a diary as the journey proceeded in the belief that in a small way this was a form of reporting back; bearing witness. Now that I have had occasion to revisit the entries — some of them made many years ago — I tend to think of the journeys as a kind of reconnaissance undertaken on behalf of my older self. I have been obliged to decode the changes within me and in the surrounding world before laying out my jottings as a form of autobiography. For these rather idiosyncratic reasons it seems appropriate that I should use the incantation ‘somewhere in the atlas’ as a title for my book.

This brings me to a theme that binds these four journeys together. In each case the country I visited was in a transition phase. Changes were taking place with a good deal of uncertainty in the air as to what might lie ahead. In each case I have done my best to set the scene and capture the prevailing mood.

This is not a scholarly work, and I make no attempt to rival

the memoirs of the Scorpion or any similar tale. I cannot pretend that my diary entries amount to more than a few quick snapshots of what was going on around me. But I like to think that a book of this kind may prompt others to read further and reflect upon the processes of transition, the ways in which four different countries swerved towards the flow of a changing world.

My areas of interest as I travelled were principally law, literature and politics, but it is not my aim to develop a thesis or to press a particular point of view about such matters. As to each journey, I have included an introductory note simply to indicate the era and to show how the journey came about. I have also added postscripts about some later events in order to round off the narrative. In all other respects I leave the diary entries to speak for themselves. It is a convenient way of telling my story.