

Reviews



A TIME FOR DRUNKEN HORSES

d. Bahman Ghobadi

Like many recent Iranian films, *A Time For Drunken Horses* stresses social obligations above all else for the survival of community - in this case, the stateless Kurdish community. That's why so many Iranian films are told from the perspective of children, the weakest members and the most deserving of protection.

High up in the mountains of the Iran-Iraq border, the members of a small Kurdish village eke out an existence smuggling goods across the line. Ayoub is a 12 year-old boy who must assume responsibility for his family after his father is killed. His mother died a long time ago. Ayoub has five siblings, chief of whom is his sister Amaneh, through whose eyes the story is told; another sister Rojini has reached marriageable age; and his elder brother Mahdi, a retarded dwarf whose survival depends on a constant supply of scarce and costly medications.

The village doctor tells Ayoub that Mahdi's condition (which is not specified) is worsening and he will die unless he undergoes an operation. This can only happen if Ayoub is able to raise money to take Mahdi across the border into Iraq; even with the operation, Mahdi is unlikely to survive more than another 8 months. Despite the knowledge of Mahdi's inevitably

foreshortened life, Ayoub joins the smugglers in order to earn the money.

The smuggling sequences are harrowing. Loading up mules with goods and feeding them vodka and brandy to numb them to the intense cold (the "drunken horses" of the title), the supply trains trudge through blizzards towards Iraq, dodging patrols, ambushes and landmines. At one point, the mules are so intoxicated and so exhausted they fall and are incapable of regaining their legs even as Iraqi troops are firing machine guns from the other side of a snowdrift. Even at the end of the journey there is no guarantee unscrupulous ringleaders will pay up.

A Time For Drunken Horses is a film of extraordinary humanity and dignity, and also of austere alpine beauty. The bleak and hostile environment of the villagers and the hatred of the Iraqi authorities only highlight the great sacrifices Ayoub and his kin make for the survival of their afflicted but precious elder brother. As director Ghobadi stresses in a brief preamble, the harshness of life depicted in this film is the existence he has known as a member of a stateless and oppressed minority most of his life. The wholly non-professional cast use their real names and own clothes, achieving a near-documentary effect; Amaneh wears the same blue-green pullover throughout the film, almost the only splash of colour in a terrain drained of it. Watching the young Ayoub labour through snow and barbed wire on inhospitable borderlands, bearing the crippled Mahdi on his back like St. Christopher, was to witness something deeply moving.

Reviewed by David Bolton





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FIRE, SNOW & HONEY

'Fire, Snow & Honey - Voices from Kurdistan' is like no other book dealing with the subjects of Kurds and Kurdistan. It is therefore destined to be a seminal work and a reference book for both the beginner and the experienced.

At first glance it appears to be a collection of Kurdish Australians' life stories, hopes, fears and aspirations. On closer examination, however, it becomes evident that it is a great deal more than personal accounts of imprisonment, torture, persecution and hopeful thinking. The book is made of insightful essays, meaningful fables, moving and analytical poetry - both contemporary & classic, short fiction and accumulated Kurdish observations expressed as proverbs such as "Grass does not stay under a rock", "The eye can see, but the hand is short" and "A time for rose and a time for primrose" that have been used as headings. Their meanings and impact are enhanced by Mme Danielle Mitterand's powerful foreword and Ms Gina Lennox's well reasoned and reflective introduction. The detailed map of Kurdistan and a lot of historical information will be new to many informed Kurds as well.

The aims of the book and the reasons for its coming into existence appear to be intertwined with the editor's compassion and concern for the plight of the Kurds. They all seem to spring from the notion which Noam Chomsky has crystallised by his saying that, "The first amendment [to the US Constitution] guarantees freedom of speech, but does not guarantee access to microphones." Thus, the Kurdish women and PKK [Kurdistan Workers' party] supporters and sympathisers have hitherto remained silent and/or anonymous in this great free and democratic country. The former due to tradition, lack of the English language, shyness, values and politics and the latter largely due to fear of being labeled 'terrorist' and made

subject to deportation by the Australian Authorities in concert with US State department's pronouncements. This is so despite the fact that, as it is noted in the introduction titled "Why care?", "The nature of PKK is a reaction to the extreme fascism [of Turkish state ideology] Kemalism." It is this ideology that, over 50 years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and in full view of uncaring world leaders, continues to deny the existence of the Kurds and outlaw Kurdish language for electioneering, education of any kind, judicial proceedings, radio & television broadcasting and trade & commerce in local corner shops. Turkey continues to get away with brutalising the Kurds because of her perceived strategic location and gateway to the riches of Central Asia.

The book therefore aims (and I believe surpasses all reasonable expectations in achieving its aim) at letting Kurdish voices, long silenced at home and ignored abroad, to be heard. The voices bring to life the Kurds' rich, diverse & enduring indeed thriving cultural heritage -literature, music, food, religion, life isolated by snow capped mountains, legendary armed struggles, unacknowledged genocides and stolen history, heroes & heroines. The voices also inspire much needed research into how and why a nation of 35-40 million people living on their ancestral homeland have been divided, dispossessed and robbed of their identity and even language.

The title of the book is highly symbolic for the Kurdish people. Fire stands for the annual Newroz (or New day, new year, new era) fires commemorating Kurdish freedom in 612 BC when a blacksmith named Kawa successfully rose up against a foreign tyrant occupying Kurdistan. Kawa lit a fire on a mountaintop to inform the people of his victory and his message was spread by fires on top of other mountains. This tradition continues to our day. Fire in the title also refers to the fires of genocides perpetrated against



the Kurds of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria in the twentieth century. Snow reflects the long and harsh winters where people walk up to their chests in snow, as well as the incredibly beautiful soaring mountain peaks that are covered all year round. Honey is symbolic of the fertile valleys that grow every crop imaginable, the river systems with their sources in Kurdistan that gave rise to some of the earliest agricultural settlements and civilisations, and the oil and mineral wealth which proved to be the twentieth century curse for the Kurdish nation.

The cover of the book is based on an absolutely beautiful painting by Kurdish artist Rebwar Tahir. The book publisher is Halstead Press, Sydney.

Fire Snow & Honey is retailing at Australian bookshops for \$A75.00 but it is available by direct order at a significant discount: \$A45.00 plus \$10.00 for postage within Australia, or \$25.00 postage outside Australia.

Please send cheque, money order or credit card details (number & expiry date) to Fire, Snow & Honey, Halstead Press, Level 5, 19A Boundary Rd, Rushcutters Bay NSW 2011 Australia

or by email to Kurdconference@optusnet.com.au

or by fax: 02-9319-7728 (+612-9319-7728 for international orders)

Reviewed by Eziz Bawermend



Reviews

THE UNINVITED: REFUGEES AT THE RICH MAN'S GATE

by **Jeremy Harding**

(Profile Books/London Review of Books PB 123 pp. r.r.p. \$18.50)

Here is a piece of documentary journalism that asks this question of all Western countries: "How much longer can exclusionary immigration policies work?" This emotive issue is very pertinent to Australia which recently experienced an influx of refugees arriving illegally through Indonesian ports. Generally referred to as "Boat People", these desperate individuals risk their lives aboard overcrowded and flimsy vessels to seek asylum in a land of perceived opportunity.

During the recent Federal election campaign both major parties took a firm stance against "clandestine migration", processing the uninvited in New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Nauru. Often these refugees are thought of as queue-jumpers rather than people who fear for their lives. Jeremy Harding is a senior editor at the London Review of Books and to the Year 2000 followed migrants and refugees in Morocco, Spain, Italy, Kosovo and Albania often accompanying border patrols

Part one of the book deals with refugees trying to reach wealthy countries since the Cold War when populations on the move were in decline. Part two deals with the predicaments of these poor illegal refugees who challenge the rich world.

This volume may be slim (at 123 pages) but not on ideas and his argument is stated clearly: Western European seclusion of peoples from economically poorer countries widens the gulf between rich and poor and is seriously harmful to both.

Here are his facts: More than 150 million people are living outside the country of their birth. Migration and migrants are as diverse as those people who stay in their birth country. For example: professionals who take a post in another country for several years; the labourer who works on a site in Thailand but is contracted by an Indonesian company.

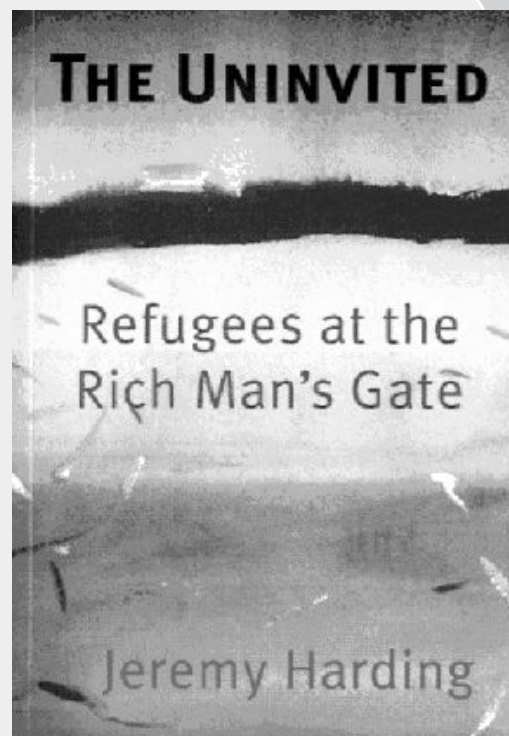
Refugees often seek asylum with migrants sharing their route to safety. Refugees are not necessarily poor but human trafficking organisations often eat up their capital. In the past Western Europe has generously taken refugees without disruption to the host country. Generally, however, Harding argues that refugees have begun to look like thieves or beggars at the rich man's gate with an expensive "game of wits" being played out along the borders.

The profiteers of this moving population around the world are the agents, traffickers and facilitators. In the 1942 movie classic, *Casablanca*, Peter Lorre plays a forger named Ugarte who deals with refugees from Marseilles to Oran hoping to obtain a visa for Lisbon. His character says to Rick (played by Humphrey Bogart): "You object to the kind of business I do, huh? But think of all these poor refugees who must rot in this place if I didn't help them. But that's not so bad. Through ways of my own I provide them with exit visas."

"For a price, Ugarte," Rick replies, "For a price."

Once the stranger arrives in a strange land Harding argues he is on a trial of nothing more palpable than his intentions."

▪ 300,000 arrived in Europe to seek asylum in the Year 2000. By way of



contrast, 4174 reached Australia by boat or plane.

▪ Tanzania hosts one refugee for every 76 citizens - Britain one for every 530 and Australia one for every 1,583.

The Treaty of Amsterdam, which came into affect in May 1999, allows greater scope for redress in cases of human rights violations when refugees are often regarded as a drain on resources.

Attitudes to ethnic migrants change over time, he observes. Once Italians who arrived in northern cities from the south and east of the country were mistrusted much like the North African Albanians and Nigerians are today.

Any reader who is interested in the destiny of the individual must face the magnitude of this human tragedy. Confront the pregnant woman captured at the border who is held in detention only to suicide overnight. Confront the thousands that drown in Indonesian waters or in the Gibraltar Straits. Confront the families that are separated and confront the stowaways asphyxiated in trucks at British ferry ports. A sobering tale by the most sympathetic of journalists.

Reviewed by Peter Bouilly



AUSTRALIA and the response to asylum seekers

Borderline:

Australia's treatment of refugees and asylum seekers by Peter Mares

(UNSW Press, 219p. r.r.p. \$29.95)

Asylum seekers:

Australia's response to refugees by Don McMaster

(Melbourne University Press, 254p. r.r.p. \$38.45)

Protecting the border **Dept. of Immigration & Multicultural Affairs**

<http://www.immi.gov.au>

Sharing the security burden: towards the convergence of refugee protection & state security

by James Milner

<http://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/rsp>

Globalisation, humanitarianism and the erosion of refugee protection by B.S. Chimni

<http://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/rsp>

WISH

***I am angry with these borders
That surround me.
I wish I could live
In the borderless world of
your eyes.***

(A poem by Marif Agha-e, translated from the Kurdish by Kamran Avin)

Recent history (and a Federal election) have painfully illustrated the deficiencies in the international and Australian responses to increases in asylum seekers and refugees, especially those from the Middle East and Afghanistan. Efforts to ensure international protection for refugees have been repeatedly frustrated, as states have expressed an increased reluctance to offer asylum. Nowhere has this been so evident in the last 12 months as in Australia.

The 2 books cited above came out in April/May 2001, that is before the most recent draconian bipartisan legislation on asylum seekers. Nevertheless, they document a horrifying governmental response to those seeking to escape the repressive regimes of Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran in particular. They remind those of us who care that much that mandatory detention was instigated by the Labor Party. They point out that the legislation and government policies have a racist element, and they suggest we have discarded a noble and humane policy with regard to those suffering under political and organised violence.

Both these books are worthwhile, each has its own emphasis, each has its own strengths, both cover the history of Australia's asylum seeker/refugee policy adequately. Each book gives fulsome documentation/case studies of both the implementation and results of government policies. Both books address the psychological consequence to individuals of these policies. *Borderline* is written in a more accessible style than *Asylum seekers* (which was first produced as the author's PhD thesis). *Asylum seekers* emphasises the strong racist undercurrent in the historical and contemporary Australia policies on refugees- the fear of the "other". It is concerned mainly with Asian asylum seekers, with only a few mentions of refugees from the Middle East or Afghanistan. If *Borderline* is a history book then *Asylum seekers* might be considered a psychohistory book, McMaster is concerned with the national psyche, especially the racists aspects, and sees the present attitudes as a continuation of the fear of the "yellow peril" and the White Australia Policy (a number of commentators have point out that if the "Boat people" were white Zimbabwean farmers there would be mass public outrage if we treated them as we have the Afghan and Iraqi refugees).

While both these books give a good summary of government policy

they are, necessarily, 10 months out of date.

If you want to know the present legal position of asylum seekers you should visit the DIMA Web site <http://www.immi.gov.au> - along with *Protecting the border* you will find more recent Fact sheets and Media releases detailing tightening of the legislation that has occurred over the last few months e.g. the Information Kit on the new Border Control Legislation.

Of course, Australia is not alone in having to deal with refugees, even if it is alone in the inhumanity with which it does deal with them. A good source of information on, and discussion of the international ramifications of mass migration is the Refugee Studies Centre at Oxford University <http://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/rsp/>. The site includes papers on the psychological consequences and treatment of refugees, and on the political and economic aspects of refugee policy both national and international.

Two papers of particular interest are:

James Milner's *Sharing the security burden* which addresses the shortcomings of international responses to refugees, and the attempt to distribute more equitably among countries the burden of offering asylum.

B.S. Chimni's *Globalisation, humanitarianism and the erosion of refugee protection* which looks at the ideology of humanitarianism as opposed to the "economic rationalism" of globalisation - that anomaly that says there should be a free and unencumbered international flow of goods and services but not people.

While neither of these papers specifically addresses the situation in Australia they do give a context for what has happened here and in other parts of the world with regard to our obligations under the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol relating to the status of refugees.

Reviewed by David Finlay