

Anthropologist journeys with the last of the First People

The Bushman Winter Has Come

Paul John Myburgh

Penguin

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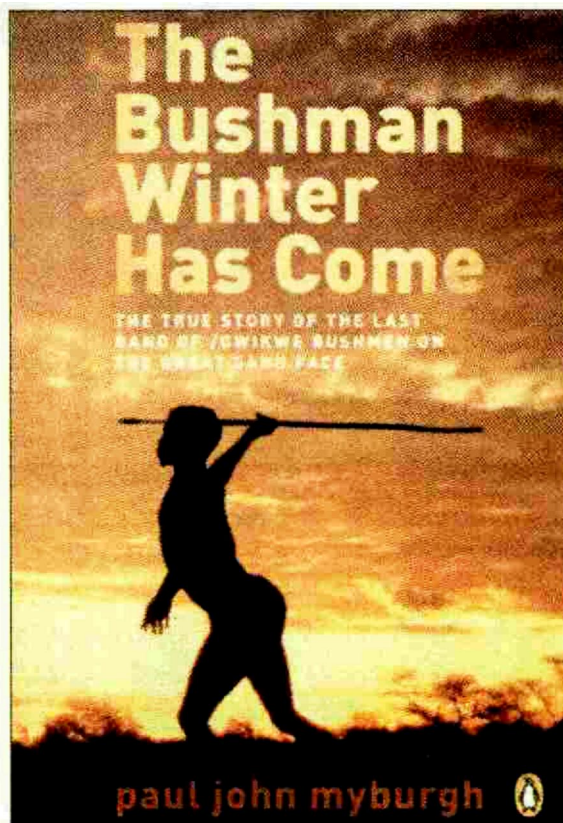
JENNY DE KLERK

Ask for these words to touch in you what is touched in me, so that I might tell this story of a people, and show a truth that belongs to all of us."

For seven years anthropologist and film-maker Paul John Myburgh lived with the last of the free Bushmen, 34 members of the /Gwikwe on the Great Sand Face in the Kalahari desert in Botswana.

He learnt their language, their stories and their traditions and strove to understand their essential goodness and their instinctive connection to the world around them, a universal consciousness that he believes we once all shared. For these, he says, are the last of the First People, a people in whose language, misunderstanding is not possible.

It's a harsh life in the desert, living in grass shelters, surviving on the larder of the Kalahari, the 70-odd edible plants, each in their season.



The evenings by the fire are for stories, myths and legends, and dancing for healing and strength.

Paul approaches them with reverence, and even awe. He regards Dzero-O, the patriarch of the group, well into his nineties, as one of the wisest of men, "the most human being I shall ever know".

The day dawns and the greeting is heard: "Are your eyes nicely open?" The men go out to check their snares and to hunt with their poison arrows – the kill is shared

equally among all. The women go out to gather – they are plant ecologists of note, knowing the flavours and uses of everything that grows.

But drought and lack of game, infringements on the hunting grounds, all are driving the Bushmen off the land into settlements, where they have to exchange their identity and their culture and traditions for water and a handful of mielie meal.

The Bushman winter has come... but it is not an end, nor is it a time to mourn. The last of the First People are passing away and it is time for the next step in the spiritual evolution of humanity.

This is poetic, moving, mystic writing as Paul ponders the essential questions of life. It is also a fascinating record of the way of life of a gentle people living in harmony with one another and everything around them.

He lived constantly with his camera at hand, an object ignored as a black box of no significance, "the thing that cannot see is looking at you". The result is a collection of superb pictures at the back of the book. He also includes a glossary of /Gwikwe words.