

MULRONEY AND THE PRESS: BLARNEY AND CYNICISM COME TO BLOWS

SATURDAY NIGHT

Canada's magazine of politics, business, and the arts

February 1990

GRETZKY'S LAST POWER PLAY

RETHINKING OUR LOST
HERO'S IMMORTALITY

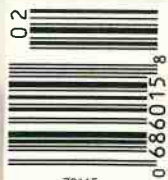
by *Kenneth Whyte*

PLUS:
CATHOLIC
SCANDALS, FOREST
RESCUE, AND
PETER USTINOV

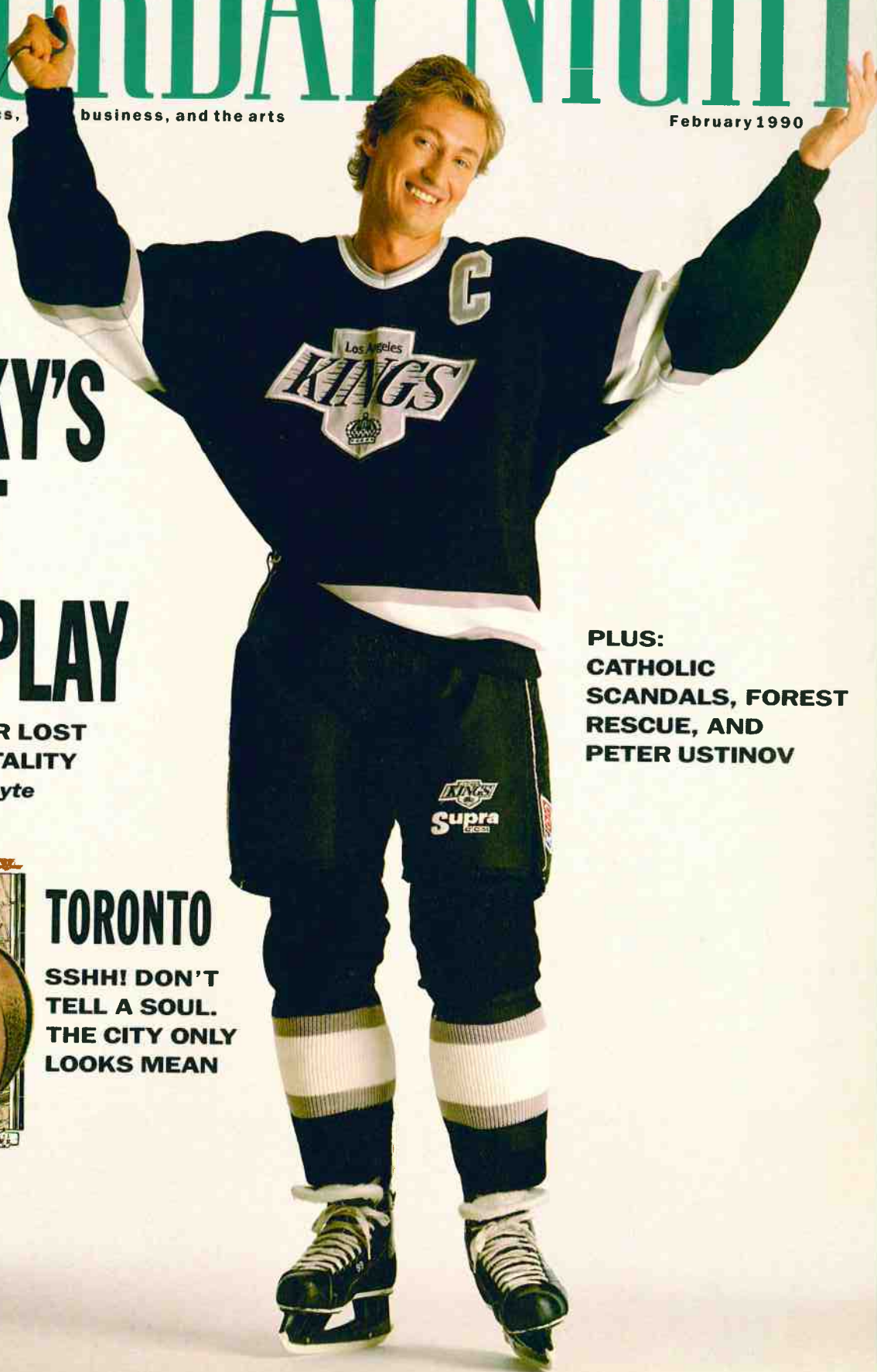


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T R A V E L

AFRICAN STEAM



NOT FAR FROM THE NATURE ENTHUSIASTS IN ZIMBABWE'S HWANGE WILD-LIFE RESERVE, A DIFFERENT BREED OF FANATIC TRACKS ANOTHER KIND OF ENDANGERED SPECIES—THE GARRATT LOCOMOTIVE AND ITS "SNAKE OF IRON"

A discreet warning is printed on a card on the reception desk of the Baobab Hotel in the coal-mining town of Hwange, northwestern Zimbabwe. Should you wish to have an extra guest stay with you, it says, please prepay at reception to avoid the embarrassment of eviction. When the check-in clerk saw me reading the card yesterday afternoon, he showed me the whites of his eyes. This is a respectable place, he said, but there are prostitutes everywhere. I signed the register, followed a silent, sad-faced porter to my steaming room, and swiftly escaped to a wrought-iron chair on the east lawn. Grateful for the shade of the biggest tree I ever saw,

by **IVOR SHAPIRO**



photographs PETER BENNETT

I ordered a drink and gazed at the flat brown plain stretched out below.

It's not really a tree, you know, said a low Lancashire voice behind me: baobabs are rather like succulents, dear, their trunks are hollows full of water. The voice belonged to a gaunt, more-than-middle-aged white woman who had appeared out of nowhere in a floral kaftan that stroked the roughly cut kikuyu grass. She introduced herself as Norma Hammond, hotel manager. The tree she introduced as Mr. Baobab, for whom the hotel was named. Demure Mrs. Baobab stands nearby, her long seed pods hanging from spindly branches. The husband is a deformed elephant, his four dumpy legs supporting a riot of arms pointing to the sky.

He's at least five hundred years old, dear, Norma said, fondling his ceramic-hard bark, showing off his thirty-foot circumference and his gnarls and crevices. He's beautiful, Norma said, patting him — aren't you, old chap? She touched a scrotum-like bulk between his two front legs. The previous manager covered it up with a menu board, Norma said. I think he was jealous, don't you?

I had heard about Norma. She is known in Hwange as the Witch on the Hill, because of her kaftans, her husky voice, and her habit of gliding silently through the halls. And because of the broom she kept on the wall of the manager's office until the owner made her remove it to her flat. Along with a certificate of airworthiness the broom was presented to her by colleagues at a Kenyan aviation firm when she retired as comptroller. That was decades after Norma stepped off a plane at Nairobi airport, a twenty-one-year-old newlywed civil-service wife who fell immediately in love with Africa and never left

except for brief, unhappy trips to an England that was always wet and grey when she visited. Don't ask me what I love about it, dear, she says of Africa, maybe it's the weather, or the smell, though I couldn't live in South Africa, you know, much too first-world, too rushed.

Hwange, whose name was spelled Wankei until 1980, is best known for its



ZIMBABWE IS ONE OF THE FEW REMAINING COUNTRIES TO OPERATE A FULL FLEET OF WORKING STEAM TRAINS

neighbouring namesake, a wildlife reserve often thought of as the best in the world. My old friend the local priest had invited me to come see his beastly parishioners. As well, a waterfall he likes. I've seen zoos and water before, but I had two days to spare, so I caught a flight here yesterday morning and then drove in a hot van on dusty roads, glimpsing yawning hippopotamuses, a leopard, five ear-

flapping elephants, and waterbucks, giraffes, wildebeests, and warthogs. And a white rhino, which looked pitch-black to me. My friend told me that one knows it's white by the size of its horn. Race is a complex matter in Africa.

The waterfall is scheduled for this afternoon. But first I have to see a train. That is why I am here again today, sitting under Mr. Baobab: I am waiting for a train.

It was over dinner last night at the Coke Oven, Hwange's only downtown restaurant, that I heard about the trains. I had been invited to eat with a party of miners and their wives. Every netted window was wide open, but the air in the Coke Oven swiftly grew as thick with rich local tobacco smoke as it was wet and warm with the tropical summer and beer fumes. Sometime after we'd settled in for some serious drinking — the wait for dinner was long — a moustached miner mentioned the trains. Did I know, he asked, that each year hundreds of people come to Hwange from all over the world to watch trains? I wondered aloud why anyone would travel anywhere to see a train. You'll have to ask Norma Hammond, he said. The train watchers always stay up at the Baobab.

When I returned to the hotel I tiptoed through the silent lobby, peering at the dozens of photographs tacked to the walls. Each was of a steam train. By the mes-

sages scrawled on some of the pictures I could tell they had been sent to Norma as trophies and affectionate tokens. There were trains reflected in murky dam waters and trains crossing bridges. A train passing some village women fishing in a river. A train passing a firm-breasted black nymph wearing high-heeled sandals and a gathered white dress obligingly lowered to her waist, the shoulder

straps draped neatly about her wrists.

That's Agnes, dear, Norma Hammond whispered out of the empty air behind my shoulder. One of our whores, cleanest ten dollars she ever earned.

Then I asked Norma about the trains and those who watch, and she told me that Zimbabwe is one of the few countries that still run a full fleet of working steam engines. Zimbabwe is especially blessed, she said, with an abundance of Garratts.

Garratts? They're a special kind of loco, dear, Norma said, articulated over three sets of wheels, big and strong enough to pull their trains up long inclines. Rail nuts love them. They come year after year, from Europe and America and Australia and South Africa. But there are none here now in the heat of March. They come in the winter, Norma said, when the air is cool and dry enough to allow steam to climb into the sky in classic clouds. They drive up from Bulawayo in rented cars packed with cameras and telephoto lenses and tripods, and their aim is to capture a classic steam-train shot. They often manage to persuade engineers to stop their trains in strategic scenic spots and build great heads of steam for the camera. One perfectionist even carries three sizes of saw in the trunk of his car to get rid of any pesky branch that dares to get in the way of a good picture.

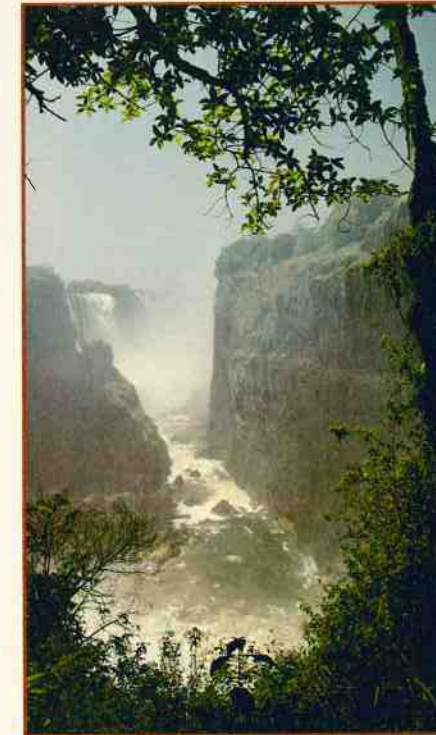
I love them, Norma said of her nuts: they're special, gentle, patient people.

I suddenly heard myself asking if she would show me where to see the trains. She looked at me silently, solemnly, as if sizing me up as a future rail nut. We'll see, she said, tomorrow.

So I woke up early this morning and came down to the lobby wearing sensible hat and shoes and feeling foolish. Mrs. Hammond? the desk clerk said in dismay.

Friday is Mrs. Hammond's day off: she is never disturbed before ten on Fridays. I ordered coffee on the terrace, admired the view for a while, and then roamed along the path to the survey point above the sleepy town, its coke plant puffing sulphur lackadaisically into the sky.

That's when it happened. I heard a distant cough, then a number of raps,



WITH LESS THAN AWE I WATCHED THE ZAMBEZI PLUMMET. UNLIKE THE GARRATTS, THE FALLS WON'T DISAPPEAR

then the distinct sound of chugging, and around a little hill to the west came a great black monster with a long thin tail. It laboured steadily, up the gentle grade and into the bush below Baobab Hill. I charged along the potholed path to the hotel and reached the terrace in time to see the snake of iron (which is, according to Norma, what Kenya's Kikuyus call it) emerge onto the plain and pace off

to the southeast towards Bulawayo.

At ten o'clock precisely I was told to follow the sad-faced bellhop — dressed today in a waiter's white jacket — who led me silently to the manager's flat, deposited a tea tray on a low table, motioned me onto a sofa, and knocked at Norma's bedroom door before making his exit. Nothing happened for a while after that, so I leafed through the September, 1987, issue of *Eisenbahn Kurier*, a glossy German rail magazine that was lying on the table. It contained a lavishly illustrated article about Zimbabwe's trains and a modest advertisement for the Baobab proclaiming *der Hotel Terrasse* an ideal place to experience *das Spektakel* of the mountain-climbing *Garratt-Lokomotiven*.

But when Norma emerged, she harumphed that true rail nuts do not spend their days on hotel terraces drinking gin and tonic. Come, she said, the best place to watch isn't far. She led me out the back entrance of the hotel and down a steep stretch of derelict pavement. It used to be the road to the hotel, she explained, as she strolled down with a cigarette in her hand, wondering aloud if she would ever make it up again, in this heat, at her age. (Fifty-eight, dear.) When we reached the bottom, we were at the midpoint of a quarter-mile of straight track between Breezy Hill and Baobab Hill. Norma told me to

lay my hand on the shining rail to see if it was vibrating. A blistering three seconds was enough to satisfy me that there were no trains for hundreds of miles. Oh well, Norma said, and we started slowly up the path. Fifteen minutes later there was the thumping noise of an approaching train. With a curse, thoughtless of the climb we had half completed, I sprinted back down the hill. It seemed to me that there was

something odd about the sound of the train, but I couldn't really hear above the pounding of my shoes and the labouring of my breath. I arrived at the crossing just as the train rounded Breezy Hill.

Pulled by a bright yellow diesel engine. I trudged back up the hill to find Norma sitting under a tree. She said: you know, you acted just like one of them; they say shit-it's-a-train and then they're off. And she smiled proudly at me.

When we got back to the hotel, I ordered a beer and studied the pictures in the lobby with their neatly typed captions stating the engine class, number, and location of each Garratt. The best shot of all, I decided, was not 20th Class At Lukosi - 1983 - Photograph By A.E. Durrant, nor 20th Class 482-284 On A Curve Between New Hwange and Entuba - Train 17 to Bulawayo - 8.4.84 - Photograph by D.W. Bell. The best was an uncaptioned one that had clearly been taken from the east lawn of the Baobab itself.

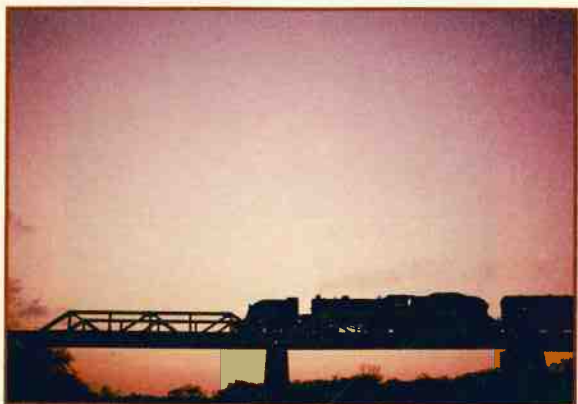
There was the bushy plain and the brown, flat-topped hills, and you could almost hear the creaking and croaking of Africa. There was that stretch of silver track curving out of the distance and coming straight towards the camera, and there was a white-crested Garratt snaking under the highway bridge, its head peering around the bend towards Victoria Falls, its steam blown by a gentle wind towards Zambia.

Eisenbahn Kurier was right after all, I decided: this was the viewing to wait for.

So here I sit under Mr. Baobab, eating hamburger steak and soggy chips, and waiting.

The assistant manager, a thirty-something black man known to everyone simply as Patrick, comes over. He and I share snide giggles about rail nuts. If you don't know what it's about you think these

people are sick in the head, Patrick says. They are sitting around complaining about the heat, then they hear a train whistle and they all run around with their cameras and things. We both realize that when the first Garratts came here in 1926 Patrick's ancestors probably did much the same thing, while the Europeans drank gin and laughed at them.



IF FROM BULAWAYO THEY DRIVE IN RENTED CARS LOADED WITH CAMERAS, LOOKING FOR CLASSIC STEAM CLOUDS

I refrain from mentioning to Patrick that the reason I'm sitting here lingering over my coffee is a voyeuristic hope for a train to whoosh excitedly down the track from Bulawayo, smoothly penetrating the road bridge, triumphantly snaking around the curve at Baobab Hill, its steam declaring its power.

But I have waited nearly three hours now, and the train hasn't come.

What comes, too soon, is my transportation to Victoria Falls, and so it is with less than awe that I wander through the famous rainforest in the steps of Dr. Livingstone. After all, we have the odd waterfall in Canada and, unlike the Garratts, the falls will always be here. Besides, the rain is so blinding today that I might as well be staggering through a Toronto ravine during a cloudburst. There is a traffic-like roar through the mist, and the falls appear only in brief glimpses through holes in the downpour, a dirty-white drapery hanging haphazardly across a narrow chasm.

We leave the rainforest and walk to the edge of the gorge, and look down from a grotto at the Devil's Cataract, where the Zambezi stops dizzily after the terror of its fall, and in deep turmoil makes a sharp left turn. The waters plummet on my left into the boiling pool, and vapour clouds rise to my right, rising higher than the falls themselves, and then falling again onto the forest, rising and falling in graceful swoops that never stop.

Like the arms of the player of a giant bass marimba, isn't it, dear, says Norma over my shoulder, and I jump and turn around, sure that I will see her, that she has somehow crept up on me even here, but this time there is no one. And later, as I fly away, the steaming whirlpool shrinking away outside the plane's window, it is the view from the terrace of the Baobab Hotel that I see in my mind's eye, the twin silver lines shining on the grassy plain below. I promise myself that someday I'll sit once again in the shade of Mr. Baobab.

On that day I won't leave until I have seen a pillar of cloud rise in the east and watched a snub-nosed, black-headed snake of iron pass under the road bridge at Hwange. ~

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