Chapter ends in South America

John Twisleton marks the work and the closure of the Guyana Diocesan Association

"SIX A.M., cool and dark. The alarm clock is ringing and another day is about to begin. I climb out from under the mosquito net and hope the floor isn't covered with cockroaches, black beetles, or other delightful examples of tropical insect life.

"The clergy house now has a bathroom with running water and a flush toilet, so life is reasonably civilised. The church bell rings, that means 20 minutes until mattins. Few people have clocks or watches, so the bell really does call everyone to church. The students take it in turn to act as sacristan and bell-ringer, and whoever is on duty for the week has my spare watch to wear as a very practical badge of office."

So wrote the Revd Brian Doolan from Yupukari in 1983 for a USPG newsletter. He was the first Principal of the Alan Knight Training Centre (AKTC), Guyana, nicknamed "Staggers on the Savannah".

The seminary, for the Amerindian ordinands of Guyana's interior, was a fitting memorial to the 42-year service of Alan Knight (1904-79), Bishop of Guyana from 1937 (when it was still British Guiana) until his death. His robust Anglo-Catholicism drew a succession of missionaries from the Church of England to South America.

Knight's episcopate paralleled in stature and length that of Bishop William Austin (1807-92), and preceded the long reign of his Guyanese successor Bishop Randolph George (1924-2016). Through partnership, primarily with the Company of Mission Priests and the USPG, 18 Amerindian priests were trained at Yupukari, one of whom, the Revd Alfred David, became a bishop in 2021.

His consecration was applauded at the last meeting of the 90-year-old Guyana Diocesan Association in June 2021, capturing something of the fruit of missionary enterprise from the Church of England which can be traced back to 1781.

The association's September 1968 magazine carried a short history of Guyana, possibly written by Knight himself: "The country lies on the north-east coast of the South American continent, between Venezuela on the west, Surinam on the east, with the Atlantic Ocean facing it on the north. It is as large as the combined areas of England, Scotland and Wales. . .

"It has pleasant climatic conditions for the greater part of the year. It is particularly so on the coastal area where it is sub-tropical. . .

"The task of shaping Guyana's history was shared among the Dutch, French, and British. Between 1841 and 1931 some 433,643 immigrants arrived in Guyana on the basis of an indentureship system . . . serving agriculture (coconuts, rice, coffee and limes in addition to sugar). . .

"Wherever shouts of 'Gold! Gold!' were raised, history provides evidence of men flocking thither. Guyana has not been the exceptional case."

I wear a wedding ring made with Guyanese gold blessed in 1988 in St Mary's, Yupukari, where, while serving as second AKTC Principal, I was married to Anne by our Amerindian parish priest.

Our journey to Guyana started with my friendship with Canon John Dorman (1916-98), who wrote to me in 1985 with typical spiritual force, asking me to consider crossing the Atlantic to train as priest candidates selected by Bishop George and his team.

It was hard to say no to this English "saint", a founder member of the Company of Mission Priests, and considered by some as suitable for inclusion in the Calendar of the Province of the West Indies. One of his contemporaries, the Very Revd Derek Goodrich (1927-2021), told of a shipwreck on the Essequibo in which Dorman nearly lost his life on his way to celebrate a Boxing Day mass. Dorman swam in the dark to safety, where he said a Magnificat in thanksgiving. Writing from his hammock in the vestry at Kurupung, he spoke of the "paint on the walls still scarred by the blood the vampire bats have sampled from my great toes".

Top row: John Dorman arriving in 1956; the author and his wife, Anne, newly married in Yupukari, in 1988; *Bottom row:* sunset on the Rupununi river; Alan Knight and Randolph George in 1966

Goodrich described how the missionary priest spends himself in an itinerant ministry: "Towards evening he would reach a Mission for Evensong, Confessions, Confirmation class, then sleep in a hammock, with Mass in the early morning."

The work was endlessly varied in pattern and human need. "It is concerned with carrying the simple riches of divine love to the simple poor people who need him," Dorman writes. "Could there be anything more at one with the work of the gospel than a little boat full of silent and reverent people returning from their communion, the priest barefoot in alb and stole, sitting in the bow and carrying the pyx containing the Blessed Sacrament for some faithful sufferer to whom the Lord travels as on the sea of Galilee?"

Dorman's advocacy for Guyana's Amerindians, faced with the challenge of integration with Guyanese society as a whole, was courageous, helping them to challenge mining and logging ventures that damaged their livelihood. The pollution of the rivers by dredging for gold remains a serious problem.

Between 1975 and 1983, Dorman was involved in a successful international campaign against a hydroelectric project that would have flooded Amerindian homelands. Space allows a mention only of the priests Richard Cole (1908-97), Martin Heal (1913-2009), Jack Holden (1912-96), Leslie Rooney (1917-93), and others, including Goodrich (1927-2021), whose renovation of Guyana's wooden cathedral gained him national acclaim.

The last of these wrote in his autobiography: "Just before I retired I did some maths, and reckoned that I baptised over three thousand, presented three thousand eight hundred for confirmation, married some nine hundred and fifty couples, conducted nine hundred funerals, celebrated mass on fifteen thousand occasions, and, horror of horrors, gave over ten thousand sermons and addresses. How much suffering I have caused!"

My wife, Anne, complementing Doolan's description of life at Yupukari, writes of the cost of expatriate mission to Guyana's interior 1987-90: "All our water was brought from the river a mile away, and, as gas was expensive, we did not boil it, but drank it, amoebas and all. The whole village went down to the river to bathe each evening, and to wash their clothes on convenient rocks, trying to avoid the stingrays, alligators, piranhas, and other creatures in the black water, such as anacondas and giant otters.

"Bats roosted in the rafters of the vicarage, and only the mosquito nets shielded us from their droppings. Snakes were common. They were all assumed to be poisonous, and the locals would dispatch them with their machetes. Sometimes a jaguar's footprints would be spotted, and, on one occasion a dog, sleeping on a doorstep, was taken in the night.

"Once, as the students came for the very early service at the church, they all dipped their fingers in the holy water and crossed themselves. When it got lighter, a small snake was seen to be swimming happily in the stoop. Every day or two, we inspected our feet and used a needle to dig out jiggers, which, if not noticed, would lay their eggs under our skin.

"The Amerindians travelled mainly on the river in dug-out canoes to tend their farms, and to spear fish as they went. Bows and arrows were used to catch monkeys, wild pigs, and other creatures at night. An iguana might be the catch of the day, chopped up, and served up in a stew."

Anne and I returned to the UK in 1990, bereaved of the excitements of our mission and yet thankful to God for a part in forming Amerindian priests who now help to make the word of God, the sacraments, and pastoral care available in the remotest parts of Guyana's vast rainforest.

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3.1). Two centuries of Church of England mission to Guyana have been a season, and the years of the Guyana Diocesan Association are now ending in closure.

Guyana has been to me the adventure of my life, set within the overflow of venturesome faith across the world, seeking to make the meaning and power of the word of God and the eucharist available to all, in season and out of season.

Canon John Twisleton ministers in Sussex and served as commissary for the Bishop of Guyana, and secretary of the Guyana Diocesan Association. He is the author of Guyana Venture: A Church of England mission, *published in 2022 (£9.99; Kindle £7.99), with a foreword by Bishop Peter Wheatley.*

Out of time

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change, expecting seasons to transform, and that they walk looking forwards, expectantly, rather than just sort of trying to remember nostalgically."

He hopes that this is liberating. "At the end of the day, I think this is about: how do we live into our creaturehood? And how do we receive the — quote unquote — limitations of our creaturehood actually as a gift?"

Much of what he commends echoes the principles of mindfulness and the contemplative life. "It's about a kind of attention for the sake of a new intention, and I do think that that's messier and more difficult than people realise. . . There's no app for this. It's an ongoing endeavour."

He smiles. "I've been telling friends that this is a very middle-aged book. In other words, it's not just that I wasn't smart enough to write this book at 30: it's that I couldn't have imagined what I now know of God in the world at that time, because I had to undergo things in order to get to a place to discern it. And I remember when I was 30, people in their fifties telling me this, and hating it. But now it's like, I get it."

He refers to Jesus's words in the upper room, when he tells his disciples "I have many things to tell you. But you cannot bear them now." Professor Smith continues: "I think that's such a beautiful expression of what we're talking about, which is that God has much to give us. The question is, do we have the capacity? Our creaturehood means it may be another 20 years before we can hear that something new."

Frustrating, too, surely, for the younger listener? "I think in our modern, Enlightenment culture, we think it's just a matter of being smart enough. We are so confident in our own ingenuity that it seems like any problem should be solvable by our intellect. It turns out that we need wisdom."

Which leads us neatly to Ecclesiastes. "Ecclesiastes is a strange book," he says. "A lot of people don't know what to do with it. For the longest time, I didn't know what to do with it. And then I realised: 'Oh, this is a book about living into our mortality.' It's a kind of wide-eyed, realistic account of our mortality."

There is also joy to be found there. "What I hope is, if we actually learn how to be mortal, if we receive the gift of our creaturehood, there is a kind of liberation that comes with that. And now you're in a place to find the joys in what was previously fleeting."

Ambiguity is one of the reasons that Professor Smith is an apologist for the arts. "I think the arts are the mode in which we learn to live into the complexity and messiness of our experience — without having to resolve it to the view or the position or the answer."

Central to the book is the author's love of music. There's an accompanying Spotify playlist of songs that he refers to in the text — something he has also offered with previous books. He explores the idea that we experience time and music in similar ways.

"The joy of music actually depends on its being stretched in time. Sometimes, we almost feel the tension of the chord in our own souls, and there's a reverberation that's going on there. To experience that as part of a melody, you're holding a sound that you just heard, and there's already this hint of anticipation of where it's going.

"That's not something you're processing intellectually, it's something that your body knows, and I think it's a beautiful microcosmic expression of why the beauty of something that I enjoy is also passing away."

How to Inhabit Time: Understanding the past, facing the future, living faithfully now *is published by Brazos Press at £14.99* (Church Times Bookshop £13.49); *978-1-58743-591-1. https://spoti.fi/3Dr1kEU*