

The introduction to a new biography of Gannibal by the Author

Alexander Pushkin was not only Russia's greatest poet, but he was also the great-grandson of an African slave. The slave, whose godfather was Peter the Great, claimed to have royal blood of his own. Certainly his Russian descendants believed that he was an African prince. His descendants have included members as well as close friends of the English royal family. So the legend goes on.

Pushkin told the story of his black ancestor in "The Negro of Peter the Great", but this biography tells a different version. The main difference is between fact and fiction. The Russian poet hoped to discover a biographical truth by sticking to the facts, only to discover that facts are slippery and not always true. His biography turned into a novel. Even then, it was left unfinished after six and a half chapters. The scrawled manuscript comes to an end with a line of dialogue — "Sit down, you scoundrel, let's talk!" — and a line of dots. Pushkin could be speaking to himself. In any case, it's now time to stand up and carry on with the story. I have tried to join up the dots.

This is a book, then, about a missing link between the storyteller and his subject, an African prince; between the various branches of a family and its roots; between Pushkin and Africa; Africa and Europe; Europe and Russia; black and white. It is the story of a remarkable life and it poses the question: how is such a life to be explained?

My own explanation began in 2001, while I was living in Russia and working there as a journalist. The first draft was written during the war in Afghanistan, on the road to Kabul, but it describes my journey to the frontline of a different kind of war in Africa between the armies of Ethiopia and Eritrea. According to legend, Pushkin's ancestor was born there, on the northern bank of the River Mareb, where I was arrested for taking photographs and compass readings, on suspicion of being a spy. Understandably my captors didn't believe that I was only a journalist researching the life of Russia's greatest writer. At the military camp, where I was held for a number of hours, the commandant looked me up and down when I asked, in my best posh English accent, "I say, my good man, can you tell me, basically, what is going on here?" "Basically," he replied, with distaste, "you are in prison!" The incident taught me something. Journalists, like biographers, are meant to respect facts, and by retracing Gannibal's footsteps, I hoped to find a true story.

Some of those journeys lie behind the book, and are used whenever it is helpful to show that the past often retains a physical presence for the biographer — in landscapes, buildings, portraits, and above all in the trace of handwriting on original letters or journals. But my own journeys are not the point of the book. It is Gannibal's story. I am only following him. Descriptions of Africa and the slave trade result from my journeys, but this is not a book about a "stolen legacy", nor certainly about the intellectual wars that have been part of black history in recent years. Biographers, like novelists, should tell stories. I have tried to do this. I should, however, point out from the outset that Gannibal was not the only black face to be seen in the centre of fashionable St. Petersburg at that time. Negro slaves were a common sight in the grand salons of Millionaires' Street and they appeared in a variety of roles, such as pets, pages, footmen, mascots, mistresses, favourites and adopted children. At the Winter Palace, so-called court Arabs, usually Ethiopians dressed in turbans and baggy trousers stood guard like stage extras in the marble wings.

The narrator says that his journeys...

1. ...helped him find some traces of the past.
2. ...extended his sympathy to a 'stolen legacy'.
3. ...deepened his understanding of the concept of intellectual wars.
4. ...turned out to be the main contents of his book.