

Ghosts of Rwanda

Interview : Fergal Keane

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He is a BBC correspondent who, for over a decade, has reported from various international crises areas. In late May and early June of 1994, as the killings in Rwanda were drawing to a close – but as pockets of Tutsis were still being hunted down – Keane travelled for several weeks with the advancing Tutsi RPF forces. In this powerful interview – in essence, a testimony of moral witness (watch the video) – Keane talks about why, after Rwanda, it is impossible for him to ever feel the same again about societies, humanity and himself. “Nothing prepared me for what I saw in Rwanda. . . . I will never forget on the way in, being confronted with the image of colleagues of mine whom I knew from the townships of South Africa, and looking at their eyes. They had just come out of Rwanda. And they were shattered. And I said, ‘What is this?’ And one of them pulled me aside and he said, ‘It’s spiritual damage, it’s spiritual damage.’” This interview was conducted on March 19, 2004.

Do you still have the dreams?

I thought the dreams of Rwanda had gone away, but going back ten years after has brought them back to the surface again – different kinds of dreams.

Just after the genocide, when I’d wake up in the night, this was a dream of being hidden under corpses, and a man with red eyes and a machete pulling the corpses away to get at me. And that was just born. I know where that came from. That came from the road blocks, and the looks on people’s faces.

But now it’s kind of waking up with a sense of failure as a human being. And I can’t really describe the dreams themselves, except that it’s just crowds of people, crowds of people and, then, waking up and just feeling a sense of failure. It sounds bizarre, but



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that’s what Rwanda has left me with as a human being.

Why failure?

I look at some of the material that we recorded when we were in Rwanda, and one particular instance comes to mind when we were in Butare, where 300,000 people were killed, and most of the killing had been done by the time we got there. But there was a group of Tutsis outside the office of the prefect. And in an interview with him, I can hear myself saying – this is on record – “I think that by the time our film

will be broadcast, most of these people will be dead.”

So I had that awareness at the time. And he denied it and said that they would be okay. And we left those people. We tried to go back once, and we were turned away at gun point, and then we left. We didn't do anything. We didn't intervene.

And a couple of years back, I was interviewing women who were dying from AIDS in Rwanda, who had been raped during the genocide. One of them said she had come from Butare. She said she had been in that crowd outside the prefect's office. And I asked her if she remembered a television crew coming, and she said she did remember white men coming with a camera. Was it us? I can't be sure of that, but she said she remembered white men coming with a camera. And she said, "I thought you might have been with the militia," whatever that meant, "because you didn't help us."

Now, human failure? I failed in that particular instance as a human being because I was scared out of my wits. I had a fear of a kind that I just cannot describe to you. I just can't describe the level of fear that you find in a place where the moral order has been completely overturned, where to do evil is the right thing, where to do good is the wrong thing. And we were just scared and petrified. And I put my old instinct for survival first, and any thoughts I had of being brave or heroic were gone.

You can rationalize that to the end of your days and say, of course, you had to keep yourself alive, and you couldn't do something which would have put your own safety in jeopardy. But I will always feel that I failed.

Where does Rwanda sit in your personal life?

Rwanda was the defining experience of my adult life. There is no question about that. I had covered wars before I went to Rwanda. I had been in Angola. I'd lived in Northern Ireland. And I covered the township violence in North Africa where thousands of people died. But nothing prepared me for what I saw in Rwanda.

And we came relatively late. It was the very end of May, the beginning of June. Most of the killing had been done. There was still pockets of Tutsis being hunted down in different areas. But to drive through

those road blocks, and see the looks on people's faces. I will never forget driving from Butare to the Burundi border with the Tutsi orphans whose parents had been wiped out. They tried to get these kids out a couple of weeks before, and some had been dragged off and killed. These were kids! You know, five, six, seven years of age. And you are driving through these road blocks and, if only for the presence of international aid workers and the fact that they had been able to do a deal with the local prefect, those kids would have been taken off and hacked to death in front of us. I never ever forget the looks on their faces. They were petrified because they didn't know, they had no guarantees. Rwanda was a country without guarantees.

You had never been there before?

I'd never been to Rwanda before. All I had heard about it was a couple of colleagues of mine had gone off the previous year to do something on the gorillas in the mountains. That's most of what the international media knew. I was living in Jo'Burg (Johannesburg) where all the Africa correspondents were. We knew nothing about the country. We were fixated by two things: Somalia and the U. S. intervention there, and South Africa's transition to democracy.

I remember being in the office in Jo'Burg when the news bulletin came on about the two presidents being shot down, and hearing about the killing taking place as a result of this. And I reacted in the same way everybody else did in the media. It's one of those things that happens in that part of the world. I just didn't get it, because I knew nothing. I was ignorant.

And maybe most of us, a great many of us, at least, looked at Central Africa as [being] beyond our ken. We didn't quite get it. We didn't get what was. We didn't get the politics and the history of the place because we were just fixated with other things. And South Africa represented for us one of those rare good news stories out of Africa. It had wonderful, colorful characters like Nelson Mandela. Rwanda – where was that? It was nowhere in on our minds.

So why did you decide to go?

I would say Rwanda found me. I didn't choose to go to Rwanda. I was called because somebody else had pulled out of the trip, and they sent me a couple of news cuttings. I read what I could. I'd seen

television images by this stage, obviously, of bodies floating down rivers. I knew it was grim. I wasn't yet using the word "genocide" myself. I wasn't thinking of this in terms of a holocaust and that kind of state sponsored slaughter. But once I got there, I very, very quickly saw what was going on.

And I will never forget on the way in, in Nairobi, being confronted with the image of colleagues of mine whom I knew from the townships of South Africa, and looking at their eyes. They had just come out of Rwanda. And they were shattered. And I said, "What is this?" And one of them pulled me aside and he said, "It's spiritual damage, it's spiritual damage."

I didn't quite get it. I thought he was either drunk or in some kind of wild existentialist phase. I didn't get what he meant. But I sure do now. I really do.

If this was mid-May, you still weren't—

By mid- to late-May, most people were still not using the word "genocide." They were still not seeing this for what it was. But that's not to say they didn't know hundreds of thousands of people were being wiped out. The minority had been targeted for extermination.

Now, there was certainly a journalistic failure, a failure of states of powerful people to use the proper words. But did we know that people were being wiped out because of their ethnicity in huge numbers, in unprecedented numbers? Yeah, we did.

You linked up with the RPF? What did you do? How did you find them, and what did you see?

By the time we got to the border with Rwanda through Uganda, we had made contact with the RPF in Brussels. And they had, by that stage, become relatively organized about linking up and giving people safe passage down through the country. It was the most organized guerilla army I had ever come across. And I'd been with the rebels in Eritrea, and they have a name for being very strict and highly organized. But the RPF were certainly in a class of art in terms of organization.

We met a very helpful and friendly young lieutenant, a guy called Frank Ndoze who guided us down through the country. . . . And the most striking thing about driving in through Rwanda at that stage was the emptiness. I was used to an Africa of crowded

villages, of people working in the fields – a vibrant, living Africa. And this place, it was like somebody had got a Hoover [vacuum cleaner] and placed it over the country and just sucked all of the life, Hoovered the life up out of the place. There was nothing. Just emptiness.

And one vivid image out of all of that, as we drive down towards Kigali, crowds of white butterflies coming across the road. That was the only sign of life. And, of course, the more you drove in, the smell of death coming from all over the place – from houses, from fields, from ditches, that rotting awful smell of death.

You describe in your book scenes of bodies in water. Do you remember that?

The rivers at that stage were still carriageways of death. There were still bodies that had been thrown in weeks earlier and had gotten caught in reeds. The village population was dead, and most of the Hutus had fled. Who was going to pull these bodies out? They were left lying there, rotting in the water, bloated by the sun. It was a hideous, hideous sight, but you got used to it. You get used to seeing things like that.

And the other very striking thing was after witnessing the aftermath of one massacre in particular, we would find ourselves driving along the road, and there might be, in the distance, a pile of rags or a bit of wood, but your mind had become attuned to the site of bodies. So you automatically swerve to avoid everything you saw on the road because you thought it might be a body. The place was just a giant open-air cemetery.

And this is at a point where they had tried to clear away a lot of the bodies, but still you couldn't. It was just too much.

As you were driving in on this trip, when did you start sensing that this wasn't just another little war that you had been through? How did that realization begin to dawn on you?

I think the scariest thing about Rwanda in those very first days when we looked in was that emptiness. This was different, this was really different; a country that had no living people apart from soldiers. It was just full of dead people. It was not like any civil war I'd ever encountered. It was just that emptiness.

And the survivors who then started to come out, like ghosts. You would meet these people, kids. I remember we went to an orphanage about the second day, and seeing little kids with machete wounds. I remember one little girl that had been stabbed running away from home. They had killed her parents. A tiny little kid. And she was just gone. Her mind was gone. And I looked at this stuff, and you knew this was different.

And then you heard about a massacre in Nyarubuye. You went there. What was the road like going there? You were in a car?

We drove to Nyarubuye with Frank Ndore who was an RPF lieutenant, and one what they call a Kaadogo, a child soldier. They were our escorts. And I remember driving down through an area that had been liberated a few weeks before by the RPF, and the striking thing was you would come across cattle wandering across the roads and, then, dogs.

And we were warned to be very careful of the dogs because by this stage the dogs had gotten very used to eating human flesh. They had lost their fear of human beings, so we were told, you know, whatever you do, avoid these animals. And I know the RPF were shooting dogs by this stage.

And we drove on a week. We took off from the main road that leads you to the border with Tanzania, and we went up this kind of bush mountain tract, very very overgrown by this stage because people had fled. There was no one to tend the fields. The people that would have done it were dead or they had fled. And for the images I have are of banana leaves coming off of the car, and the sun starting to set, and I knew we had very little time because this was right on the border. You know, the RPF people were afraid of an Interahamwe coming across at night, so we had to get in and out of there rather quickly.

Where did you think you were going? Who did you think awaited you there?

I thought that we would go and we would see a massacre, but I didn't know what a massacre meant.

I had an intellectual understanding of what the word "massacre" meant from reading books. But books don't smell. Books don't rot. Books don't lie in stagnant pools. Books don't leach into the earth the way those bodies did. They can't tell you about

it. Nothing can tell you about it except the experience of going there and seeing it.

We got out of the car, and in front of the church there were some bodies on the ground. And then we walked down this path through the church compound, and it was heavily overgrown, heavily overgrown because there had been rains.

And then you find yourself walking along and you are stepping around and stepping over bodies. A colleague of mine, you know, almost tripped over the body of a kid. I know he's haunted by it to this day.

We went down further and we came to this kind of open courtyard area where the bodies were stacked in against the walls. And I think to myself now, there were a lot more dead people there, but we just – you know, we didn't go beyond that. We didn't go around. We didn't make a really thorough search. And I think it was just a sense of shock that we didn't. We filmed what we could.

And it started to get dark and, then, we would enter the church. And there was no light in the church itself, so we had one little camera light, and we – you are walking around in the dark and suddenly the light points here and you see a kid's body. And you know it's a kid because he's wearing his khaki school uniform, and he's lying there, and his head has been bludgeoned away.

And down in another corner, there is a man's body lying there. Up there, there also are bones, probably where dogs have been because there is no body left there, it's just bones.

And then it's really dark, it's really dark by this stage, and we have to go because the escorts are getting uncomfortable, they are starting to get afraid of the area. And as we are coming out, we hear noises, noises from one of the roads. I got very, very scared. And one of the drivers with us, a Ugandan, said, "Don't worry, it's only rats." Rats. And then we left. And I just remember looking up at the church itself, and there is this white statue of Christ standing with his arms open. And as you look down from him, there is the remains of a human body underneath, and then – I was raised at a Catholic, and I kind of drifted away big time from religion, but I prayed so hard. I prayed so hard because I was scared, but I prayed so hard, too, because I needed something

good to hold onto at that moment. I really did.

And I'm not the only one. There were lots of reporters who have had that experience – lots in Rwanda who went to those massacre sites at the time.

What did you pray?

I said, "Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, give us thy kingdom come." I needed to believe in something.

Do you?

Not any more. The huge thing that Rwanda changed for me was a kind of fundamental optimism of the humanity. When you see what people were capable of, the unspeakableness of which they were capable of. The simple fact that there was so much more evil than there was good. There was so much more cowardice than there was bravery. After that, no, I'm not optimistic any more.

When you were there at the church and you were talking to your colleagues, what kind of voice did you use?

I remember that apart from standing in front of the camera and, you know, talking about what I was seeing, we whispered. If you listen to those tapes, there is almost no sound.

That's the really striking thing. And not a lot of the time when journalists go out to the field or anywhere, and they see something shocking, exciting, we chatter in the background. The cameraman is having to turn around and say, "Shh."

There is none of that on this. There is this silence. In my experience, this unique silence, and just whispers, whispers every now and again.

You described going to government offices, seeing bodies, I guess, with identity cards. That massacre was the result of that kind of organization, the state's organization?

The kind of thing you really have to appreciate about Rwanda was the degree to which the country was organized. This is a country where the mayors of areas were hand-picked by the president. The man that was accused of leading the slaughter at Nyarubuye was a man hand-picked by the president. That was the kind of attention to detail, because they understood the people at the very top of this – that if you want anything to happen in Rwanda,

and you want it to happen on a coordination scale, then you've got to be with the local officials.

They were immensely powerful people, and they had access, because of the nature of the state, to everybody's ethnic origin. They had to carry it on identity cards, and these were stored – lists of these people, lists of Rwanda's Tutsis, Hutus, were kept in offices run by the mayor.

So it was a kind of filing index for killing. It was perfect. It was a perfect system. We saw the identity cards for all of the areas around Nyarubuye and Nyarubuye itself. And I looked at these identity cards. There it was – so and so, Hutu; so and so, Tutsi. And you knew looking at them that most of the Tutsis on these cards were dead.

And then you heard about some survivors?

We heard that there were survivors when we got to the mayor's offices, offices that had been used by the man accused of leading the genocide in Nyarubuye. Outside those offices were clusters of people, and the minute you walked up, you could see they were different. Because there was a kid sitting there with a huge black gash in his head where he had been hit by a machete. There are other people sitting there that are just dazed, they are absolutely dazed.

And we were in speaking to some nurses who were standing outside the building. They told us about some kids and a woman inside a small little office. And we walked in, and sitting on the ground were this woman and I think two children. And one of the children, she looked in the most terrible state. You could tell her hand was black, it had been hacked away, and there was a wound on the back of her head as well.

The nurse was trying to dress the wounds, and the child looked like a famine victim. And I just remember her grimacing in pain as they tried to treat the wounds. And we had no medicine. I remember all we had was some aspirin and some sweets, and we gave it to them.

And I assumed – I looked at that kid, and I said she's not going to make it. There was no way because her hand was rotting. She looked starved. I just couldn't see her pulling through. And I left assuming that, believing that, she wouldn't make it.

What was her name?

The kid's name was Valentina. And she had been at the church with her parents, and her brothers, who had all been wiped out. She had survived there for something like a month among the bodies, with dogs roaming outside trying to eat the flesh of the dead. She was haunted. She was haunted.

On that first journey when I met Valentina, you couldn't talk to her. There are times when, you know, you go to a war zone and you see what happened to them – you couldn't have asked this child.

She was in so much physical pain, her hand hacked away, her head wound, and she just looked so traumatized that we backed off. We did the only decent thing you could do. We gave the few sweets we had, we gave some aspirins, which was all we had, and we backed off. We left her be. And we assumed she would die.

Does looking at that footage restrain you? She is obviously in pain but she is not screaming.

That's Rwanda. Rwanda is a country that was in pain but wasn't screaming. Silence. That's what I remember most – silence. Just an endless, screaming silence. That was Rwanda.

If you want to understand what genocide means at the human level, look at Valentina. Who did she offend, who did she hurt? Her crime was being a Tutsi. Her crime was being a member of the wrong ethnic group. And for that her entire family was wiped out, and she was mutilated and traumatized terribly. That's what genocide is. And if you want to understand our failures as human beings, as governments, look at that kid. That's who we failed. You know, we failed the innocent, we failed those who are targeted for no other reason than that they come from the wrong group.

You asked me what I'm left with? Yes, a sense of human failure, but also one hell of a determination that if I ever see anything like that happening again, would I take up a camera and a notebook? No. I might do something much more fundamental, because you can't depend on the powerful and the rich to come to the aid of people like Valentina. Don't believe them, don't trust them, no matter how many times they say "never again."

Going back to her, you told her story.

One of the ways that I tried to keep faith with Rwanda is by going back, and going back to Nyarubuye. I don't think you can go back to a whole country. But when you meet people, you can go back to them, like Valentina. And she's about the most remarkable person I know. She's extraordinary. The first time I went back, she was still very, very traumatized, and it took a lot of talk off-camera, and just getting to know her before she felt free enough to talk about her experiences, and I knew it was vital that she did. Because how do you explain to the world the reality of something like genocide? Not through mass statistics. People don't get the idea of 800,000 dead. They just don't get it. It's too big.

But they can understand the testimony of a child like Valentina. And she spoke in amazingly moving and haunting terms about what had happened to her, and what had happened to her family. I stayed in touch, and I've been back maybe three or four times to see her. And each time she gets stronger. Each time she is more confident.

And she has turned into a really beautiful and engaging and warm human being. She is quite the most remarkable person I know to come from living among the bodies at Nyarubuye, to seeing your family wiped out – to come from that, and to be able to talk as she does to me now about going on to be a doctor, about wanting to be a doctor so that she can heal people. For all that Rwanda has left me haunted with, someone like her also has given me a gift, a real gift.

And when all the politicians and all the soldiers and all the journalists and all the rest of us – all this great international circus – when we move on, Valentina and people like her, they offer what hope if any there is for Rwanda.

You went to Kigali. You went to the Red Cross Hospital. What was that [like] driving, just trying to get to that Red Cross Hospital? It was a make-shift hospital, a school on the side of town, There was no way to get there. What did you see?

To be able to get to the Red Cross Hospital from where the journalists stayed, and which was around UNAMIR, you have to go with the U.N. There was no other safe way across. So you had to go with the UNAMIR people, and there was a marvelous French

Canadian, Officer Plante, who was their information guy. And he took us down.

And I remember him saying to us very clearly – we had a camera with us – but his instructions as we approached no-man’s land, he just said, “For God’s sake, keep that on the floor. Do not produce that camera”. Because you going across no-man’s land, which is dodging enough because the shelling and shooting is sporadically going on. But you come into the first road blocks where you have FAR, the Rwandan Army, and you have a Interahamwe, and these guys did not want to see cameras produced. They really didn’t.

And the faces of the people on those roadblocks – and a lot of the guys were drunk, and there were just bloodshot eyes looking at you. The road blocks in most cases didn’t amount to much more than a couple of beer crates, and a few stones and a bit of wood across the road. But they were very, very scary. And those UNAMIR guys, you know, like Plante were an amazing presence of mind and calm. They used their heads to negotiate their ways through these road blocks.

We got to the Red Cross Hospital, and it was being shelled at the time. The area was being shelled. I’m not saying the hospital itself was being deliberately shelled. The area was being shelled by the RPF. And you could hear explosions and you could hear gunfire in the background. And you walk in there, and what’s striking is the degree – for all the kind of chaos and the wounded, and the grimness that was there, it was just this little sense of an island, of a haven right in the middle of this madness which these people had against all odds managed to establish.

And when I say odds, right outside their gates, you know, was a population intent on exterminating any Tutsi, or any moderate Hutu they found. And as the violence went on, in a population where law and order had just vanished – you know, it was war central at this place.

Plus, they are being shelled from the other side. And yet they have managed to establish in this little patch of sanity, which they tried to achieve. And I’ll never forget someone like Philippe Gaillard – I only met him for what, 15, 20 minutes. It was a snapshot meeting – but this guy was a serious, serious human-

being in a conflict that had been characterized by international fumbling and cowardice and abandonment. Here was one guy in particular who was making a difference through his personal bravery.

Now, when I interviewed him, he struck me as being tired and war weary. I will never forget asking him about the number of people that were dead. And he took the figures up to a half a million, and then he said something like, “I stopped counting after that.” He sounded like a profoundly weary man. But the trick of a really brave person in a situation like that is not only confronting their own courage, but confronting the kind of emotional exhaustion which he must have felt at that time, and keeping going, and they really made a difference.

You asked him – You said he had “a brain of iron.” What was the price to pay for that? Do you remember that?

I do, I do. I asked him that and I asked several other people there. And the sense I got from Philippe Gaillard and other ICRC (International Committee for the Red Cross) workers was, there will be a time to talk about what it was doing to them inside, but they couldn’t afford that kind of reflection at that time because there were lives to save, there was human life to save.

There was . . . thousands that we now know they managed to save. It’s extraordinary that they did that. They couldn’t afford – I won’t use the word “luxury” because it isn’t a luxury – they couldn’t afford the time to feel the pain of what they were going through.

That struck me as really – you know, it’s as brave as physical courage; it’s as brave as going out and facing those road blocks, just keeping going.

You said you have been back several times. Do you really want to go back much more?

I said to my wife, who’s looked at the effect of Rwanda on me, and she said, “You really should pull back from this.” And I said that I don’t want to go back any more, but after the anniversary, then that’s it.

But even as I say those words, I don’t think I can. Valentina will still be there. The graves of the people who died in Nyarubuye will still be there. The memory of my own failure to intervene on behalf of

people who were threatened, the memory of my own fear – all those things will be there. They don't go away.

And I suppose, you know, if I say I won't go back— Poor me. Nothing happened to me. I didn't see my family wiped out. I didn't see them buried alive in front of me. All I did was go for a couple of weeks and come out. But I can't, I can't say goodbye that easily.