

Laura Freeth at home on Mount Carmel farm in August 2000



In August 2009, the house was burnt down



OUT OF HOUSE AND HOME

Stripped of their land and forced to watch their house torched, Kent-born Ben Freeth and his family have seen first-hand the violence and unpredictability of Zimbabwe's authoritarian regime. Yet after beatings, torture and court battles, he still has hope for the hundreds of thousands of farmers and farmworkers who have lost their livelihoods to Robert Mugabe. By **Martin Fletcher**. Photographs by **Linette Frewin**



COURTESY OF BEN FREETH

The Freeth house in December 2000



Ben Freeth outside his ruined home in November 2016

Below The view from the garden in 2000



There is just birdsong now, birdsong and the sound of the breeze rustling the long, dry grass that surrounds Ben Freeth's ruined home.

'It's a little haven of peace,' the British-born farmer remarks wryly as he surveys the remains of the house that he and his wife, Laura, built with their own hands, of local materials, on the fertile plain of central Zimbabwe in 1997. This is where they raised their three children until Robert Mugabe's 'war vets' arrived eight years ago to sow not crops, but terror.

Only the walls still stand. Where once there were windows there are now gaping holes. Bushes grow in the debris that covers the floors. The wiring was stripped out long ago. 'That was the kitchen. This was the dining room, and over there the sitting room,' Freeth says.

Poignant reminders of happier days lie on the piles of bricks and fallen plaster – a bit of piano frame, broken flower pots, a rusted bread bin, sofa springs, a fridge door. Outside, dead leaves rot in the bottom of the empty swimming pool. Except for the brick paths, nature long ago reclaimed Laura's English flower garden. 'It's amazing how quickly man's efforts can be annihilated,' Freeth observes.

Beyond the pool is a mound of earth on which a gazebos used to stand. 'I remember sitting here, and nine giraffes wandered right past us. That was in 2008 or early 2009, and the last time I ever saw them. Now there's not an animal left,' he says.

From that same mound Freeth and his family watched, appalled, as their home burnt down at midday on August 30, 2009. They returned from church to find the war vets had set a fire beside some farmworkers' houses barely 100 yards away. There was a strong wind. The vegetation was tinder-dry. In no time the sparks set the thatched roof of their own house alight.

Freeth managed to grab the safe, his computers and a camera, but that was all. 'Within minutes the whole thing was ablaze. You couldn't go anywhere near it. It was an inferno.' As the house burnt, the war vets drove by on a stolen tractor with a 2,000-litre spray tank on the back. Instead of using it to extinguish the fire, they laughed. The family dog, Topsy, and cat, Brown, died in the fire.

Three days later those same thugs burnt down the nearby home of Laura's parents, Mike and Angela Campbell. The

family's long, courageous fight to keep their property – the most productive mango farm in Zimbabwe – was over. After years of being harassed, terrorised, abducted and beaten, they had finally been 'jambanja-ed' – forcibly evicted. They had paid the price for daring to take Mugabe to the highest court in southern Africa and winning; for being white in the land of a black despot who would rather see his people starve than lose his grip on power.

'It's horrific to see your home in ruins simply because you have the wrong coloured skin,' Freeth says. 'That, ultimately, was our crime.'

Tall and moustachioed, Freeth was born in Sittingbourne, Kent, in 1969. When he was 12, his father moved to Zimbabwe to set up a staff college for its new, post-independence army. Freeth fell in love with the country. He returned there after a year at the Royal Agricultural College in Cirencester, and in 1994 married Laura on her parents' 6,000-acre farm, Mount Carmel. He shows me the wedding site – a ring of rocks in a small wildlife reserve overlooking a dam on the Biri river built by his father-in-law.

The altar was made from old railway sleepers. Guests sat on hay bales. A friend played a piano on the back of a truck. 'It was a very happy day,' says Freeth. Today the dam leaks, the Biri River Safari Lodge is an empty shell, and the reserve's giraffes and impala, zebras and warthogs, eland and kudu are long gone – killed and eaten by war vets. Mike Campbell created the reserve. He loved the animals. In the last years of his life, he could not bear even to watch wildlife programmes on television. 'It was too painful,' says Freeth.

Freeth was employed by the Commercial Farmers Union, and witnessed the growth of Zimbabwean agriculture in



Above The Freeths' sitting room, and the exterior of their house, before it was destroyed

Below The homes of Mount Carmel farmworkers were also destroyed by fire in August 2009

the 1990s. 'Everyone was developing and building dams. They had diversified into everything under the sun. It was extraordinary what people could grow in this country and export to Europe. It was an era of huge successes and we were probably the fastest-growing economy in Africa.'

But in 2000 some white farmers made the mistake of backing the newly formed opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). Mugabe retaliated by unleashing veterans of the 1970s war of independence to punish the farmers and destroy a potential reservoir of MDC support among the country's million black farmworkers and their families.

Across the country, mobs loyal to Mugabe's ruling Zanu-PF party invaded farms. Drunk or high on *mbanja* (cannabis), armed with axes, machetes and *pangas* (long knives), they attacked, terrorised and occasionally killed the farmers, their families and their workers. They slaughtered cattle and pets, stole tractors and combine harvesters, destroyed crops, cut down trees and held all-night *pungwes* – indoctrination sessions with non-stop drumming and chanting around bonfires on the farmers' lawns. They frequently gave those farmers just hours to leave their properties, then ransacked their homes.

The police stood by and the courts did little, which was hardly surprising as at least 16 senior judges were on the long list of Zanu-PF cronies – ministers, MPs, army



commanders, district administrators, councillors, girlfriends – who received farms in the name of a land-redistribution programme supposed to help the indigenous poor. Robert and Grace Mugabe acquired 13 farms. All Zanu-PFs 56 politburo members, all 10 provincial governors and 98 MPs acquired at least one.

The first vets arrived at Mount Carmel in late-2000, moved into a hay shed and began a relentless campaign of harassment and intimidation. They also brought with them a virulent strain of malaria, which killed 11 workers and Freeth's sister-in-law, Heidi, who was pregnant with twins. 'If the land invasions hadn't happened she wouldn't have died,' says Freeth as he shows me her grave in the overgrown grounds of his in-laws' former house. Of the beautiful garden only a rampant bougainvillea remains.

In 2004, Nathan Shamuyarira, a former cabinet minister, claimed Mount Carmel. The next year, Zanu-PF amended the constitution to allow the government to seize land without offering recourse or compensation, and in 2006 it introduced two-year prison sentences for farmers who resisted. In 2007, Campbell and Freeth sued Mugabe before the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Tribunal.

It was an astonishingly bold step. 'The definition of appeasement is feeding the crocodile and hoping you'll be the last to be eaten,' Freeth explains. 'There were many times when we thought, "Why are we battling it out?" But at the back of our minds we were saying, "How dare these people get away with all these things, and what's going to happen if we do leave? Our farmworkers will be destitute and everything we've built up will be destroyed."'

On June 29, 2008, a fortnight before their case was due to be heard, Freeth and the ageing Mike and Angela Campbell were seized by war vets, trussed up, severely beaten with sticks and rifle butts, and driven into the bush, where their torture continued late into the night. Their abductors beat the bottom of Freeth's feet with *samboks* – whips made of hippopotamus hide. They put a burning stick into Angela Campbell's mouth, and forced her to sign – at gunpoint – a statement promising to drop the SADC case. At midnight, Freeth and the Campbells were dumped on a roadside, barely conscious.

All three had broken bones and faces bruised almost

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Above Laura in the ruins of the Freeth house, and Ben at his sister-in-law Heidi's grave, in the garden of his parents-in-law's home

beyond recognition. Freeth suffered a fractured skull, but attended the SADC hearing in Windhoek, Namibia, in a wheelchair with his head heavily bandaged. That November, the tribunal ruled that they should be allowed to live and work peacefully on their farm.

It was a moment of extreme euphoria. 'We were incredibly excited,' Freeth recalls. 'Here were black African judges ruling for the first time that white people have a place in Africa.' The plaintiffs and their lawyers hugged tearfully in the courtroom. But the celebrations proved premature.

Mugabe called the ruling a 'nonsense'. He declared, 'Our land issues are not subject to the SADC Tribunal.' A new group of armed war vets led by Lovemore Madangonda, alias Landmine, arrived at Mount Carmel to ratchet up the terror. They threatened to kill Freeth's children. They wrapped barbed wire around a horse's head and mouth. 'It was continual harassment – stealing cattle, poaching game, cutting down trees, getting in your face all the time,' says Freeth.

Finally, they burnt down the Campbells' and Freeths' homes. The family lost almost everything save, miraculously, a tattered black and white photograph of Angela as a very young girl that had sustained her father when he was a prisoner of war in Germany in the Second World War. He called it his 'lucky charm'.

Mike Campbell never really recovered from his injuries. 'His spirit to fight for justice carried on, but his will to live became difficult,' Freeth says. He died in 2011. He was buried on a neighbouring farm that was still white-owned, and hundreds of mourners, including many of his old farmworkers, attended his funeral.

The Freeths moved to Harare. In 2010, the British government pointedly awarded Freeth an MBE for services to farming. Today, he and Laura's brother, Bruce, farm 40 hectares of rented land while Laura runs a small cake business. 'It's hard to get by,' Freeth admits, quickly adding, 'But we are much better off than our farmworkers.'



Mugabe's land seizures did not just destroy the Freeths' livelihood. They destroyed that of their 500 workers and dependents, of the region and of the entire country.

Peter Asani, 69, Freeth's old foreman, and Sinos Bois, 58, who helped run the farm's irrigation system, meet us in the ruins of Freeth's house – loyal retainers who were beaten by war vets for supporting their mabhunus (white farmers). You can still feel the lump where Bois's skull was fractured by a steel bar.

Before the land invasions, both men earned a decent salary. They received food and housing. Their children attended school. A mobile health clinic visited twice a week. Laura ran a small embroidery business, which gave the farmworkers' wives an income.

Today they are hungry, emaciated and jobless. They have no electricity, and walk two miles for water. They survive on *sadza* – a maize porridge. If they and their families eat just once a day they can make a \$6 bucketful last five days.

Asani receives a tiny state pension, Bois nothing – 'Not two dollars, not one dollar, nothing.' Nothing to pay his grandchildren's school fees of \$15 a term. Nothing to buy seeds, though the rains have come and it is planting season. As opponents of Zanu-PF, they receive no government food aid. 'It was a good life, but we're starving now,' Asani says, though he lives in the middle of rich land.

We drive across the farm. Freeth watches nervously for war vets, but the land is desolate and abandoned. Where maize and sunflowers grew in abundance, scrubby thorn bushes have taken root. Fences have been torn down. Irrigation pipes are broken. The boreholes are disused. The tractors and other farm machinery disappeared long ago.

Many of the 40,000 trees in the mango and citrus orchards are dead or dying for lack of water. Some have been burnt because nobody extinguishes dry-season fires. Mount Carmel used to produce 1,200 tons of mangoes and oranges a year. Today it produces nothing.

Another former farmworker appears. Friday leans on a bicycle with no pedals because he has a prosthetic leg. Freeth explains that war vets sent him to fetch wood one night, and his tractor hit a school bus. Friday is carrying a catapult. He is looking for birds, he says. He needs food.

Near the old safari lodge a few squatters have commandeered small plots of land. They show no hostility. They too are desperate. 'We're growing maize but it's no good,'

Farming in Zimbabwe: then and now

Number of white-owned commercial farms in 2000: **4,500**. Number of white-owned commercial farms now: approximately **300**

Between 2000 and 2008, there were **21,491** recorded incidents of violence and intimidation

There are **2,200** relatives of Mugabe, ministers and other loyalists who own at least half the seized farms; **13** farms are owned by Mugabe and his wife

Maize production in 2000: **two million** tons. Estimated maize production in 2016: **500,000** tons

Wheat production in 2000: **250,000** tons. Estimated wheat production in 2016: **60,000** tons

Cotton production in 2000: **350,000** tons. Estimated cotton production in 2016: **32,000** tons

Cattle killed for beef in 2000: **605,000**. Cattle killed for beef in 2016: **244,000**

From 2000 to 2016, earnings from agricultural exports fell from **\$1.4 billion** to **\$700 million**

Sources: Commercial Farmers Union of Zimbabwe; Charles Laurie, *The Land Reform Deception* (Oxford University Press); Movement for Democratic Change; ZimOnline News

says Tawanda Mapepa, 21. From six hectares he coaxed just 12 bags in 2016 – a 60th of what Campbell would have produced on the same area. He complains that the government has provided no fertiliser or seeds for the coming season. Oblivious to the irony, he begs Freeth for help.

Mount Carmel is no exception. Of the 30 other farms in the district, just one still has white owners. Across the country, barely 300 of 4,500 white farmers survive, mostly because they have collaborated or paid protection money, or been overlooked because they are remote.

The result is catastrophic. Maize production has fallen from two million tons in 2000 to 500,000 in 2016, wheat from 250,000 to 60,000 tons. The number of cattle killed for beef has fallen from 605,000 to 244,000. Zimbabwe once fed much of southern Africa, but today a third of its roughly 13 million people urgently need food aid.

Freeth drives me to the nearby town of Chegutu, which is dominated by 12 towering silos. Each can hold 5,000 tons of grain, but an employee says just one is full, though the harvest has recently ended. Workers are unloading a goods train bearing maize from Mozambique. ‘This used to be the grain basket of southern Africa, and here we are importing maize to prevent us from starving,’ Freeth exclaims.

We visit Bain Farm Equipment, an agricultural supplier. ‘This would be full of new tractors, ploughs, harvesters and people. It would be a hive of activity at this time of year,’ Freeth says as we park on its forecourt. Now there are three bored employees, the last survivors of a 20-strong workforce. They have sold one tractor all year, and have two ox-drawn ploughs on display. ‘The new farmers don’t buy anything. They don’t have the money,’ says one.

Outside Chegutu we stop at the David Whitehead Textiles factory. It once employed 4,000 people, turning locally grown cotton into fabric, but closed in 2012. Today a few

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gaunt men guard the premises. They are paid four loaves of bread a day, and pass the time playing draughts with bottle tops on cardboard. They turn up in the forlorn hope that they will be first in the queue for jobs should the factory ever reopen. ‘If I don’t do this, what else will I do?’ says one.

The farm seizures did not only destroy Zimbabwe’s agricultural sector. They destroyed the many industries that relied on it. They destroyed the nation’s entire economy, leading to hyperinflation, empty shelves and ever greater repression by a regime desperate to retain power.

Freeth does what he can to help. Through the Mike Campbell Foundation, he teaches former farmworkers to grow their own food, supports other dispossessed farmers and documents land seizures, which continue to this day.

But mostly he waits. He waits for Mugabe, now 92 and visibly deteriorating, to die. He waits for the day when property rights and the rule of law are restored. Having been held in contempt of court three times, the regime managed to have the SADC Tribunal disbanded in 2012, but its ruling still stands.

‘Mugabe can’t last for ever,’ says Freeth. ‘The time may come when we have a government that says, “We want people to be employed, producing food, and economic activity to start coming into the country.” The time may come when they come to us and say, “We need to get this farm up and running again.” We will sit tight and wait and do what we can in our own little way.’

The rise of Robert Mugabe



1924 Born in Kutama, in what was then Southern Rhodesia. Educated at Kutama mission school and the University of Fort Hare, South Africa
1961 Marries Sally Hayfron, a Ghanaian
1964-1975 Imprisoned for subversion by Ian Smith’s white minority government
1975-79 Leads in liberation war from neighbouring Mozambique
1979 Signs Lancaster House peace agreement
1980 Wins independence elections
1983-87 Crushes Zapu opposition in Gukurahundi massacres
1996 Marries Grace Marufu, a State House secretary, four years after Sally’s death

1999 Opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) launched by Morgan Tsvangirai
2000 Loses constitutional referendum to increase powers. Unleashes the war veterans, who start seizing white-owned farms
2005 In Operation Murambatsvina, security forces using bulldozers and flamethrowers destroy the homes and livelihoods of 700,000 slum dwellers
2008 Loses first round of presidential election to Tsvangirai. Violence against MDC supporters forces Tsvangirai to withdraw from second round. Hyperinflation reaches 500 billion per cent
2009-13 Forced to establish a government of national unity. The US dollar becomes legal tender
2013 Mugabe and his Zanu-PF party steal elections and restore one-party rule
2016 Protests erupt in urban centres. Regime introduces bond notes because Zimbabwe is running out of US dollars. Mugabe, 92, insists he will seek re-election in 2018

GETTY IMAGES

Back in Harare, Freeth and I drive to a handsome villa set in large, walled grounds. This is the house of Nathan Shamuyarira, the former cabinet minister who claimed the farm. He died in 2014, but his widow, Dorothy, is still alive, and Freeth wants to try to meet her.

To our surprise, a gardener opens the steel gate without asking who we are. A maid admits us when we knock on the front door, and there she is – an elderly, well-fed woman in a wheelchair who visibly starts when Freeth introduces himself. She knows full well who he is, but cannot escape.

Freeth, a devout Christian, asks how she is. He commiserates on her husband’s death. Then he gently explains how the farm is abandoned, the orchards are dying, the people starving. He invokes commandments – ‘You shall not steal,’ and, ‘You shall not covet your neighbour’s house.’ He asks if she would consider letting someone else farm the land.

Dorothy Shamuyarira looks acutely uncomfortable. She fidgets, staring out of the window at her well-tended garden. Though physically disabled, she is mentally sharp. At first she insists she has plans for the farm, and tells Freeth he was wrong to seek legal redress, but then she clams up. ‘You will have to ask the government,’ she replies to Freeth’s questions. I ask if she feels any regret at what happened. ‘I’m not going to comment,’ she says.

After 30 minutes, we leave. ‘God bless you,’ Freeth tells Shamuyarira with a magnanimity he does not really feel. ‘It was an opportunity for her to show some little bit of remorse for the destruction that’s taken place and the lives that have been ruined, but there was none,’ he says as we drive away.

‘Why did they take the farm? Its not for any material benefit for themselves, the community or society. They took it as a child takes another child’s toy and throws it in the bin.’ *Martin Fletcher’s visit to Zimbabwe was financed by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting*

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