

Small Wars: Sadie Jones - Chatto & Windus, 2009, Reviewed by Elayne Jude
Hal Treherne, exemplary scion of an ancient Army family, loves Clara, an English rose. With her dark blue eyes, red lipstick and pale skin, she is his red, blue and white girl. They marry. Hal is posted to Germany. Twins are born. For many years they live happily and quietly in Krefeld. In January 1956, Hal is promoted to Major. The family is sent to the British protectorate of Cyprus.

EOKA (Ethniki Organosis Kyprion Agoniston's) campaign for union with Greece was bloody. The insurgency claimed 371 British servicemen. British attitudes changed largely due to the radical shift in Imperial foreign policy following Suez in 1957. It's a small war, dirty, asymmetric, and the civilian population were, inevitably, implicated, and suspect.

In Sadie Jones' mesmeric novel, bombings are followed by retribution, British squaddies on National Service vent their grief on the 'wogs', confessions are extracted from teenage boys under torture. Under pressure to cover up crimes and preserve the good name of the regiment and the image of the righteous Empire, moral and military codes are eroded, and personal integrity disintegrates.

Hal, the model Major, destabilised by the violence and his role in it, begins to unravel. He becomes hopelessly alienated from Clara, sending her away from the barracks at Episkopi to Nicosia so that she may be protected from the terror, but also as a means of walling up his own humanity. He loves the Army; he loves his England; he loves his wife. None of this is compatible with what he sees in the guardroom by accident, where suspects are hooded and waterboarded, or can prevent him from sending a fifteen year old boy caught with a gun in his bicycle basket to a similar fate. His sense of justice is exploded when an interpreter comes to him as a witness to soldiers' rape and murder of Cypriot villagers; worse, when the interpreter withdraws his allegations at the summary hearing, and Hal realises it's at the behest of his father's old friend and his commanding officer.

Jones remorselessly captures the painful ambivalence of the interpreter, Davis, unable to sustain his self-image as a decent man, and unwilling to surrender it:

The boy was kept awake, standing, for hours at a time, and with each interrogation, seeing his deterioration, Davis jumped through the same hoops in the circus of his mental process. Steeped in shame, he condemned himself, but always, in the back of his mind the thought: "This is still within the realms of the acceptable. If something really bad were to happen, I'd do something."

He knew he had failed before, that Clara's husband had been right to call him a moral coward, but he couldn't easily give up the idea of himself as honourable. He clung to the notion that he had a limit, that his threshold lay somewhere, uncrossed, and ready to save him, if only he were given the opportunity.

Hal does not let himself off the hook. The choice he makes is his best hope of self-preservation and recovery. Baffling to his superiors, inexplicable to his military family, misinterpreted by his father-in-law, he attempts to reconcile his warrior's code of honour and loyalty with his inescapable realisation that change must come. To himself, broken down and humiliated; to the emotional inarticulacy of his marriage; to the beloved, rotten Army; to a deeper England, symbolised by the oak leaf on his badge. It's an end of illusions.

When he was a child, home from school for the holidays, and alone again, he had played toy soldiers. His armies were vast and loved. At the back of the house, on the first floor, was a long landing, with doors on one side and cold windows on the other. The wooden floor had a runner down the middle, with brass fixings at each end, worn patches where the stitching had faded and gone. Hal would lie on his tummy with the lined-up battalions, their cannon and cavalry, all the flags, the minute courageous figures of his dreams. Above him, painted soldiers looked down from dull gilt frames all the way along the landing.

They had seemed to smile at him. He had not felt alone. He had been surrounded by legions. But now it came suddenly and coldly into his head that, really, there had been nobody else there with him at all.

Published in 2009, it's a timely read when Kenyans tortured sixty years ago have just been given the right to pursue their claims against the British in a British court of law. Jones's book is also larger than any particular conflict. In its address of honourable people in dishonourable circumstances and its mapping of the tragic drift of traumatised soldiers from their loved ones, this book is timeless.