

# Remembrance of death and destruction

C Stephen Baldwin recollects his days in the prenatal Bangladesh during a conversation with Raffat Binte Rashid

STEPHEN BALDWIN – an attorney, an arbitrator and a demographer – has specialised in complex international negotiations and conflict resolution. Currently on the arbitration panels of a number of impartial organisations, Baldwin previously occupied senior positions in the United States and overseas with the Ford Foundation, the Population Council, and, for twenty-one years, the United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs. He has developed alternative dispute resolution expertise in employment matters as chair of the United Nations Joint Appeals Board, where he deals with and resolves complex staff-management disputes including discrimination and sexual harassment issues.

A graduate of Amherst College, Yale Law School and a Ford Foundation/Population Council Fellow at Princeton University, Baldwin was the Assistant Representative for Pakistan of the Ford Foundation, Dacca, East Pakistan during 1970-71. Currently he is writing a book about his days in the prenatal Bangladesh.

Recently, during a captivating conversation with *The Daily Star*, Baldwin recollected his days in the prenatal Bangladesh. Excerpts:

**Raffat Binte Rashid (RBR): You were in Bangladesh when it was going through rough times in its struggle to be independent from a ruler, who was making lives of the Bengalis as miserable as possible from thousands of miles away. Mother Nature was equally cruel, unleashing on the country one of the most devastating cyclone in the annals of mankind. Will you talk about your experience in Bangladesh during the early 1970s?**

**C Stephen Baldwin (CSB):**

On that fateful Friday, the 13th of November 1970, a day I spent driving to and from Comilla, one of the worst cyclones in recorded human history struck the Bay of Bengal area in full force in the early morning hours. Our share in Dhaka was only a bit of rain and some wind squalls in early morning, bringing out sweater-clad Bengalis to fight the seventy-degree winter chill, but by afternoon we'd returned to an early taste of Baishakh's breezeless burn, typical of the Bengali calendar's hot spring.

Early reports from the affected areas were, as usual, incomplete, but as they increased in detail over the next couple of days it was clear this would be one of East Pakistan's worst disasters ever, if not the world's. This, from a fateful coincidence of circumstances: the storm thrust landward at the height of the Aman monsoon season harvest, while hundreds of thousands of 'extra' landless Bengalis joined landholders in the rich Bay of Bengal area to harvest the unclaimed, rich, ever-changing flat sandbank islands that'd seeded months before.

Sleeping on these chars, the largest of which lay hundreds of yards across, totally flat and never more than a few inches above water during calm and windless weather, these people huddled at the storm's complete mercy when its demonic winds and accompanying wall of water struck just after midnight, following a deceptive lull.

The local paper carried a series of front-page pictures relentlessly depicting floating and decomposing bodies, bodies stacked neatly, dead children hanging from trees, corpses awaiting disposal. The background stayed the same: a drying sea of mud left behind by receding waters, randomly distributed clumps of pitiful belongings.

Reports of the usual sluggish and corruption-tainted government efforts to respond abounded. Fed up, a bunch of Cholera Lab colleagues, Bengali friends and we hurriedly collected enough money from the Western community so some of us could travel to the most affected area near Chittagong, buy things we knew the people really needed, like rice, kerosene, blankets, and cooking oil, and try to see that it got to them in time to do some good.

We rented a large country boat there, loaded our goods,

were joined by a few students from Chittagong University who'd heard of our quest through the Bengali grapevine, and sailed off into the Bay of Bengal to find a place where we'd be useful.

The first island, Hatiya, was a great disappointment. It was large and therefore relatively unaffected by the storm, its large open markets brimming with goods and healthy-looking people. We topped off our supplies with some last-minute supplements and sailed further west, for we'd been told there was a three-island chain. Manpura, just a few miles away that rumours said was devastated. As our boat approached the island through sparkling sun and mirrored sea, we knew we'd found the right place.

Even before reaching the mainland, dead bodies in groups and alone floated quietly in the still waters, while bloated human and animal corpses lay rotting in the sun, bobbing ever so gently in the shallows along the shore. From a distance they appeared as darkish clumps, but as we drew nearer the terrible stench confirmed what we hardly believed possible. We established a beach head with our backs to the sea, enlisted a few of the pathetic foot-kissing survivors who met us as coolie labour to unload our goods, set up a crude distribution line, and got to work handing out rice, kerosene, mustard oil, cookies for kids, milk, small kerosene lamps and matches, cups, bowls, saris for the women, and lungis (a kind of sarong worn by men).

Memories sear forever against that background of improbable bright blue sky: children's pipe-stem arms straining to hold food and clothes already received, trying desperately to accommodate the containers of milk I handed out, stumbling off dazed to stuff themselves in silence. Over and over holding freshly opened cans of condensed milk to children's lips to urge "Dood! Khan!" ("Drink! Milk!") and watch dull suspicious eyes widen in delight after the first tentative swallow.

A small child standing by the beach alone, eyes fixed on a young woman's sprawled leg-spread purplish corpse. Old men carrying long staffs poked rotted bodies back into the sea in hopes a gentle tide would float them away and not, eternally, back. These were not bodies from Manpura but unknown harvesters from distant sandbanks; they buried their own. A penetrating stench of death rose from those bodies as strong breezes blew shoreward around mid-morning, forcing even the strongest of us to wrap strips of cloth around mouths and noses.

All this against a background of searing heat and insistent Bengali babble from men squatting down to wolf their food right after leaving the narrow roped corridor we'd made to keep people in some semblance of order. The few women we saw saved their food for those still at home. Two little girls with fixed dark eyes stumbled down the line stooped under the large vase-shaped dekshi bows normally only adult women carried; they were their families, only survivors. One Cholera Lab doctor borrowed my Swiss Army knife to perform instant surgery on a pus-swollen hand. We found mud in the unboiled drinking water we'd been sipping up against the heat during the six hours of unbroken work we put in before sunset kept us from more, but we ate nothing and the work we were doing did not make us hungry.

We estimated serving between a thousand and twelve hundred men, women and children that first endless day. At night we slept out in sleeping bags after brushing our teeth and urinating through the evening mist over still corpses washed ashore. Next morning, before returning to Hatiya to replenish our store of goods, we scraped what was left into a small mound and paid off our local volunteers moments before the massed crowd, circling like wolves around their prey, closed in to pick over the scraps. Jon and I, unofficially leading the group and coincidentally both Amherst graduates and fraternity brothers, bounced back to base over the flat water in a Boston whaler to organise supplies. We stopped for a few minutes at a nearby char lying inches

above sea level, flat and barren-looking as a Scottish moor though in fact more fertile than a river-bed, death-lonely and horrible in silence. The two of us stood for a moment in all that emptiness considering what it must have been like two short days before, crowds of harvesters shrieking panicked from rolled blankets to face the towering black wave and howling wind, then dying.

Heading back to camp on Hatiya, pockets of gassy ripeness reminded us death was never far away as we crept down a narrow unlit road in our hired rickshaw looking for food, shelter, and rest. There'd been little time to let the full scale and intensity of the horror really register, for our minds and bodies had been protected, as in battle, by simply coping. Lying on top of my sleeping bag a little later, I finally had time to recall that first incredible sight of distant death, bodies clogging the island's shoreline as far as we could see, the close-up stench, awful swelling, discoloured and disfigured. I pored over stark images of horror-scarred survivors, faces, their struggles to eat for the first time in days, to break through dull resignation and regain their accustomed friendliness and warmth.

That was Manpura, where we learned to cope with death and disaster combining natural skills and energy with the ability to learn from "peasants" themselves and thus, over the weeks we went there first, elevate "Operation HELP" from one of scores of private efforts to the most successful of them all. It eventually moved from rescue, on to rehabilitation, finally into effective rural institutional reorganisation and innovation over the months it operated before a civil war following on the cyclone's heels slowed HELP's pace and that of all such operations for well over a year.

The government's own efforts, and those of nearly everybody else, were limited to dumping goods contributed from abroad in mounds, often from hovering helicopters, in the far-fetched hope they'd be distributed fairly, somehow, among survivors. This led inevitably to yet more horrifying TV and newspaper pictures of people battling each other for whatever they could get, and a lot of sanctimonious head-shaking over "survival of the fittest" and the brutish nature of man.

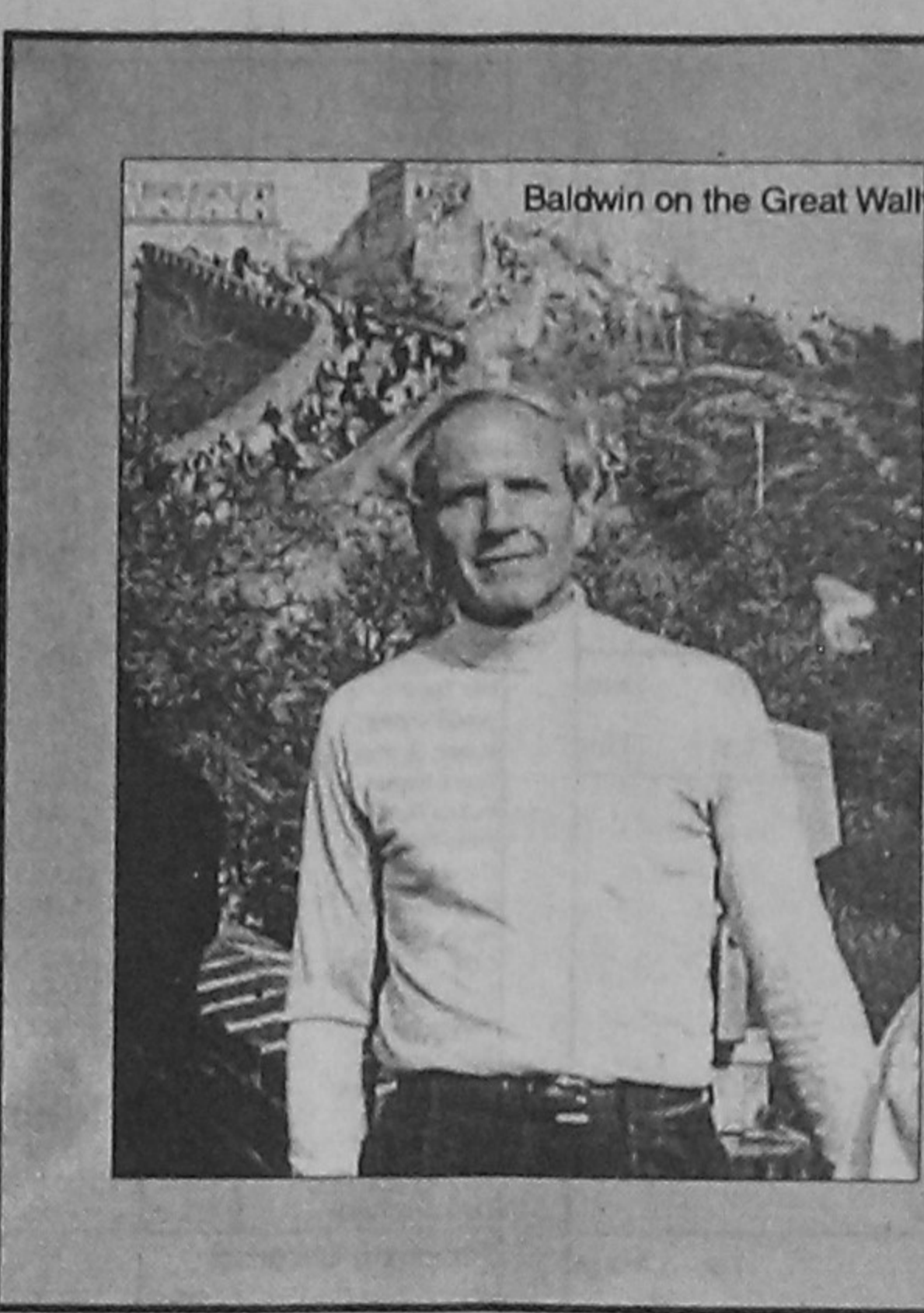
Before I left Manpura, and after doing a long period of work, we did a comprehensive census of the three-island chain: under thirteen thousand people remained from some forty thousand before the storm. Only a single pucca building was still standing; the others, constructed of inferior materials by crooked contractors, had been swept away with the great preponderance of kutcha houses. It was strangely quiet, for no birds or insects remained but somehow only snakes.

**RBR: Which part of the country were you in during 1971? Were you there as a diplomat or a journalist? Can you recall your experience in that war-ravaged country?**

**CSB:** The morning of March 26 I drove to work through the suburb where we lived, wondering vaguely why the streets were so much more deserted than usual and what was causing the distant sound of thunder since the skies were clear.

When I arrived, my assistant told me I'd just broken a "shoot to kill" curfew and that the West Pakistani Army had struck in full force late the night before. The few advisers we had left, staying for safety in the staff apartment at my offices, had spent most of the night on the roof listening to a heavy artillery barrage and the rattle of machine-gun and rifle fire in the neighbourhood and, sounding more intense, from the centre of town. They'd watched tracers stream across the horizon and the glow of huge fires spreading; a pall of smoke was still visible from the roof when I arrived, clattering heavy machine-gun fire a constant background until shortly before noon.

I'd managed to sleep through it all, my room air-conditioning blotting out any noise from outside, but later my servants showed me the spent machine-gun round that came through my



*Baldwin on the Great Wall*

*Countries do not lose the war of development, ever; it's more a question of how fast or slowly they win. Bangladesh is clearly not in the front of the pack right now, but it has one enormous resource that make me optimistic over the long haul Bangladeshis.*

dining-room window and imbedded itself waist-high in my daughters' door.

**RBR: What caught your attention the most, was it the tailored genocide, the collaborators, the torture on women or the freedom fighters' effort to fight back?**

**CSB:** We watched two arrogant Punjabi soldiers kick and pummel a couple of Bengalis, load them on the bus they'd been desperately trying to conceal from Army looting, and drive them around the corner.

Since it never emerged, we assumed they'd been shot. There being nothing further I could do at the office, our telephone dead, I played hide-and-seek with a couple of Army patrol jeeps and drove home. From my own roof I saw clouds of smoke still billowing downtown, an occasional Army helicopter buzzing by low on patrol, and several jeeps skidding around corners filled with Punjabis in full battle dress, rifles leveled and searching, bayonets fixed. Next day, during a partial lifting of the curfew, Jon Rohde and I got together and rode around town in his little Volkswagen trying to document the reports of burned houses, missing families, scorched bodies, and rampant terror that our frightened Bengali friends had provided. It wasn't hard to do, although once again we had to keep moving a step ahead of the patrolling jeeps.

Peaceful Hindu herdsmen's two small villages, at the centre of Ramna Race-track, lay burning and riddled from artillery and small arms fire, clumps of bodies strewn about on the track and central green. The few remaining villagers we talked to were dazed and terrified. A lonely half-naked body lay emblematic on the sidewalk before dazzling white High Court buildings whose proud black flag of a new self-proclaimed Bangladesh had been replaced, like all such flags everywhere, by the fluttering green and white paper flags of Pakistan the Army had distributed. In the Old City, especially the narrow-laned Hindu and mixed Hindu/Moslem bazaars, bodies lay everywhere we could see.

The entire area had been burned out and shelled to rubble, and the smell of burning flesh followed us throughout. A small crowd of anguished, panicked Hindus ran up for help and guided us through narrow alleys into the home of a prosperous shopkeeper who lay dead in his own living-room, shot minutes before in broad daylight by a Punjabi patrol for protesting when they demanded he open his store so they could loot it. Just down the lane we found sixteen more bodies in a single household, but now our guides insisted we take our cameras and run before the next patrol found us.

We passed through other bazaars on the way home where bodies lay strewn about on the streets and sidewalks. More smoke, smells of charred human flesh, dazed clumps of men huddled together speaking softly on the streets, beneath the fluttering gay green banners. It was even worse at the University. The Hindu Students' Residential Hall had been attacked and shelled point-blank by a tank whose tread-marks were followed through the breach it made in the surrounding compound wall to where it stopped, only a few dozen

feet from the hostel's front entrance. Rooms inside were slick and wet with blood, a raw mass grave outside concealing all but a single student's body.

A few yards further down the road several bloody corpses could be seen behind the servant's quarters, however. When we gathered to compare notes with other patrolling friends back at Jon's house they provided details we would just as soon have missed; entire families lay murdered in the University's faculty quarters, children slaughtered in bed, pregnant women deliberately shot in the stomach, left to die with foetuses exposed.

We documented the murder of a number of top faculty members and the escape of only a few, later joined by other members of the thin upper crust of Bengali intellectuals and leaders helped by a foreigner-assisted "underground railway" to escape from Dhaka, eventually across the border to India. The precious slender Shaheed Minar memorial spire honouring Bengali martyrs killed in an earlier Bengali Language rebellion in 1952, lay shattered, and a shell had blown a huge hole through the belfry of St. Francis Church.

Neat, pathetic little heaps of straw and ash marked where Bengali slum-dwellers tried unsuccessfully to make homes and survive, while everywhere hard-faced Punjabi soldiers tore around in trucks and jeeps brandishing bazookas, machine-guns, and rifles, contempt and hatred filling the cold dark eyes.

**RBR: What made you want to report to the West about what was happening in East Pakistan?**

**CSB:** By this time, it became clear someone needed to get out to tell the world what had happened, that the West Pakistani government had begun no less than full-scale genocide in the East, with a cold, calculated plan to eliminate a generation of leaders and potential leadership from a nation that, despite a population of over seventy million, making it in its own right one of the world's largest, had few leaders to spare.

We'd learned the foreign press, housed in the inter-con for the month of strikes and demonstrations preceding crackdown, had been evacuated en masse by the

Pakistan authorities just prior to their strike. Taken to the airport in buses with blacked out windows, they could only guess the fate of those left behind, and our own short-wave radios confirmed that so far only speculation informed the outside world.

Since I'd drawn a relatively low number in the lottery for airline tickets that had been held for remaining foreigners, all of my foreign staff had left and the Foundation's physical stock was in the competent hands of my local administrative officer, Mr. Osmani, my friends and I agreed I should be the one to release the information we had accumulated.

From what we'd been able to observe so far, taking friends to the airport, the military occasionally searched passengers' luggage but rarely their hand-carried bags and briefcases. So I loaded up the file compartments of my large black Samsonite briefcase with miscellaneous office files and sprinkled into them Jon's precious role of film, my January-March diary pages, an early list of Bengali notables confirmed dead and, on the bottom of my cufflink case, three Polaroid shots I'd taken of the dead Hindu shopkeeper, which I was reasonably sure I could claim was from my days of doing cyclone relief work a few months earlier, if challenged.

As it happened, the search couldn't have gone worse. Leaving my person untouched, they went through all the luggage first, even unscrewing shoetrees, and then the young Pakistani Army intelligence officer began his patient reading of my files, page by page. I started blustering something like "These are official Ford Foundation files and you have no business looking at them." But he quietly overlooked this, only bothering to ask, "Is this Ford Foundation business?" when he ran across my diary entries for the preceding days and then, a little later, an actual hand-printed Bangladesh flag that I'd been reckless enough to include. He confiscated everything he thought might be incriminating, including nine reels of home movies Sandy and I had made of our lives in Asia, saying, "All of these will be returned to you in due course." But, naturally, they never were. In re-

sponse to my repeated requests through the Foundation, months thereafter, I finally received a single document back. In late June: a copy of the first Christmas letter we'd mailed out so enthusiastically not quite a year earlier.

The search continued under the watchful eyes and levelled rifle of a stony-faced Punjabi soldier, so there was a limit to how much I could complain when my passport was taken from me and I was told it would be returned when we landed in Karachi. On the plane I went to the lavatory and memorised the latest little list of names Jon had given me before burning it, then made friends with my seatmate, a German press officer and former secretary to Willy Brandt.

I told him what had happened and he promised to contact my uncle, Al Friendly, in London to let him know when I'd last been seen, in case I didn't re-sur-face after landing in Karachi. He introduced me to the Bengali editor of *Interwive*, one of the few excellent and reasonably dispassionate national periodicals at the time. With his wife, both proudly dressed in Bengali clothing, he was bound for Islamabad to close down the journal, which he said he'd "refuse to allow further operation after what I've seen."

Flying on a West Pakistani-run airplane, surrounded by hostile enemies who even then continued their campaign of genocide against his kind, this man, who had known their prisons before, for openly stating his beliefs spoke directly and calmly. He gave me hope and helped renew my own courage. It was a very long ride, for the Indians were forcing all Pakistani airplanes to fly around the country instead of allowing them, as previously, over-flight privileges between the two wings. After we'd stopped for fuel in Ceylon, I mustered my courage and demanded to see the pilot.

Strangely, he actually came back from the cockpit, a compact man in a sharp creased khaki uniform sporting a curling black Sandhurst moustache, and politely asked in a clipped British accent what I wanted. I demanded the return of my passport in a loud voice, adding I was an American citizen and that they had no right to take it. Irritably, he promised "as an officer and a gentleman" to return it to me personally before we landed. And he did.

In Karachi I was searched again, and this time much was made of the little black book my girl friend Mikel had given me years before, where I wrote occasional poems. This was apparently considered a direct contradiction to my claim of being Assistant Representative for the Ford Foundation and *prima facie* evidence instead of my real profession, that of journalist/spy. After what under other circumstances would have been an amusing cross-cultural debate on what constituted the legitimate boundaries of professionalism, they reluctantly returned the poetry and, an added and unexpected dividend, a roll of undeveloped film I didn't even know I had.

Later, I found it only contained pictures of Bengali tapestries, but my Polaroid shots got through undetected.

**RBR: How did you report the situation to the West, when the West was not taking the East Pakistan problem seriously?**

**CSB:** At the Foundation staff flat I immediately made arrangements to get on the first flight out of Karachi for London the next morning and then unburdened myself emotionally over supper to one of our best advisers in either wing, an old public health/family planning veteran in Asia, Penny Satterthwaite. We ended up in tears, for she too was a lover of Bengal and knew practically everyone I listed as murdered. Next morning, as soon as the military security officers left the airplane and we began taxiing for take-off, I started to write down everything I could from memory. I'd cabled Uncle Al my arrival information and his

chauffeur and limousine met me at the airport and took me directly to the *Washington Post* headquarters downtown, although it was already after ten in the evening. He greeted me with a hug in his office and asked if I wanted to do a story with him.

Of course I said yes, and by midnight we filed it with the *Post* in Washington, then had the driver take us to a late-night French place he knew for the best meal I'd had in years. Next morning we learned the *Post* had spiked the story, having just run one on the basis of less informed speculation, but over lunch with his friend Louis Herron, a *London Times* editor, we mentioned what had happened and he asked if he could use our piece, for he recognised what the *Post* hadn't: this constituted real news. Mine was indeed the first verifiable report (even if my Polaroid pictures weren't good

enough to use) of genocide, and it was an important slant on the news. Al and I agreed. We sent it over, and the following morning, boarding my flight for New York, I bought the *Times* and there saw my story, the second front-page lead. Back in New York the Foundation asked me to make a presentation in the auditorium and so I gave a passionate address on the cyclone/tidal wave, which I further documented with a roll of home movie pictures I'd taken on Manpura, and the genocide. Norman Cousins, editor of the *Saturday Review*, was in the audience and came up afterwards. He wanted to discuss my writing an article on the place everyone was now calling by its new name, Bangladesh, and we made an appointment to talk the following week.

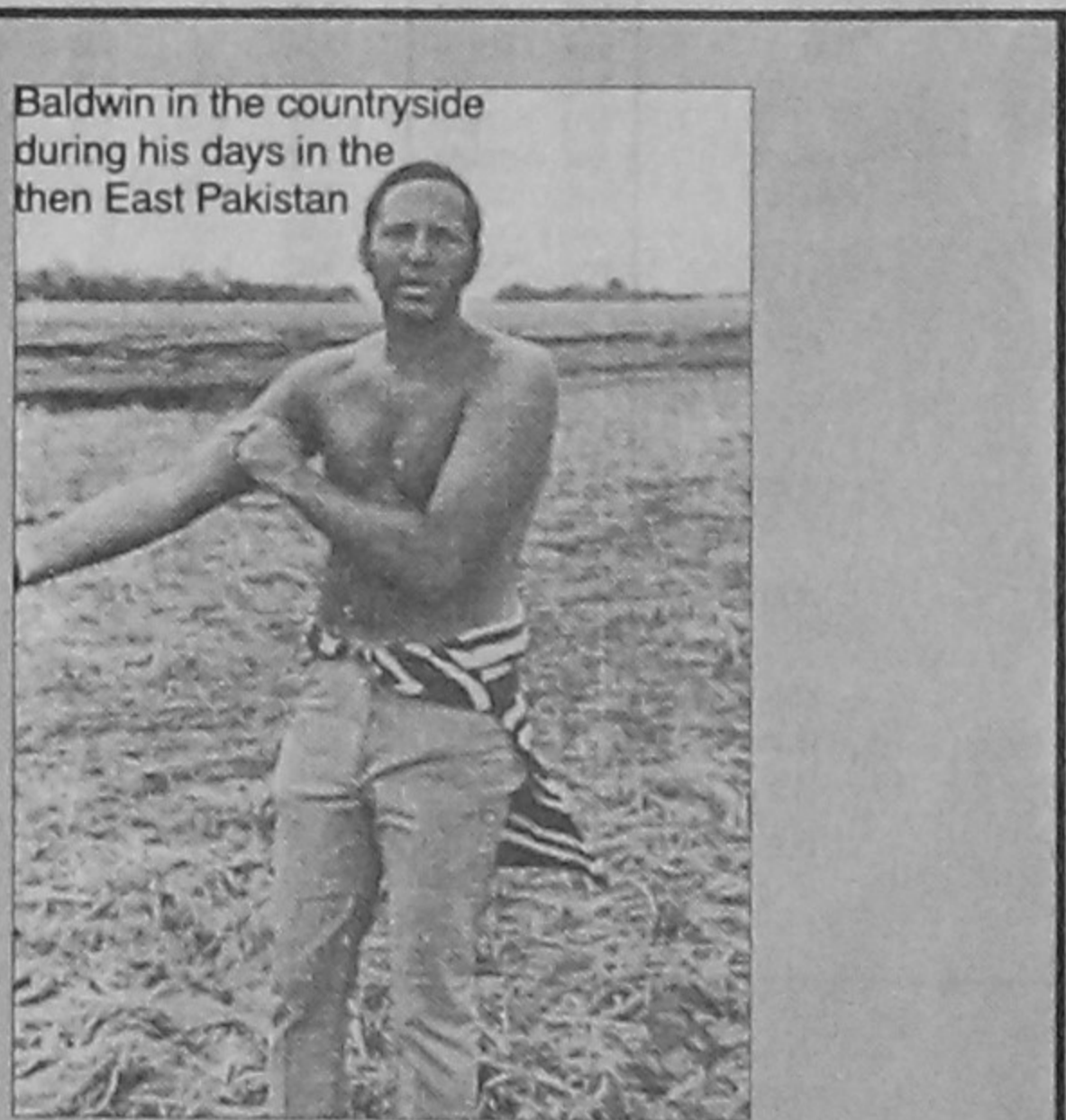
My article later ran in the *Review*, including a then pessimistic formulation, which the *New York Times* later quoted in its lead editorial, to the effect that "Bangladesh will be on the world dole as long into the future as reasonable men can see." More elegant than Henry Kissinger's "basket-case" formulation, but hardly more positive. I was fortunate to return to Bangladesh a couple of times after leaving, once fairly early on – in about 1975, the other time in late 1998. Not much had changed in 1975; indeed, the country was still understandably reeling from the war. But in late 1998 I got a different feeling, especially because of the documented progress that has been made in the population and development area.

**RBR: You are a diplomat and you have seen a lot of countries being born. How would you evaluate post-war Bangladesh? Do you feel we won a war but lost another while developing it? How do you evaluate Bangladesh, just the country?**

**CSB:** Look, it is awfully hard to bring a place like Bangladesh up to speed without a great deal of help and luck, luck often seeming to have forgotten the place. But Bengalis are an intelligent and resourceful people. I hardly need to tell you, and while the country's population has doubled since I lived there, while everyone said it couldn't even survive if that happened, it has, and it has modestly progressed. Two big problems continue to plague it: the first is political fragility, if not outright instability; the second is relative inattention from the outside world, notwithstanding an apparently large presence by outside agencies. Also, it needs better luck: the natural gas deposits should turn out to be gold mines, or oil should be found in the Bay of Bengal, or some of the big western companies should decide Bangladesh is the next place to find relatively inexpensive labour to make their goods.

But, in my experience, countries do not lose the war of development, ever; it's more a question of how fast or slowly they win. Bangladesh is clearly not in the front of the pack right now, but it has one enormous resource that make me optimistic over the long haul – Bangladeshis.

Few excerpts from Stephen Baldwin's forthcoming book are also run into the interview, with the permission of the author.



*Baldwin in the countryside during his days in the then East Pakistan*

*A small child standing by the beach alone, eyes fixed on a young woman's sprawled leg-spread purplish corpse. Old men carrying long staffs poked rotted bodies back into the sea in hopes a gentle tide would float them away and not, eternally, back. These were not bodies from Manpura but unknown harvesters from distant sandbanks; they buried their own. A penetrating stench of death rose from those bodies as strong breezes blew shoreward around mid-morning, forcing even the strongest of us to wrap strips of cloth around mouths and noses.*