

## The “Terrible Loneliness”: Loneliness and Worry in Settler Women’s Memoirs from East and South-Central Africa, 1890-1939.

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**Abstract:** Descriptions of loneliness and worry fill settler women’s memoirs from British Africa. Despite this prevalence, scholars rarely discuss such emotions at length. This paper explores the themes of loneliness and worry in the memoirs of female settlers from British East and South-Central Africa, 1890-1939. The majority are drawn from Kenya and Rhodesia, and include authors such as Karen Blixen, Elspeth Huxley, Hylda Richards, Jessie Currie, Ruth Fisher, and Mathilde Goy. Unpacking through a close textual analysis what women meant by loneliness and worry, and how they explained those feelings, this paper positions loneliness and worry as crucial aspects of settler women’s colonial memoirs and a defining feature of their experiences of British Africa.

Jessie Monteath Currie’s arrival in Africa was not auspicious. Leaving England in 1892, she travelled to Africa to join her husband on a mission in the British Central African Protectorate (present-day Malawi).<sup>1</sup> They had been married just a fortnight when he had left for Africa, one year earlier.<sup>2</sup> She travelled up the Zambezi River to meet him, the heat rapidly exhausting and depressing her. “I am daily feeling weaker from the extreme heat,” she wrote, “I feel so exhausted that I can hardly crawl from the boat.”<sup>3</sup> As they sailed up the river, her expectations dwindled. She had “a foolish feeling that this journey will never end,” and commented that “I have long since resigned myself to fate” and “how bitter and horrible I have grown.”<sup>4</sup> When she finally met her husband, their reunion was passionless and impersonal.<sup>5</sup>

Currie and her husband journeyed to their home on Mount Mulanje, which she translated as “the hill of good-bye.”<sup>6</sup> Her life on the mission—a lowered standard of living, geographical and social isolation, and severe malaria—undermined her mental health. She “awoke each morning with a sense of great depression” and “had a strange desire for something unusual to happen, anything in fact to break the monotony and terrible loneliness.”<sup>7</sup> With her husband and the mission doctor as the only Europeans in the area, she longed to see another white woman.<sup>8</sup> Time did not sweeten Mount Mulanje. Although she had moments of enjoyment, she explained that “I was dull and languid; the present seemed to hold me in a stifling grasp...I confess it now, that sometimes in those later days I lay down in the little summer-house in the garden, wishing I would die there and then.”<sup>9</sup> Not long afterwards, Currie and her husband returned to England.<sup>10</sup>

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This paper explores settler women's literary representations of loneliness, worry, boredom and sadness in white women's memoirs from East and South-Central Africa, primarily Kenya and Rhodesia, between 1890 and 1939. Through a close reading of women's memoirs, such as Currie's, it unpacks how women described and explained these feelings in print. In some ways, settler women in British Africa shared much with women in other colonies throughout the British Empire (and in the United States), such as loneliness following migration and worry while establishing farms. Other factors, however, distinguish the British African experience from that of women in other colonies. The presence of the particularly deadly *falciparum* malaria and blackwater fever, the African wildlife, public worries about tropical neurasthenia and mental deterioration in the tropics, and the very strong geographic isolation of rural settlers all contributed to the specificity of the colonial experience in Africa.

### Settler Women and Colonial Memoirs

Currie and her husband were at the beginning of a wave of immigration from Britain and Europe into newly occupied African territories. Britons travelled to freshly annexed territories in East and South-Central Africa as colonial officials, missionaries, traders, and farmers and miners. The white populations of Kenya and Rhodesia rose rapidly in the early twentieth century; indeed, Kenya's white population tripled between 1905 and the outbreak of World War One.<sup>11</sup> By 1914, over five thousand white people had moved into Kenya.<sup>12</sup> The population continued to grow rapidly in the interwar period.<sup>13</sup>

The two main colonies for permanent white settlement in the region were Kenya and Rhodesia, although those populations were still very small compared to the local African population. Other areas in the region had far smaller numbers of white residents (Nyasaland, for example). Despite numerous cultural similarities, Kenya and Rhodesia nevertheless had substantial social differences. In neither colony was there room for white working class migrants—these economic spaces were filled using local labor. However, in Rhodesia there were jobs for white artisans, clerks, and small business owners, while in Kenya these roles were generally the purview of Indian migrants.<sup>14</sup> While both colonies drew their white populations from the middle and upper classes, in Kenya the preferred migrant was firmly from the upper echelons of British society. Seen as the officer's colony, it had the reputation of being settled by the younger sons of British aristocrats.<sup>15</sup>

The women discussed here almost universally came to Africa as wives. Their husbands' careers were diverse: missionaries, farmers, miners, and officials from the colonial service. Missionary wife Jessie Currie is accompanied in these pages by several other missionary women. Mathilde Goy and her husband travelled to a mission station on the Zambezi River in 1889. Her residence ended in tragedy after her seven month old son and then her husband died of fever, forcing her to leave.<sup>16</sup> Annie Hore journeyed with her husband, a London Missionary Society missionary, in the early 1880s to their mission station on Lake Tanganyika. Interestingly, Hore's *To Lake Tanganyika in a Bath-Chair* does not focus on her life at the mission. Instead, it centers round her journey from Zanzibar to the interior. The book concludes with her living at the mission, spiritually satisfied by her Christian mission and her health and that of her son recovered.<sup>17</sup> One of the few women to appear in these pages who travelled to Africa unmarried is Ruth Fisher (though she married another missionary a few years after arriving in Uganda). Fisher went as a Church Missionary Society missionary to Uganda in 1900, and in 1905 published a popular book called *On the*

*Borders of Pigmy-Land*, which went through five editions in the early twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> She provides an insight into the opportunities that missionary work gave single, middle class women to move beyond the more rigid expectations they faced in Britain.

Many of the women whose accounts appear here were married to farmers. Indeed, the phrase “married to” is misleading, as most of these women took an active role in farm management. With a high proportion of socially elite, well-connected, and well-educated women, Kenyan farms produced several of colonial Africa’s best-known writers. The most famous of them was Karen Blixen. She migrated to Kenya with her husband to establish a coffee farm, which was located in the Ngong Hills near Nairobi. After separating with and later divorcing her husband, Blixen managed the farm herself. Blixen returned to Denmark after her farm failed and her lover, Denys Finch Hatton, died in a plane crash in the early 1930s.<sup>19</sup> Elspeth Huxley was another of the most iconic colonial Kenyan writers. Huxley was a child when she arrived in Kenya; her parents were settlers who established a coffee farm. Her 1959 autobiography *The Flame Trees of Thika* described her childhood living on the farm.<sup>20</sup>

While members of the settler elite penned many of the Kenyan colonial farming memoirs, this was not exclusively the case. Alyse Simpson’s strongly autobiographical work *The Land That Never Was* draws upon her experiences living on a new, under-capitalized farm in inter-war Kenya.<sup>21</sup> Plagued by their lack of money and experience, the Simpsons’ farm eventually failed and they returned to Kenya. As Dane Kennedy writes, “her tale is one of disillusionment, providing a revealing and valuable corrective to the roseate popular image of the white settler’s experience in Kenya.”<sup>22</sup> Similar in tone are some of the writings from Rhodesian settler farms. Hylda Richards, like Simpson, was a middle class woman who, along with her husband, struggled to make their farm pay. The Richards’ farm (located near Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia) eventually became sufficiently successful, but only after a decade of struggle.<sup>23</sup> Richards was a fairly popular writer in the area, publishing humorous verse under a pseudonym through the 1930s and 1940s, then her memoir *Next Year Will Be Better* in 1952.

Another group of women who authored memoirs about the region were the wives of colonial service officials. As they were not generally permanent settlers, few are considered here. However, Emily Bradley’s autobiographical advice book is of some use. Emily and Kenneth Bradley travelled to Northern Rhodesia in the 1920s and remained there until the 1940s, a residence longer than that of many supposedly permanent farmers. Kenneth Bradley wrote several well-known books about his work as a District Officer, and Emily Bradley penned two household guides for tropical Africa. Her 1950 advice book, *Dearest Priscilla: Letters to the Wife of a Colonial Civil Servant*, not only includes plentiful personal reminiscences, but also extensive discussions and advice about women’s emotions, capturing both the expectations and the reality of life for civil service wives.<sup>24</sup>

Published memoirs privilege the voices of particular types of settlers: well educated, well connected, and economically secure. Socially elite settlers of the Kenyan highlands produced more memoirs, for example, than the wives of mine officials and small farmers in Rhodesia. Some of that source bias is here addressed through the use of Madeline Heald’s compendium *Down Memory Lane with Some Early Rhodesian Women* (1979). This collection of biographies were contributed by families, and includes a far greater cross-section of women than is seen through printed memoirs.<sup>25</sup>

The women discussed in this paper are varied, ranging across time periods, locations, and personal situation. Their differences, however, should not overshadow the fact that they shared much in the way of culture and experiences. As Kennedy argues, while there were substantial differences between Kenya and Rhodesia, there was nevertheless a common culture between the two.<sup>26</sup> Women who grew up in England carried a shared understanding of “Africa” and “Africans,” which shaped their experiences of the continent. Famous memoirs by explorers (for example, Henry Stanley’s 1890 *In Darkest Africa*), boys’ adventure stories (such as those of George Henty), missionary publications, and newspaper reports all ensured that white settlers entered Africa already conditioned to popular prejudices: African peoples as uncivilized, child-like, and at times dangerous; African landscapes as challenging, exhilarating, and deadly.<sup>27</sup>

Another point to touch on is the use of the term “settler.” Not all of the women discussed here would have termed themselves as “settlers” in the permanent sense. Missionaries and colonial officials generally intended to reside in the colony for a fixed period of time and then to return home (usually to Britain). Miners and farmers usually intended to remain for a long time, but not necessarily permanently. Alyse Simpson wrote in *The Land That Never Was*: “in common with most settlers, we dreamed of ultimate success and then ‘home’; before we were too old.”<sup>28</sup> Many settlers who intended a long residence returned quickly to Britain.<sup>29</sup> Here the term is used as shorthand for Europeans who migrated for a significant period of time to East and South-Central Africa.

Since the 1980s, life writing by women has received greater attention by scholars. Noting that “autobiography has been employed by many women writers to write themselves into history,” women’s autobiographies have been used by scholars to explore questions of identity, self-knowledge, and agency.<sup>30</sup> Many female settlers in Britain’s African colonies authored memoirs about their stay on the continent. A few, most notably Karen Blixen’s 1937 *Out of Africa*, achieved considerable fame and have been reprinted many times.<sup>31</sup> Although Blixen’s continuing popularity (encouraged substantially by the 1985 Sydney Pollack prize-winning film of the book featuring Robert Redford and Meryl Streep) is not representative of most colonial women’s memoirs, some now obscure memoirs did command a sizable audience and went through several reprints. Women’s memoirs from colonial Africa are not simple views onto their authors’ lives; they are, necessarily, a literary genre, with particular conventions and shaped to appeal to an audience at home in Britain (an audience that had expectations of how a British woman would behave in a tropical environment). At the same time, women’s memoirs provide historians with a unique insight into the voices, albeit mediated, of individual settlers.

While most women’s experiences in colonial East and South-Central Africa were not so dramatically negative, Currie’s story highlights common features in settler women’s narratives from colonial Africa. The isolation, loneliness, boredom, worry and alienation that she records appear in numerous women’s memoirs (and indeed, in memoirs of women in new environments around the world). Despite such prevalence, settler women’s loneliness and worry is under-developed in the literature on the region. It is well established that “costs of whiteness” existed.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, while the scholarship of white colonial Africa frequently acknowledges women’s loneliness and worry, little space is devoted to its analysis. Gillian Whitlock explores ideas of isolation, silence and confinement, but focuses primarily on their appearance in Simpson’s *The Land That Never Was*, and the comparison between this text and Blixen’s *Out of Africa*.<sup>33</sup> Anthony Kirk-Greene discusses both white women’s and men’s emotional challenges in Africa, but confines his subject material to the

colonial service.<sup>34</sup> Other authors who consider female loneliness and worry more briefly include Heather Dalton, Dane Kennedy, Helen Callaway, Deborah Kirkwood, Beverley Gartrell, and Catherine Barnes Stevenson.<sup>35</sup>

Narratives of struggle fill various purposes in women's memoirs. From the eighteenth century, women were viewed as inherently weak and so naturally at risk while travelling.<sup>36</sup> Upper class and middle class women of "refined sensibilities" were believed to suffer most while abroad, as they "would perceive even minor discomforts immediately."<sup>37</sup> Such fears of women's travel were enflamed when the destination was Africa. Africa was widely viewed as a place for men, with the "rough" conditions, lack of "civilized" comforts, deadly diseases, dangerous animals, and a tropical climate all rendering the continent unfit for the delicate British woman. Female bodies in the tropics, according to medical wisdom of the period, were at a greater risk than men of developing tropical neurasthenia, a catch-all diagnosis for physical or mental suffering without an obvious cause.<sup>38</sup> Once British immigration increased, the reputation of Kenya softened somewhat. Lord Delamere's characterization of Kenya as a "white man's country" and its development into the notion of the "white highlands" did suggest that it was possible for particular areas of Africa to be marked out as suitable for white settlement. Even within these areas, however, fears about the body persisted: worries about high altitudes, the tropical sun, and the long-term viability of white populations persisted in Kenya's highlands.<sup>39</sup> A 1938 public debate in Mombasa on the question of whether Kenya was a white man's country resulted in a vote for "no."<sup>40</sup> In Rhodesia, a widespread belief existed that the climatic conditions of October and November induced mental instability in Europeans that could lead to suicide.<sup>41</sup> In part, women's descriptions of loneliness and worry in colonial Africa meet a narrative need for the protagonist to be out of place in Africa, fitting the trope of the respectable British woman out of place and uncomfortable/at risk while travelling. Some degree of physical and mental suffering affirmed the protagonist's whiteness, marking her as British despite her physical location in the tropics.

Descriptions of unhappiness and sickness in Africa also played into women's narratives of sacrifice. In missionary memoirs in particular, white female missionaries' suffering acts as a religious sacrifice, a penance as part of their Christian mission. For some, vivid descriptions of sickness and suffering appear almost as offerings, with hardship giving a claim to African territory. Illness and death act as a penance for occupation, and pain invokes a certain belonging. Whitlock explains that scenes of burial as metaphors for claiming the land are common in settler texts.<sup>42</sup> Denys Finch-Hatton's famous burial scene in *Out of Africa*, for example, renders him inseparable from the continent, and the lions that sit upon his grave signal Africa's acceptance.<sup>43</sup> For others, suffering is part of an over-arching narrative of growth and development, with the author struggling at first, overcoming obstacles, and finally coming to love Africa, and live there successfully. For a few, tales of struggle justify the ultimate failure of return to England, leaving unsuccessful farms or missions.

The last point to mention is how women's memoirs fitted into the larger colonial project. Women's writings were undeniably part of "writing the empire," packaging foreign places and peoples into dramatic, exotic conventions to be enjoyed by readers at home in Britain. African people are typically vanished from accounts: landscapes are empty and unpeopled, local people appearing only as brief curiosities, servants, or the subject (particularly by missionaries) of censorious comments. Colonial tropes reoccur through the

pages: white women are “alone,” despite being surrounded by servants; they journey through unchartered, wild territory; they tame wild landscape with farmland. Few show any interest in local people or customs. Furthermore, women’s descriptions of “charitable” acts (teaching schools, carrying out medical treatments for local people) fed a narrative of benevolent colonialism. Many of the daily tasks that women describe, whether managing a colonial farm, hosting civil service “sundown” drinks, or bandaging a wound for a farm laborer, speak to the role that white women had in upholding and maintaining colonialism.

Yet at the same time as being constructed, sometimes formulaic, narratives and intimately tied to the wider colonial endeavor, women’s writings are also deeply personal. They are accounts of globally mobile individuals, writing about their experiences—and often struggles—in a radically new environment. They are intimate insights into the inner lives of white women in British Africa.

### Isolation and Loneliness

Migration was a psychological strain for many women and the shock of arrival appears throughout colonial memoirs. The first sighting of an African port could bring excitement and enthusiasm, but it could also be a reminder of that left behind. As Charlotte Mansfield sailed into Cape Town, another passenger advised her to “eat an apple when approaching Cape Town... the dull grey city under the shadow of the overhanging mountain will give you melancholia, but you can’t eat and cry at the same time.”<sup>44</sup> As Hylde Richards leaned over the ship’s railing arriving at Cape Town, she experienced “a dreadful wave of homesickness.”<sup>45</sup> Wives travelling alone to Africa not infrequently had the shock of arrival intensified, when husbands (particularly missionary or farmer husbands) were delayed and could not meet them.<sup>46</sup> Depending on the port women where they arrived, upon leaving the ship they could encounter very unfamiliar environments. A few were shocked by poverty. When missionary Ruth Fisher took the Ugandan railway to her missionary post in 1900, while travelling between Mombasa and Voi she found that “the land was in the grip of famine” and “some of its last victims dragged their exhausted limbs to the banks of the railroad as the train passed through.”<sup>47</sup>

Those whose standard of living lowered with migration struggled to adjust. Although Kirsti Sigel notes that “there are numerous discussions of the lack of embodiment in women’s autobiographies,” in African colonial memoirs physical experience and the lived-in body play a central role.<sup>48</sup> Women frequently wrote of the physical discomfort of their new environment. One child born in Rhodesia wrote: “my mother, who was a gentle, cultured, slender woman, had thought Johannesburg primitive, but when she arrived in Francistown and was met by George with a sprung Scotch cart...four trotting oxen and forty miles to go to the mine on a country track—imagine her feelings!”<sup>49</sup> Struggling to transplant British living habits onto a Rhodesian farm, Richards asked herself “what had made me think I was a success? Not one of my triumphs had been lasting. On every side were instances of my neglect.”<sup>50</sup> She faced endless difficulties in keeping yeast alive and successfully baking bread; a fallen angel cake so infuriated her that she hurled it into the veldt.<sup>51</sup>

The African landscape distressed many women and their writings often present African nature as hard, savage, ruthless, and uncaring. “A picnic in the jungle! What could be more exquisite?” asked Currie ironically.<sup>52</sup> She described a romantic, Eden-like jungle scene, then slowly subverted it: a serpent appeared in the water, thousands of beetles covered the rock, and white ants gnawed a dying tree.<sup>53</sup> The beautiful, velvet-podded creeper she admired

was covered in poisonous thorns.<sup>54</sup> Reactions such as Currie's cross class boundaries and areas. Currie experienced extreme social isolation and depressed spirits during her time in Nyasaland—it is not surprising that she would transfer such feelings onto the landscape. Yet while it is perhaps more common among women further removed from the settler elite, fashionable Kenyan settlers who regularly went on safari also made such comments. Even in Huxley's *Flame Trees*, a book that explicitly makes claim to a white African identity and belonging, feelings of alienation remain, at least amongst the first generation of settlers. Tilly Grant discovered ants had eaten alive her newly hatched chicks, causing her to exclaim "I wish I'd never come to this rotten country...everything is raw and crude and savage and I hate it!"<sup>55</sup> Her neighbor Lettice Palmer echoed the sentiment, observing that "this country frightens me...It's a sort of quiet, smiling, destructive ferocity" and that "it is a cruel country that will take the heart out of your breast and grind it into powder, powdered stone. And no one will mind, that is the worst of it."<sup>56</sup> With African nature representing the continent, authors believed they had uncovered a fundamental harshness at Africa's core.

Such perceived harshness formed a crucial element in women's narratives of belonging. In the period, medical and popular debates raged over whether Europeans could thrive in tropical Africa; even in the supposedly safer highland areas of Kenya and Rhodesia, fears persisted over the long-term viability of a white settler population. In relation to landscape, some authors posed subtly different questions: could white women really belong in Africa, and could Africa belong to them? Some, for example Beryl Markham, Blixen, and Huxley, felt an innate connection: it is notable that all of these women lived in Kenya in fashionable circles, and that Huxley and Markham both arrived in Kenya as small children. In a letter home, Blixen wrote "I have a feeling that this country belongs to us" and "the fact that most white people hate it...brings it in a way still closer to the hearts of those who feel they can understand its voice and that it has spoken to them."<sup>57</sup>

On the other hand, many would have agreed with Palmer that "as for myself, I don't belong here."<sup>58</sup> Particularly for struggling farmers, the themes of Africa's indifference to white settlers and the difficulty of permanently marking the land run through memoirs. As the protagonist in Alyse Simpson's *The Land That Never Was* prepared to leave Kenya, she mused: "buried our acres would be in no time, and covered with weeds—like some forgotten grave...in less than six months from now there would be no trace of our six year sojourn...it would now revert, almost at once, to the savage state we had found it in."<sup>59</sup> The abandoned settler farm reverting to bush is one of the final images of Doris Lessing's iconic Southern Rhodesia novel, *The Grass is Singing*.<sup>60</sup>

Even more than their emotional isolation from the landscape, women of all classes and in all locations felt isolated from friends and family. Migration invariably entailed leaving friends and family, a painful separation broken only by letters or visits. Letters were slow, but nevertheless precious and written frequently. "Only those who have really experienced it can enter into the awful homesickness that sometimes a girl feels on her first long separation from England," Fisher wrote, and explained that anyone in such a situation "may behave like a big baby" when reading letters from home.<sup>61</sup> Trips home or visits from relatives were a pleasure, but only possible regularly for the wealthy—for missionaries and struggling farmers without wealthy relatives at home, visits to England were a luxury that was often out of reach. In Rhodesia, unlike in Kenya, the lower levels of wealth among settlers generally precluded unnecessary travel.<sup>62</sup>

The lack of white female friendship opportunities amplified women's loneliness. Although all women in rural locations experienced some degree of isolation from others, this was lessened in areas of denser settlement. Very remote areas (such as those in which missionaries settled) and areas with few white women (such as in mining communities) amplified rural isolation from other settlers. In Rhodesia, a woman begged Richards' husband "to bring his wife and children out, because all her other female neighbours had died of fever."<sup>63</sup> Although the vast majority of women would have lived with white men, for many they could not substitute for female friendship. "However kind and tender a man may be he lacks the subtle sympathy and understanding which a good woman has," Currie wrote; "he lacks the patience to listen to the feminine trifles that interest most of our sex."<sup>64</sup> With so little choice in company, women could be bitterly disappointed if female neighbors or visitors failed their expectations. Currie experienced great disappointment when a woman finally visited and yet "she did not understand me."<sup>65</sup> Blixen struggled with the lack of "mental reciprocity" among rural Kenyan society.<sup>66</sup>

Husbands' frequent physical and mental absences also isolated women. Men, whether missionaries, on farms, or working at mines, were usually away during the day, leaving many empty hours.<sup>67</sup> Some memoirs also suggest emotional distance between wives and husbands. Currie invariably refers to her husband as "the *Msungu*" (master or white man), and when the mission doctor left on tour, to give the couple some honeymoon privacy, she commented "how we wearied for his coming back."<sup>68</sup> In *The Land that Never Was*, the protagonist Joan met her cousin Jim preparing to be best man at a wedding. Jim explained that the groom's "fiancée was on your boat...he hasn't seen her for five solid years...hardly remembers her...I reckon there is many a fellow who's married a stranger at this Cathedral, worse luck."<sup>69</sup> Men often appear on the fringes of women's memoirs, characteristically silent, particularly in the memoirs of women who had generally negative experiences of Africa. In Currie, Richards and Simpson's memoirs, the husbands all barely participate, standing silently on the sidelines enhancing the sense of isolation.

In some texts alienation from peers complements that from husbands. Some found their intense isolation rendered socializing difficult. Here again, class differentiations are seen: wealthier and more socially connected women, even in rural areas, were more integrated into settler society and less likely to suffer from crippling isolation. At a wedding, Currie found that she "dreaded society, and felt that it would be an effort even to speak."<sup>70</sup> Once there, "the drawing room seemed perfectly dazzling. I sat down shy in the corner and envied the other ladies...with their flow of talk. I was not in it. Mount Mlanje had struck me dumb."<sup>71</sup> Another woman "became a very shy person and never really enjoyed the conventional social activities" after nine years of social isolation at the "Maid of the Mist" mine in Barbeton, Eastern Transvaal.<sup>72</sup> Poverty also played its role. *The Land that Never Was* features a recurring image of being on the outer, with Joan excluding herself—usually for economy—from fashionable Kenyan settler society.<sup>73</sup> In both Simpson and Currie's texts, their alienation persists after returning to Britain. Both husbands refused to speak of Africa, and Joan found that no one in England understood their struggles.<sup>74</sup>

Indeed, for Simpson and Currie, the sense of loneliness in the texts becomes claustrophobic. Joan became anxious about letters, "for letters were of the outside world of which I seemed almost to have grown afraid," and noted that "solitude of long duration made you silent."<sup>75</sup> On the first page of *The Hill of Good-bye*, Currie questions whether she can make the reader "see the sights that haunt me, and hear the sounds that thrill me even now."<sup>76</sup> She concludes, "I would that I could."<sup>77</sup> Joan and Currie felt imprisoned—

economically constrained, isolated, surrounded by silence, and trapped within themselves. Such imprisonment inverts the freedom celebrated in classic colonial texts, such as Markham's *West with the Night* or Blixen's *Out of Africa*. Whitlock compares *Out of Africa* with *The Land that Never Was* to illustrate that the enduring image of East Africa as a land of freedom is highly socio-economically specific, describing Simpson's work as a "class-based critique of the Kenyan dream."<sup>78</sup>

There is certainly a strong element of socio-economic determinism in whether women experienced greater or less freedom in British Africa. Markham's position among Kenya's maverick settler elite undoubtedly facilitated her successful career as a pilot.<sup>79</sup> Wealthier women had a greater ability to travel (within the colony and back to Europe) for companionship, had more time to write letters, and had a greater range of pursuits (such as safaris) available to them. For women of a lower socio-economic status, this was not the case. Travel was prohibitively expensive, isolation more difficult to overcome, and fewer servants meant more time spent on domestic work. When Cousin Jim visits Joan, for example, and comments how wonderfully free they were in the countryside—no need to dress, shave, go to church regularly—Joan disagrees, saying "it doesn't seem free to me, Jim... On the contrary, we are tied hand and foot here."<sup>80</sup> A little later, Simpson writes: "when I studied those who called Kenya beautiful, the opinion seemed mostly to come from the wealthy, the sport-loving and those who had no other choice."<sup>81</sup> The only moment when Joan feels free is when she leaves Simba Valley to return home to England, feeling as if an "appalling dead weight" had gone, finally allowing her "to take breath."<sup>82</sup>

At the same time, the role of class in determining women's freedom should not be overstated. Some women from outside the social elite also enjoyed employment and activities that would have been impossible for a respectable woman in Britain. *Down Memory Lane* mentions several women who participated in the mining industry in Rhodesia. One woman overcame her fear of prospecting shafts and soon divided the management of the family's mining ventures between herself and her husband.<sup>83</sup> Some claims were registered in her name, and she "took over the running of the mine completely and my husband rarely visited it."<sup>84</sup> After her husband's death she continued to work Soloman Shaft and Kent Mine, still being lowered into prospecting shafts in a bucket at age seventy.<sup>85</sup> Alexandrina Kitto, despite her initial shock at rural Rhodesian life, made her own furniture, taught a servant to make bricks, and ran Jessie Mine when her husband was ill.<sup>86</sup>

### **Boredom and *Ennui***

Although some women's loneliness led to feelings of stifling imprisonment, many merely experienced boredom. Wealthier women with extensive staffs found they had long hours to fill, and often with little to fill them. A sense of *ennui* fills the letters and memoirs of some of the wives of wealthier farmers or civil servants. In *Dearest Priscilla*, Emily Bradley noted the lack of ready entertainment in rural areas and advised settler women to stay occupied.<sup>87</sup> "Idleness leads to boredom, and boredom to discontent, and sometimes to actual illness," she explained.<sup>88</sup> Bradley recorded one friend as having "spoke feelingly of the time one spends alone. How quickly the books are read, the tasks done, and the hours stretch on and on, so easily filled with boredom, with a caged squirrel's thoughts, and with discontent."<sup>89</sup>

To some degree, boredom was a privilege, built upon the labor of African servants and other workers. Poorer settler women had little free time to fill. Yet even women who were fully occupied could find themselves bored by domestic work, especially by the struggle to

recreate British living habits in the wildly different environment of colonial farms. Richards, for example, missed her “busy creative sort of life” and found her first year “dragged on,” despite being busy on her and her husband’s farm.<sup>90</sup>

### Worry

Worry was another all-pervasive experience among colonial women. Many women found economic survival to be an endless source of anxiety — particularly for farmers’ wives, but also for those of low-paid civil servants. Settlers often came to farms with little knowledge of farming in general, and very rarely with a specific knowledge of farming in that region. As Lewis Gann and Peter Duignan observe, “again and again a farmer in Rhodesia or Kenya might lose all his capital.”<sup>91</sup> For the wealthy such losses might be bearable, but for small farmers with little capital, they were devastating. During the inter-war era, the most optimistic promotional literature for Kenya recommended £2,000 capital to start a farm, with £4,000 to £5,000 being the more common figure.<sup>92</sup> For previously unfarmed land, the requirements were much larger.<sup>93</sup> Many settlers emigrated with far less money, leading to debt and ultimate failure.<sup>94</sup> Even those with enough capital faced further problems, including the Great Depression and disastrous fluctuations in international markets during the early 1920s and 1930s.<sup>95</sup>

Debt and other economic problems worried some women greatly. Blixen’s failing coffee farm was an “intolerable pressure,” giving her the feeling of living “day to day with this sword hanging over my head.”<sup>96</sup> She realized that “what was making life so hard for me was the fact that I am so poor” and wrote that “I feel my poverty like a foreign body inside me, like the broken-off point of a spear.”<sup>97</sup> Economic trouble in *The Land that Never Was* is foreshadowed when Joan and John reach Nymba and witness a “pathetic little sale” in which “even the dresses of a White woman were being sold against the debts left behind by a couple who had come to make their fortune.”<sup>98</sup> After Ada Slatter’s husband committed suicide, she was left in Salisbury, Rhodesia, struggling to find work and with very little money to support her children.<sup>99</sup> She viewed the failure and mortgage of their farm as a contributing factor in her husband’s suicide.<sup>100</sup> Although most women did not face such extreme situations, constant financial worry was a daily reality for many. The specter of becoming “poor whites” (of the kind described in Daphne Anderson’s *The Toe-Rags*), with all of the financial struggle, loss of status, and “race and class ambiguity” that this entailed, would have heightened the financial worries of women already at the lower end of the white communities’ social hierarchies.<sup>101</sup>

Some women also feared African animals. Wealthy women who went on regular safaris were less likely to fear larger animals such as lions, but for women who had less contact with them, they could be a source of fear. The wife of a Rhodesian miner recalled hearing lions roaring, and commented that “naturally we were very frightened by this and we slept very little on those nights.”<sup>102</sup> Less exotic animals also bothered her: “to add to our terrors, the hut was infested with huge rats and I don’t know of which we were the more terrified — the rats or the lions.”<sup>103</sup> Even well-seasoned colonials found *siafu* (driver ants capable of consuming animals or humans) chilling. Markham experienced terrible nightmares about *siafu*, which “relegate all other bad dreams to the category of unlikely but tranquil hallucinations” and described with horror the thought of crashing her plane and being left “hors de combat and the Siafu hungry that night.”<sup>104</sup>

Women in Africa often feared the local people on first arrival, but such fears frequently disappeared quickly. In some places, fears of African people were more ingrained for the white population than others. As Sarah De Mul notes, news “about the African resistance to colonial rule in 1893 and 1896,” helped established Rhodesia’s reputation as a dangerous place, a preconception that new settlers would have taken with them from Britain and doubtless inflamed fears.<sup>105</sup> Kennedy argues that anxieties about African men and “black peril” were very real among settler women, although they had almost no basis in fact.<sup>106</sup> He attributes the persistence of such fears to the symbolic importance of “black peril” for the settler community, “reaffirming a sense of solidarity” and regulating the relationships between Africans and Europeans.<sup>107</sup> In actual fact, sexual relationships between white women and African men were essentially unknown, although many male Africans were arrested on dubious intent or attempt charges during “black peril” panics.<sup>108</sup> Place was a substantial determining factor in the degree of women’s fears about “black peril,” and in Southern Rhodesia it “was at times a fully hysterical obsession amongst the white population,” of the type captured by Lessing in *The Grass is Singing*.<sup>109</sup>

The other colonies considered here did not experience a public panic of the same extent and many women’s fears diminished over time after they arrived. As Simpson wrote, “were these [villagers]...the men of whom I had been so afraid sometime ago?”<sup>110</sup> Annie Hore discovered that she “felt uneasy for the first few days I was alone, but the steady and respectful conduct of our Zanzibar men soon gave me confidence.”<sup>111</sup> A few discovered that white men posed a greater risk: Joan’s African cook protected her from a drunken settler wielding a gun.<sup>112</sup> Mansfield advised potential settlers to Rhodesia that “a low white is certainly more to be feared than an ignorant black.”<sup>113</sup> That is not to imply, however, that women generally developed friendships or cordial relationships with their servants. The close relationship that Blixen described with her servant Farah Aden is far from typical; as Kennedy notes, settlers often degraded and physically punished their servants and even warmer relationships were usually deeply paternalistic.<sup>114</sup>

Worry over health was far more continuous. Geographic isolation implied medical isolation, and both potential and actual illnesses worried many women. Although Bradley recommended that women take all precautions, then try not to worry about germs, as “hypochondria is an insidious temptation in countries with bad medical histories,” such advice was probably easier written than followed.<sup>115</sup> While crowded British cities also presented much to fear in terms of disease, the deadly and exotic reputation of tropical illnesses encouraged concern. Once ill, medical isolation inflamed worry. One of Fisher’s missionary companions was “taken with bad fever,” and after three days of 104° temperatures they summoned a doctor.<sup>116</sup> The distance meant that he did not arrive for six days, giving the party a “very anxious time of waiting.”<sup>117</sup> Physical isolation intersected with socio-economic status: it was easier for wealthier women to arrange medical care/transport over long distance than it was for isolated poorer women. For those who undertook treatment themselves, the results could be devastating. Mrs. Cook lived with her husband in a cave in the Nata Reserve, and when his leg became seriously infected she attempted to amputate it herself, after which he died.<sup>118</sup>

The presence of children dramatically increased medical anxiety. Pregnancy in isolated areas was dangerous and feared, and children increased financial pressure.<sup>119</sup> One of the D’Urban children recalled rain pouring through the roof as their brother was born in rural Rhodesia—an umbrella had to be held over their mother.<sup>120</sup> Wealthier women could travel to

a main center or to England for childbirth, somewhat lessening the anxiety associated. It was common for children to be sent home to Britain, although this was again class specific.

For women who kept their children in Africa, sick children appear in memoirs as a particular point of pain and anxiety. Women “worried incessantly” about their children.<sup>121</sup> Richards “took little pleasure in the children” as she “was worried to death whenever they were out of sight.”<sup>122</sup> Despite constant vigilance, she was pessimistic about her ability to protect them: “I was always on the alert for an emergency which I felt I should be incompetent to meet and which would, therefore, prove fatal.”<sup>123</sup> Such anxiety was likely inflamed by the concerns over racial degeneration in the tropics; while a diligent mother could protect her children from snakes and scorpions, they were powerless against the African climate.

### Sadness

Sadness is also common in women’s memoirs. Women often discuss the sadness of migration.<sup>124</sup> The process of sending children back to England, as mentioned above, was a miserable separation for all concerned.<sup>125</sup> In *Flame Trees*, Palmer explained that “we have a son, you know...and of course he has to stay at home, and while I suppose that this is necessary...I find it hard to bear.”<sup>126</sup> When she discovered that he nearly died from appendicitis, she exclaimed “what good am I to him as a mother?” and longed to bring him to Africa as even “a year would mean everything to me.”<sup>127</sup> Migration sadness also encompassed environments, with some women missing familiar English landscapes or locations. During her first attack of malaria, Currie repeatedly fantasized about her country home and garden spring.<sup>128</sup>

The greatest sadness in women’s memoirs comes from deaths: those of friends, servants, pets or—at the most acute—husbands or children. Such instances range across memoirs of all types, from each colony, profession and degree of financial security. Even in memoirs written years later, women’s grief is often still vivid and raw. Goy represents her husband’s death as beyond the ability of the reader to understand and her to explain. After he died of fever, she “felt as if I were lost in a terrible desert.”<sup>129</sup> With little available assistance, she measured the coffin and grave and helped construct them.<sup>130</sup> “I leave you to picture what it was to me,” she wrote, “no one can imagine the suffering I endured, the longing I had to tell my trouble to those I loved.”<sup>131</sup>

### Conclusion

In conclusion, loneliness and worry appear throughout white settler women’s memoirs from colonial British East and South-Central Africa. A distinctly gendered experience, women’s loneliness was established through the rupture of migration and the shock of arrival, and fed by the lack of connection to African landscapes and social isolation from friends, family, and even husbands. Geographic location and socio-economic status played a major role in women’s isolation, with wealthier settlers in areas of denser population able to mitigate somewhat the loneliness of migration and remote settlement. Women who had little ability to travel for companionship or enjoy new social pursuits (such as safaris) found the transition to be far more isolating. The sadness of migration, isolation, and often death is present in many memoirs.

Worry—another ever-present part of most women’s emotional landscape—was driven by precarious economic situations and fears of local people, African animals, and the new

disease environment. Once again, women's location within Britain's African colonies, their socio-economic situation, and their individual temperaments shaped the nature of the worry that they experienced. Wealthy women with many servants, especially those who did not take an active role in their husbands' professions or the family's farm, often experienced *ennui*, finding themselves listless and with little to occupy themselves. Women with less financial security and fewer servants did not lack occupation, but they could find the domestic drudgery boring, particularly combined with their geographic isolation from the companionship of other white women.

The popular *Out of Africa* image of colonial Africa has little room for women who did not find freedom, enjoyment or spiritual connection in Africa. While such images allow for romantic grief, they have minimal space for mundane frustration, worry, and loneliness. This article began with Currie's story, who represents the other pole of women's experience, those for whom Africa brought not freedom or connection, but "terrible loneliness," sickness, depression, worry, and silence. Most women, of course, would have fallen somewhere in the middle. Overall, an appreciation of settler women's loneliness and worry is crucial to a balanced understanding of their experiences in British Africa.

## Notes

1 Currie 1920, p. 2.

2 Ibid., pp. 2-3.

3 Ibid., p. 7.

4 Ibid., pp. 10, 12-13.

5 Ibid., p. 13.

6 Ibid., p. 2.

7 Ibid., p. 41.

8 Ibid., p. 150.

9 Ibid., p. 227.

10 Ibid., pp. 219, 240-47.

11 Kennedy 1987, p. 42.

12 McIntosh 2016, p. 23.

13 Ibid.

14 Kennedy 1987, pp. 6, 50-51.

15 Ibid., pp. 6, 47.

16 Goy 1902.

17 Hore 1886.

18 Fisher 1904; Speake 2003, p. 798.

19 Blixen 1986.

20 Huxley 1959.

21 Simpson 1985.

22 Kennedy 1985, p. v.

23 Richards 1985.

24 Bradley 1950.

25 Heald 1979.

26 Kennedy 1987, pp. 1, 8.

27 During the latter decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Henty wrote numerous juvenile adventure novels promoting the empire, though only a few dealt specifically with Africa. These

- included *By Sheer Pluck: A Tale of the Ashanti War* (1883) and *The Young Colonists: A Tale of the Zulu and Boer Wars* (1885).
- 28 Simpson 1985, pp. 83-84.
- 29 Kennedy 1985, p. v.
- 30 Smith and Watson 1998, pp. 5, 23.
- 31 Blixen 1986.
- 32 Mohanram 2007, pp. 138, 143.
- 33 Whitlock 2000, pp. 115-23.
- 34 Kirk-Greene 2006, pp. 165-77, 190-201.
- 35 Dalton 1985, pp. 23, 41, 57-58; Kennedy 1987, pp. 123-25; Callaway 1987, pp. 184, 220-21; Kirkwood 1984, pp. 155-56; Gartrell 1984, pp. 176-79; Stevenson 1982, p. 19.
- 36 Siegel 2004b, pp. 60-61.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 61.
- 38 Kennedy 1987, pp. 165, 172.
- 39 *Ibid.*, pp.110-27.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p.120.
- 41 *Ibid.*, pp.122-24.
- 42 Whitlock 2000, p. 113.
- 43 *Ibid.*; Blixen 1986, pp. 249-53.
- 44 Mansfield 1911, p. 23.
- 45 Richards 1985, p. 16.
- 46 Kirk-Greene 2006, p. 193; Currie 1920, pp. 2, 13.
- 47 Fisher 1970, p. 6.
- 48 Siegel 2004a, p. 9.
- 49 Heald 1979, p. 208.
- 50 Richards 1985, p. 78.
- 51 *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57, 62-66, 79.
- 52 Currie 1920, p. 16.
- 53 *Ibid.*
- 54 *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.
- 55 Huxley 1959, p. 38.
- 56 *Ibid.*, pp. 67, 272.
- 57 Blixen 1981, p. 60.
- 58 Huxley 1959, p. 272.
- 59 As Whitlock notes, "the relationship between the experiences of the young couple in *The Land That Never Was*, Joan and John, and those of the Simpsons...is unclear." However, the memoir is generally regarded as substantially autobiographical. Simpson 1985, p. 258; Whitlock 2000, p. 119; Kennedy 1985, p. x.
- 60 Lessing 2013, pp. 195-96, 205.
- 61 Fisher 1904, p. 27.
- 62 Kennedy 1987, p. 122.
- 63 Richards 1985, p. 32.
- 64 Currie 1920, p. 202.
- 65 *Ibid.*, p. 150.
- 66 Blixen 1981, p. 282.
- 67 Bradley 1950, p. 85; Kirk-Greene 2006, p. 190.

- 68 Currie 1920, pp. 20, 41.  
69 Simpson 1985, p. 17.  
70 Currie 1920, p. 180.  
71 Ibid., p. 182.  
72 Heald 1979, p. 75.  
73 See, for example, Simpson 1985, p. 52.  
74 Ibid., p. 271; Currie 1920, p. 219.  
75 Simpson 1985, pp. 184, 236.  
76 Currie 1920, p. 1.  
77 Ibid.  
78 Whitlock 2000, p. 123.  
79 Markham 1988.  
80 Simpson 1985, p. 120.  
81 Ibid., p. 161.  
82 Ibid., p. 262.  
83 Heald 1979, pp. 190-91.  
84 Ibid., p. 191.  
85 Ibid., pp. 191, 193.  
86 Ibid., pp. 199-200.  
87 Bradley 1950, pp. 84-85.  
88 Ibid., p. 85.  
89 Ibid., p. 111.  
90 Richards 1985, p. 31.  
91 Gann and Duignan 1977, p. 59.  
92 Kennedy 1985, p. vi.  
93 Ibid.  
94 The Simpsons, for example, possessed two thousand pounds of capital and purchased a thousand acre farm of previously unworked land. Kennedy 1985, p. vi.  
95 Ibid., pp. vi-vii.  
96 Blixen 1981, p. 157.  
97 Ibid., pp. 2848-5.  
98 Simpson 1985, p. 40.  
99 Strickrodt 2006, p. 242.  
100 Ibid., p. 239.  
101 Cairnie 2010, p.18.  
102 Heald 1979, p. 60.  
103 Ibid., pp. 60-61.  
104 Markham 1988, p. 200.  
105 De Mul 2011, p. 38.  
106 Kennedy 1987, p. 138.  
107 Ibid., pp. 137-49.  
108 Ibid., pp.141-145.  
109 Lessing 2013; Pape 1990, p. 699.  
110 Simpson 1985, p. 254.  
111 Hore 1886, p. 192.

- 112 Simpson 1985, p. 99.  
113 Mansfield 1911, p. 127.  
114 Kennedy 1987, pp.154-55.  
115 Bradley 1950, p. 219.  
116 Fisher 1904, p. 34.  
117 Ibid., p. 35.  
118 Heald 1979, p. 311.  
119 Kennedy 2006, p. 175; Simpson 1985, p. 44.  
120 Heald 1979, p. 129.  
121 Kennedy 2006, p. 176.  
122 Richards 1985, p. 31.  
123 Ibid.  
124 See, for example, Blixen 1981, p. 53.  
125 Callaway 1987, p. 184.  
126 Huxley 1959, p. 60.  
127 Ibid., p. 170.  
128 Currie 1920, pp. 96-97.  
129 Goy 1902, pp. 50-51.  
130 Ibid., p. 52.  
131 Ibid., pp. 52-53.

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