

## Bookworm in the Bush

By Vanessa L Farmery

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My Father, Doug, flew out to Nyasaland, so he carried no books with him; his luggage allowance was taken up by all the items of 'necessary equipment' (from a list sent by the powers-that-be in Colonial Administration) which included a canvas bath - never used for that purpose - and a Pith Helmet!

Mother, Dot, followed him by boat, through the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal, with various cases and trunks carrying clothes, household possessions, the all important Christmas Pudding and only two

essential books; the Oxford English Dictionary and that new wives' Bible, the 'Good Housekeeping Cookbook' which was ideal for beginners. It was just as well; one of her first tasks on arrival at Mzimba was to teach their houseboy, Brighton, how to cook. This useful manual was later supplemented by a locally published volume which will be familiar to readers - 'The Naggars,' more correctly known as the 'Nyasaland Cookery Book and Household Guide' - and Marguerite Patten's 'Cookery in Colour' which claimed to be 'a picture encyclopaedia for every occasion.'

This was the dinner party book. By going out to Africa my parents had been catapulted from a world in which being invited round for a meal meant high tea at five o'clock with best ham, tinned salmon and a fresh garden salad followed by a Victoria sponge or, on very special occasions, trifle, to one which involved providing three courses at no earlier than seven in the evening preceded by aperitifs and nibbles (usually crisps and nuts). There was a certain standard to keep up; Ms Patten's recipes included sophisticated starters, elegant entrées and dramatic desserts and as such was an invaluable asset to both hostess and kitchen staff alike.

Mzimba was a small settlement and there was no library, although residents passed books around. The only other literature available to my parents at that time was the British Sunday Express which my maternal grandmother posted out to them every week without fail for the whole of their decade in Africa. As she sent it by sea it took several weeks to arrive and the news was hopelessly out of date, but nevertheless fresh to the recipients. My father was habitually infuriated by her habit of sello-taping the blank cover sheet onto the outer sheet of the newspaper so that he was never able to read the first two pages completely as they tore when the tape was removed. After our first trip to England, when I was about two, she always slipped a packet of Highland toffee in between the pages for me, and when Dot later started making a patchwork quilt, small scraps of fabric would fall out from between the sheets like bright burnished autumn leaves.



Mzuzu, my parents' next posting, was better provided for and in the Club there was a bookcase with three shelves. On the bottom shelf sat the hardbacks, and from this Dot extracted 'The Little Madeleine' by Mrs Robert Henry, the discovery of which led her to a lifelong passion for biographies to the extent that she now reads nothing else. The other two shelves were crammed with dog-eared paperbacks. Doug first encountered a favourite writer of his own from this small but eclectic selection; Wilbur Smith. There was also, interestingly, a copy of 'Lady Chatterley's Lover,' which had only been published in full in 1960 after a trial involving Penguin Books under the Obscene Publications Act of 1959. Whether this particular edition was the unexpurgated version or an earlier one, Dot cannot

recall, but she can remember it being a well-thumbed copy which she found under Doug's side of their bed, so concludes that it had 'done the rounds!' Perhaps someone had recently come back from the UK and brought it with them as a conversation piece; it would certainly have been much talked about in that time and place.



Far from seeking out controversial books, while she was back in England in 1962, Dot had more erudite matters on her mind. She took the opportunity to take advice from Doug's sister who was a Nursery teacher and able to recommend a reading scheme which my parents duly purchased to take back to Africa with them. I was also given several other beautiful books by my relatives and Godparents and the first few stories featuring Peter Rabbit and his friends which were published in books small enough to fit easily into a child's hands.

Our small family returned to Nyasaland and Doug was put in charge of Ncheu. I was now approaching my third birthday and talking fluently. I loved being read to and looking at the pictures in books so, as the months progressed, Dot began to teach me to read for myself. Of course, she had had no training in this skill beyond a few tips my Aunty had given her, and had to develop her own method. I can actually remember the light marks she pencilled over or beneath certain combinations of letters to remind me that when they were put together they made a different sound - 't' and 'h' to make 'th' for example. (I wonder now if the idea grew out of her knowledge of shorthand).

Dot recalls that the books she had diligently bought for this purpose were the crowd-pleasing Janet and John series which focussed on the 'look-and-say' method and as such introduced common key words earlier in a child's reading development than in the previously prominent phonetic approach. Whatever system they embraced, they clearly cut no ice with me as I can't call to mind a single storyline or illustration and I suspect that the plots were so simplistic that they bored me. I was used to being read to from much more challenging texts and knew many of my books by heart, so much so that if a single line was omitted at bedtime I would indignantly object and demand that the reader go back and insert the missing section. I suspect that it was as much that familiarity of certain stories that helped me to read independently as learning to associate visual symbols with sound and meaning. Certainly, I developed a wide vocabulary quite early and took to the mechanics of reading like a duck to water so that the biggest problem for my parents was keeping up with my appetite for new material. The books I had were read and reread and any new ones that were passed on as visitors passed through Ncheu were hungrily devoured.

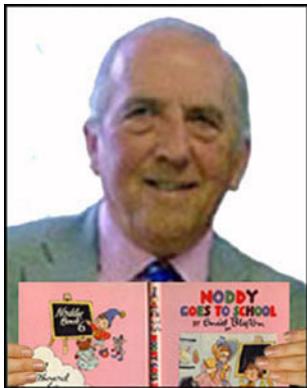


The remainder of our time in Nyasaland/Malawi was passed in either Zomba, Blantyre or Kanjedza. Although hardly metropolitan, there were more possibilities for reading there. We took a locally published newspaper and an occasional magazine crept into the house. I even received comics from England, courtesy of Nanna, and was once surprised to find my own face peeking out from the back pages of one - Nanna had sent in my photograph to be put on the 'readers' page!

In Blantyre there was not only a proper library with a children's section - I can picture it now; a very small room with a window and blue painted shelves - which we went to every week, but also that great temple to literature and learning, the Times Bookshop in Blantyre. Just thinking about it conjures up the excitement a trip to its hallowed interior would elicit all over again; that fizzing anticipation in my tummy! Would there be a new Hamlyn 'Myths and Legends' from foreign lands? I had a number of these glorious books which

transported me to the snowy steppes of Russia, across the great plains of North America, to gypsy encampments where magic was commonplace or to the ancient Silk Road cities such as Samarkand. (I later visited Samarkand as an adult. It was every bit as exotic as my six year old self had been led to believe.) Perhaps there would be a new Rumer Godden. We had come across this author on a library shelf and I couldn't get enough of her delightful stories which were almost always about dolls. As an only child I played with dolls a lot and loved the fact that someone else had recognised the secret world they lived in. To this day Rumer Godden, who also wrote wonderfully perceptive books for adults, remains a favourite writer of mine. I loved a series of four books which may be familiar to others who grew up in Nyasaland; the traditional African folk tales of the animals written by Geraldine Elliott and illustrated by Sheila Hawkins. My parents did not neglect the classic children's books and would always buy me anything tried and trusted - my copies of the Winnie the Pooh stories, Dr Dolittle, Mary Poppins, The Borrowers, Heidi, The Wind in the Willows, Hans Christian Anderson and Aesop's Fables were all bought during this period. I was encouraged, too, to read 'true stories' such as Daphne Shelldrake and Robert Vavra's books about real life experiences with African animals.

Dot herself was a discerning reader; in particular she loathed the immensely popular author, Enid Blyton, whom she claimed 'never used a long word where a short word would do' and was the absolute antithesis to our beloved Beatrix Potter who 'never used a short word where a long word was better.' (Many a five year old has been introduced to the word 'soporific' thanks to her uncompromising approach!) However, in spite of Dot's prejudices, some copies of the 'Noddy' stories found their way into my bookcase. The biggest problem with them was the name that Blyton used to represent the golliwog character, so in my books this was carefully crossed out and an acceptable alternative written neatly above. As far as I was concerned, his name was Noggle (later, of course, the publishers of Blyton's books made their own alterations). I enjoyed the 'Noddy' stories, but not to read



for myself so much as to have them read to me by that debonair and dashing single man and regular visitor to our home, Barry Thorne. An amateur dramatist, Barry could do all the voices and read the books with enthusiastic and animated gusto. No wonder my dearest desire was to marry him! However, I was a fickle and faithless little beast and my head was easily turned. The chief rival for my affections was that other eligible bachelor, Paddy Adair, who bought me an impressive edition of Charles and Mary Lamb's 'Tales of Shakespeare.' I have it still and it is my only reference for the works of the bard as I find his original plays incomprehensively impenetrable and dishwater dull.

Like all those favourite volumes from my childhood, 'Tales of Shakespeare' is now displayed in the three tiered bookcase Doug made me for my seventh birthday. This piece of furniture was carefully designed for particular collections to fit into perfectly - the Beatrix Potters on the top shelf on the left within their own little cubby hole, the tall, fat myths and legends along the bottom, middle-sized classics and paperbacks in between. Anything over-large or awkwardly constructed as landscape rather than portrait such as a lovely picture book telling the story of 'Peter and the Wolf' slid in along the long space left at the top.

I attended two different nursery schools in Zomba and later went on to St Andrew's in Blantyre and a small newly-built annexe to that in Kanjedza where I was exposed to more books. We initially had a tussle with St Andrew's because the teacher didn't want to accept that this otherwise unschooled pupil could already read, but my vociferous complaints at home that all the books were 'babyish' were heard, thankfully, and a timely parental visit to the school ensured that I was allowed to choose my own reading matter from then on.

Dot tells an anecdote which demonstrates my early confidence in reading perfectly; one day at about this period we had been into the bookshop with Cathy and Gillian Bowmaker and my mother had purchased the 'Nyasaland Times.' As we clambered back into the car she passed the newspaper to Cathy and, as she did, I glanced at the front page from the back seat.

"What's happened to the Punters?" I asked, referring, of course, to our good friends, Ray and Nora.

*"Nothing, why?"*

*"Why are they in trouble?"*

*"They're not in trouble. What are you talking about?"*

I was insistent, "It says it on the front of the paper - look!"

The two women looked at the lead story, which was about the recently run Grand National in the UK, *"Punters in Trouble!"* declared the headline. The two women were astonished! I wasn't remotely precocious in any other way and found school rather a bewildering environment. If I could have stayed at home and read all day, I would have done.

I have tried to remember if my playmates at that time were as bookish as I was but I don't think that many of them they were. However, I can vividly recollect Dorothy Baker (wife of Arthur, WPD, and mother to Andrew and Paul) coming back to Blantyre with a recently published children's book she had bought in England and subsequently loaned me. I read that book with delight and wonder; here was a modern author who was writing books for my generation and it was a revelation to me. The book? 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory' by the inimitable Roald Dahl.

When we finally left the country which had become Malawi we took a long trip home, travelling through Kenya, Israel, Greece, and Italy, through the Alps and along the Rhine as far as Holland from where we crossed the North Sea back to Yorkshire. Since we went by plane, train, boat and bus and had to carry our bags with us there wasn't any room for books and I was reduced to reading whatever I could find in ships' libraries or books that other people gave me. Dot remembers being questioned curiously by a lady who was somewhat bemused to find an eight year old reading Pearl Buck's 'The Good Earth,' and understanding it.

I still like to have a book with me if I anticipate a period of inertia - waiting for an appointment, travelling on a plane or train, on holiday - and have been known to take one on a first date with me, just in case! It says much about my poor judgement of potential boyfriends that the book has sometimes been the better bet!



Ncheu (aged three)



Zomba (aged five)

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