

# A Nyasaland Childhood

By John Clements

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I was born at the beginning of 1932 in Zomba and christened at Saint George's Church in the town. My mother, Barbara, was also born in Zomba, in the then British Central Africa Protectorate. She was the daughter of V J Kegte who was, at the time, an official of the Government Transport Dept. Her birth certificate is recorded as No 5 in the district register of births.

My Grandfather and my Mother's first cousin, V J D Ascott, were involved in the military preparations for a possible incursion by a German East

African Force into the protectorate at the outbreak of war in 1914. Vincent Ascott was killed at the subsequent battle of Karonga in September.

My father, J B Clements, was a Forest Officer, appointed to the protectorate after obtaining his B.Sc (Forestry), at Edinburgh, in 1920. In 1922 he became Chief Forest Officer. This title was later changed to Conservator of Forests in 1927.

From all reports he was largely responsible for laying the foundations of what developed into a thriving and productive forest industry. He became known as 'Nkhuni Joe', owing to the fact that firewood permits were issued from his offices. Soil erosion was a problem that was close to his heart and in this connection he, with Paul Topham, produced a manual for the benefit of villagers entitled 'Madzi ndi Nthaka' (Water and Earth). He was honoured with an OBE in 1945 for his service to Forestry, and retired in 1946. He died in 1976 aged 84.

Dad's Office was just below the Secretariat and it was always a highlight of the day when my sister Gillian and I were taken there to visit him. On one wall of the office was a huge linen-backed topographical map of the country dated 1906 - this map, now looking somewhat time worn, is still in my possession.

Gill and I later started our schooling at Mrs Daly's Kindergarten. This was located, if I remember correctly, near the bridge over the Mulunguzi at the lower end of the town. Mr Daly ran the garage not far from the school, but subsequently became involved in crocodile hunting at Palm Beach on the lake. Our transport to school was by garetta, similar to a rickshaw. We wore pith helmets and were under strict instructions to wear them when out of doors, between 8 am and 4 pm. These helmets had red cloth drapes at the back to protect our necks from the sun. Mrs Daly was a demanding teacher but she succeeded in



setting us successfully on the long road of education, armed with a reasonable competence in the three Rs.

As we grew older, we graduated to the Limbe Convent as weekly boarders and this establishment is imprinted on my memory for a number of reasons. The Convent had a library and I regret to say that the nuns practised gender discrimination unashamedly; boys were prohibited from using this important facility on the grounds that we would mess up the books. Who knows to what heights we would have risen had it not been for this rule.

Another vivid memory was that nearly every meal consisted of sandwiches. We boys had our own dormitory, but at night we were kept under strict surveillance - one of the nuns (I think her name was Sr. Eugene) had her own space in the room. This was completely surrounded by curtains, but in spite of it she was able to stamp out any pranks designed to irritate her before they got under way. This was not apparent to us budding delinquents, but Sr. Eugene must have suffered from a certain amount of stress at times.

The Conservator of Forests's house was fairly high up on the slopes of Zomba Mountain, with distant views of Mt Chiradzulu and part of Lake Chilwa. We had an extensive garden strewn with huge boulders that provided a secure habitat for a population of fat lizards, (probably a species of skink). These reptiles occupied our two Dachshunds in endless hunting - success on their part

often resulted in alarmingly foaming mouths.

Our parents employed three servants. These men, Chibwana the senior man, Imani, a house servant and Taumbe, the cook, served the family for many years. Our favourite was Imani. He had a great sense of humour and in his quiet way kept Gill and me in order when our parents were otherwise engaged.

When there was a dinner party of any importance, Chibwana and Imani were on duty in immaculate khansus (a white Islamic style over-garment reaching the feet) with appropriate headgear and smart green braided waistcoats. I still have a pencil drawing of Chibwana, drawn by the late Arthur Wilson, an officer at Police HQ. Taumbe's son Zimbota, and I spent hours trying to dam the small stream that flowed through the garden - I sometimes wonder how he fared after our departure in 1945.

By today's standards, bath time was a very primitive procedure, a large galvanised bath was brought into the bare room and filled with hot water from paraffin cans, followed by a top-up of cold water. The water was heated by a wood fire outside and this routine was carried out daily, in the late afternoon, for Gill and me.



The Zomba Gymkhana Club was the social heart of the community. Dad was a golfer, Mum played tennis and squash and we children, with many of our friends, enjoyed the swimming pool. All the big ceremonial parades took place at the ZGC and these were big occasions. The club was also the cinema, and films were well attended, the evening shows being formal occasions, necessitating the wearing of dinner jackets and long dresses for grown-ups. Other events held at

the Club included children's parties, balls, plays and naturally a variety of sporting fixtures.

On the slopes of the mountain, running along the contour, was the water channel; a man-made, brick lined, channel taking water from the Mulunguzi from just below the waterfall. A path followed the line of the channel and the 'water channel' walk was always a favourite. The waterfall was a wondrous place for us, but the best part was the collection of snakes that had collected in the small dam, half way along the track. Dad had a sensible approach to these creatures, with the result that I cannot ever remember being frightened by them.

Mum and Dad had a number of friends who lived on estates in the outlying countryside and among these were Helen and Bloggie Maw, at Namadidi, and the Thorneycrofts who farmed tobacco out beyond the aerodrome. Mr Thorneycroft, known always as Bwana Chimpeni - Mr Knife, was probably the most interesting to us children. He always wore a knife on his belt, hence his name, but for Gill and me the main attraction was his collection of Stanley Holloway records, particularly the story of 'Albert and the Lion'. This had to be played at every visit, during afternoon tea on the big khonde.

Our family car was a chocolate coloured Armstrong Siddeley with mica windows. It had a distinctive engine noise and I remember listening out for it in the afternoons, as Dad climbed the slope leading to the house on his return from the office. I still have the scar on a finger which got caught in the heavy door, an incident engraved in my memory as being highly traumatic because it involved a hospital visit and stitches.

A number of families owned cottages on the plateau (chawe) of the mountain - these were of various sizes and construction. Ours was built from the waste outer lengths of the seppi-seppi pine planks which gave it an attractive log cabin look. During the hot season we all moved up to the cooler attitude which, of course, necessitated a daily commute for the bread-winners. During this time we children had a wonderful existence in a beautiful setting. The Mulunguzi stream was not far from the bottom of the garden and, apart from walks along stream banks, we enjoyed playing in the pine forests and especially in the saw-pits. Felled trees had to be sawn before dispatch down to Zomba. The saw-pits, used by pairs of workers, consisting of a platform on which the upper sawyer stood on and on which the log was wedged; the lower sawyer worked from below, operating the lower end of the long cross-cut saw. But the big delight for us was the inviting accumulation of sweet smelling saw-dust. The resulting seppi-seppi planks were marked with 'paint' made from crushed charcoal and water.

There were a number of well known picnic sites which were visited regularly, often by several

families together - these included the Flat Falls, Mandala Falls and the Williams Falls. The dam, which supplied Zomba with water, was also an interesting place to visit. Dad had been responsible for the introducing trout into the Mulunguzi and also to the Mlanje Mountain, and it was another great excitement for me when I was taught the basics of trout fishing at the dam.



Another activity that took place occasionally on the plateau was a wide-ranging, and for us, thrilling type of 'war game'. This took place in the pine forest and involved everyone: parents and children. A certain amount of stalking and stealth was required and the culmination, when contact had been made, was a battle in which, I think, unripe granadillas served as ammunition.

Being the son of a Forest Officer, who was also a keen walker, I was introduced to hiking at quite a young age. I accompanied him once on a day trip up to the Chagwa peak area - this was the longest walk I had ever done and I remember being somewhat weary at the end of the day. At that time there was one road up from Zomba, and being narrow with some sharp bends, vehicles could only ascend on the hour and descend on the half (or was it the other way round?).

The Dalys owned a house on the plateau and during our stay on the mountain, in the hot season, we continued our schooling. This was perhaps the less attractive aspect of our life on the chawe, but surroundings were magnificent. The Dalys' house overlooked Zomba and the plain, and was situated just above the sheer face of the mountain.

The mountain was full of interesting things to do - crab fishing from the bridge over the Mulunguzi. Just below at the car park, was one. This involved a stick and string with our bait, consisting of a piece of stewed beef tied to the string. It proved to be a successful method of catching those big crabs. The strategy was based on the stupidity of the crab, because once it had a hold of the bait, it hung on tenaciously. The rule was that they had to be returned to the stream, as Dad had told us that the otter population preferred crabs and if they became scarce, trout would become first choice.

In the vicinity of a building known as the KAR (Kings African Rifles) Cottage, there was an extensive growth of wild granadillas with good quality fruit. These were gathered by locals and found their way down to Zomba with itinerant salesmen. I believe my Grandfather had something to do with the building of the KAR Cottage.

Naturally Dad had to tour the various Forest stations and developments throughout the country. These ulendos involved several days away from home and in the early days this necessitated quite a lot of camping. I accompanied him on a visit to the Mlanje plateau on one occasion - an adventure I have never forgotten. We set off in the morning from the Likabula depot, but not before



walking sticks had been issued, including a short one for me. The climb would take us to the Chambe plateau where there was a small settlement of forest workers and their families, as well as a forest officer's cottage. On the climb up we heard singing from above us which became gradually louder until, from around a bend ahead, came jogging workers with seppi-seppi planks on their heads. They were on their way to the depot and to my amazement I learnt that they did this trip twice a day. I have often thought that today they would probably have made it to the upper ranks of marathon running. Thrilling for me on arrival was to learn that a leopard had been trapped and killed near the settlement a day or two earlier. That afternoon I put my newly acquired trout fishing



skills to the test - we fished the stream not far from the Cottage and it could have been beginners luck, but I think I caught ten little trout. My unexpected success clearly due to the fish having become overstocked and underfed. It was cold that night and my bath, in a tin tub, was taken beside a fire in the hearth by the light of a paraffin lamp. We woke to a bitterly cold morning to find that ice had formed in a bucket of water left outside. I think this was the first time I've ever seen this. As Dad had planned to spend the day visiting forest projects on foot and would not be returning until late, he felt it would be too strenuous for me to accompany him. He arranged instead for me to have a day at the stream, fishing with a lad from the village. This we did, and by the time Dad returned I had caught another 16.

In due course, our schooling had to be raised to a more serious level, and it was decided that we should attend recommended schools in Johannesburg. This meant a five day train journey in the company of a number of our friends - totalling, perhaps, as many as a dozen or more. In view of the length of the journey, one of the mothers took it in turns to accompany this boisterous bunch and there is no doubt that the unfortunate lady faced five days of constant anguish. The afternoon departure of the train, (Nyasaland Railways/TZR-Trans Zambezi Railways) was a social event that also had undertones of unhappiness, and probably relish at the prospect of a stress-free period without the kids. As the train pulled out, there was naturally much waving until the first bend when



the crowd on the platform disappeared from view. The first milestone was the crossing of the Shire River; this was followed by the crossing of the Zambezi which occurred late at night and therefore meant a welcome delay of bed time. The next day was spent at Beira, based at the Miramar Hotel, where we had the wonderful prospect of a day on the

beach. The sea was luke-warm and sticky and inevitably necessitated a fresh water shower and clean-up before entering the hotel. The second phase of the adventure began that night, with the boarding of the Rhodesian Railways to Mafeking from where the last stage would start on the South African Railways train to Johannesburg.

The return journey, with a different Mother in Charge (M in C), began with a night-time start from Johannesburg. Spirits were naturally high and a feature on this section was waiting up until the early hours, when there was a stop at Mahalapye in Bechuanaland. The tradition here was to pile out of the train and dash to a small general store where we bought tins of Vienna sausages. Inevitably, on occasions, a few of us suffered the consequences of a surfeit of Viennas - a minor crisis which presented M in C with further tribulations. It was customary to buy catapults from locals on the track side; ammunition for which was obtained from the track ballast, when the train slowed down for the gradients. Our targets were the drivers' information boards at the side of the line. This activity, at times incurred the wrath of railway officials, resulting in the M in C having to conduct an interrogation to uncover the culprit(s), this was usually a somewhat fruitless exercise.



Our arrival at Limbe, dirty and soot- covered, was a joyous event and the car journey home to Zomba was filled with much chatter and anticipation of a carefree holiday. The only dark cloud was the prospect of having to read the 'Holiday Task' - this being the set book (always a classic) on which we were tested at the start of the following term. Waking up on the first morning of the holiday was a moment of sheer bliss; ahead of us were weeks of sunlit and school-free days and the anticipation of exciting things to do.

How very fortunate we were to have had the privilege of growing up in the uncomplicated environment of a lovely country; in the bosom of a caring family and within, what I remember, as being a happy community.

