

Letter Writing (1950s)

By Mary Brill

(Note: Reproduced here from Volume 7 of 'Expatriate Experience of Life and work in Nyasaland' by Colin Baker, with the kind permission of Mpemba Books, owners of the copyright.)

When I was growing up, I was always fond of writing. At school we used to get lots of encouragement from our English Teacher. She would give us plenty of help with our compositions. She was a great reader and gave us advice on what books to read. She also taught us letter writing and how important thank you letters are. I'm certainly eternally grateful to her, but regret I was never good at spelling.



Letter writing helped so much when I first went out to Nyasaland in December 1949. It was my life line. Writing and receiving letters from home helped so much to overcome homesickness, bringing loved ones closer. We would get the mail from home about once a month. My Father sent magazines as well, we loved getting these, as news was always welcome. At Balaka the mail came up on the train this would be collected from the Post Office, or a Mail Box about once a week.



When we moved up to the Northern Province and were working out on the Vipya, we had to collect mail from Mzimba twenty-five miles away, and further north you got the longer it took, of course. It was when we were posted to Rumpi that I started writing things down in an exercise book, or a small notebook, and this helped me remember things to put in letters back home, and later when I started writing about life in Africa. I would write my letters early morning or after dinner when it was cooler. In the evening this had to be done by the light of a Tilly Lamp. I think the hiss of the lamp kept me awake. Sometimes when we were camping it would be difficult to find a comfortable seat and a table to write at, the flying ants and other insects distracted you, making it difficult to concentrate.

When the children were old enough, I would encourage them to write letters, because their grandparents loved to get letters from them. My Father taught me how important thank you letters are. "Never forget your thank you letters," he used to say, so in Nyasaland if you got an invitation to dinner this would be answered by a note written by hand (your house boy would deliver it). When our elder son Robert was seven years old he went to boarding school, St Andrews Juniors. We were stationed at Fort Johnstone at the time and looked forward to letters from him, and we would write about once a week. Mail would come up on the little Beaver plane from Blantyre, the Boma Messenger would collect it then it would be delivered to the different departments.

Hand-written letters from friends and family were the greatest treasures. Many of them I have kept. Later in life when we moved to the UK, we kept up a correspondence with many of our friends, often with postcards and cards at Christmas. We have still got a few of those friends left, who I now email, but always like to write a card at Christmas. When Robert joined the Merchant Navy, we would get lots of Postcards from around the world which I've kept in an album, which I now really treasure: these are my memories of him

Many years ago I remember meeting a very elderly gentleman called Wincup. I never knew his first name, but he lived at Ncheu, not far from Balaka. I recall him telling us how as a young man in Africa, he was employed by the Government to "ride shotgun on the Mail coach" travelling from Salisbury, Rhodesia, to Blantyre, Nyasaland, once a week during the 1800s. He was such a great character, but sadly I only met him once before he passed away. Reg got to know him quite well and would go out hunting for a game with him.

I hope to keep on letter writing a bit longer. I still enjoy receiving them.