

A very different land: memories of Empire from the farmlands of Kenya

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I began my life as a development economist with a Master's degree from the Overseas Development Group at UEA in 1974. It was a very good, very technical course, and was at the high point of cost benefit analysis and national planning. With these useful, objective tools, we could enable countries to throw off the colonial yoke. Technical and practical yes, but also soured in the Marxian ideology of the time – that colonialism was a bad thing. The literature – Franz Fanon and the wretched of the earth, Walter Rodney and how Europe underdeveloped Africa, was quite clear.

Yet there was always an unease at the back of my mind. My father, Owen, had joined the Agricultural department in Kenya in 1928, at the age of 23 and rose over twenty years to become Assistant Director of the Department. Knowing him, knowing his set of moral values, it was not conceivable that he would have gone to Kenya in those days with a vision of exploitation or even control. So perhaps he and his contemporaries were misguided instruments, or living a false consciousness.

Anyway, encouraged by Peter Hennessy, ('you must write about these people') I decided to take these thoughts further, and explore the nature of my parents' lives in Kenya and the work they were doing. I had grown up with stories of their lives – safaris, the Nairobi Club – but I wanted to find out what they had been doing professionally and technically. So my idea was to understand not only what these people were doing but what they thought they were doing. Why were they there? What did they hope to achieve? And what are the legacies, good or bad?

So I started with the reports from the Department of Agriculture (one of the things the British Empire did with great competence and thoroughness was to keep records) chronicling what the agricultural advisers had done in the early 20th century, and what they had hoped. The detail of the work and the records were familiar – echoing those of a consultant – the sincere hope that things would get better for the African, the sad, weary optimism of the policy reformer or the technical advisor. But what was striking in the dry language of the reports and

the writings – letters, interviews – with members of the service was the commitment the officers felt towards African agriculture.

Another great source was the Rhodes collection of the Bodleian library, which held some wonderful resources, not least the raw material for a research project carried out in the 1980s into the practice of small holder agriculture in Kenya. This material was wonderful, fresh, lively and witty; some great characters there. And it was clear that the motives of these people tended to the do-good, the altruistic; in the 1920s Empire was something to be proud of, and for a young man of 21 or 22 to leave his family for a tour of three years was seen in the same light as missionary work, it was a career in service.

My father, Owen, went to Kenya in 1928 at the age of 22. He was idealistic and reasonably well educated. The colonial service was a good place to be in the '20s and '30s, for a generation who were inspired by the great Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924/25, whose objective had been to 'stimulate trade, strengthen bonds that bind Mother country to her sister states and daughters, to bring into closer contact the one with the other, to enable all who owe allegiance to the British flag to meet on common ground and learn to know each other'. It was the zeitgeist of the time: there was not a corner of the world untouched by the energy and economic power of the European industrial revolution. Searching for goods, for raw materials, for adventure and for Christian souls the European powers were confident of their abilities and religion and – most importantly – the rightness of their cause. In the early twentieth century Empire was seen as a source of peace (perhaps even then this was wishful thinking), the commonwealth of man, the sisterhood of nations, the inspiring visions of Lord Reith. And at the time of my father's generation there was a nascent recognition in the Colonial Office that the colonial government needed to do more than simply administer justice; it needed to provide training and perhaps the first glimmerings of what we now call development.

Not that the government motivations were particularly altruistic; the government needed to raise money from the colony to finance the great railway – sometimes called the Lunatic express – from Mombasa to Nairobi (and later beyond)

Financed by London, the railway was built for a combination of altruistic and geopolitical reasons – the abolition of slavery and the control of the head waters of the Nile. Slavery because it would connect the heart of Africa with the modern world and would supplant the slave caravans between central Africa and the Coast. Geopolitically, because it would enable

British power to reach right to Uganda and in the words of Elspeth Huxley; whoever rules Uganda controls the Nile; whoever controls the Nile dominates Egypt; whoever dominates Egypt holds the Suez Canal; and whoever controls the Suez Canal has his hand on the throat of the India trade. But once it was completed, it was apparent that there was not enough traffic to finance it – and having financed the building of it, the colonial government had no intention of pouring more money into this project.

The line carried traded goods from the inland to the coast – replacing caravans of head loads – but it was not enough, and the trade in local agricultural products, maize for example, but it was sporadic and unreliable. The pastoralism and shifting agriculture of the Masai and Kikuyu and Luo tribes in 1900 could not possibly generate sufficient revenue. The only way the railway could achieve financial viability was through opening up the great spaces of Kenya to commercial, tradable agriculture.

Land was negotiated in somewhat dubious treaties with local tribes, and plots of land set up for leasing. Settlers were encouraged by the government to come from Europe, and they became the agricultural and economic powerhouse. It all looked very promising. The Rift Valley and the Highlands in the centre of Kenya looked rich and full of potential. In the words of Lord Lugard, a formidable colonial administrator, writing at the end of the 19th century, ‘the soil of the Mau is extremely rich and covered with excellent and luxurious pasture throughout the year which is mixed trefoil and clover’. He imagined a new Canada or New Zealand – fruit crops and cattle. So it would be easy to open up this and, bring it under cultivation.

Not that it was very easy – at least at first; fortunes were sunk into the land. It may have looked lush with rich red soils – redolent perhaps of Devon – but in fact it was plagued by many pestilences; rinderpest and sleeping sickness. Wheat was rust infected. Lord Delamere, perhaps the most flamboyant of the pioneers had seen the great plains as sheep ranching country. He brought 500 merino ewes from New Zealand – but they died of tick fever. He interbred local cattle with Herefords – but they wasted away because the land was deficient in iron, or there was red water fever. He turned to dairy farming – but all his young stock was killed off by East coast fever. And so it went on; wheat succumbed to rust, cattle to fevers. He spent vast sums but was tenacious, stubborn even, borrowing more and more, pouring in more and more money; but learned from his errors. He bred seed to resist rust, eventually set up the first dairy industry in Kenya and laid a foundation that others followed.

The government set up a Department of Agriculture, providing some technical support for the modern sector settler farmers. At the same time it was recognised that the Colonial Agricultural Service increasingly demanded professional expertise – and courses in tropical agriculture were set up at Wye College, then part of the University of London, which aimed to provide a strong technical background for advisers in agriculture and it was here my father went. The college offered a detailed training in the agriculture of those days – experimental plots on the green downs of Kent. A cohort of graduates from Wye spread their way around the colonial world, and in 1930 there were about 30 ‘Old Wye Men’ in Kenya. Some went out as farmers in their own right, some were working on the new cash crops on – coffee, tea, sisal; and others like Owen worked with the newly established Department for Native Agriculture, working with African smallholders, and which had been set up to develop the highly fertile Native areas, and to ensure that ‘the natives take a proper place in the economic life of Kenya and they should be made to use profitably the large sections of the country in which they are left undisturbed in peaceful possession’.

And this was the role of the agricultural officers, to teach modern farming methods to small holder farmers who were traditionally risk averse and whose monetary ambitions favoured goats and cattle over profitable crops. But they were normally very dedicated, and worked hard, these young men, often based in remote communities, spending at least a third of their time on safari in their regions (Owen writes how in his first six month in Embu on Mount Kenya he travelled nearly 2000 miles by motor bike and spent 71 night days away from station.) They were required to know the local languages (pay increments depended on language proficiency), spent usually two years in a district and were expected to spend at least a third of their time there on tour. They imported and bred improved seeds, they set up experimental farms and cross bred local with English cattle, and they worked with locally recruited African agricultural assistants. The Department set up two training colleges for them, in the 1920s, and they were the vital interface between advisers and the local communities. Haranguing, demonstrating, *barazas*, teaching; all pedagogical means were used, and to reasonable effect. Some of the earlier practices they imported turned out to misguided. They underestimated the fragility of local soils, the potential advantages of traditional mixed seed sowing and -as always – the importance of women in agriculture, despite the fact they were the recipients of improved seeds. Production was sometimes ravaged by droughts, and locusts were a real plague until the mid 20th century

Of course there were technical difficulties but they had probably not reckoned with the difficult politics of Kenya; money from the Department was always short, but their work was constrained also by tensions with the settlers who had little interest in supporting African farming, and effectively had the ear of the Governor at the expense of the native agricultural department. So, for example, when some in the agricultural department wanted to introduce cash crops such as coffee in the African areas, the settlers resisted fiercely, to the extent of sabotaging new plantings. There were some fair reasons for the resistance – there was a fear that native farmers would not maintain sufficiently high standards of husbandry for the overall quality of the crop, but there were baser objectives, of limiting development in the reserves. Not until 1934 was coffee finally authorised in native areas, and then well away from the white settler coffee estates. The settlers wanted a compliant labour force and were constantly at loggerheads with the more progressive elements of the colonial society, the administrators, missionaries and so on.

Despite the various difficulties, by the end of the war there was a cohort of agricultural advisers who had 25 years of experience in small scale Kenyan agriculture. So when in 1945 substantial money was made available under the Commonwealth Development and Welfare Act of 1945; the budget for native agriculture doubled, and in 1946 a ten year development plan was prepared with a supporting budget of £15.6 million there was expertise to take advantage and do more effectively what at they had been trying to do for a decade or more; strengthen small holder farming through better husbandry, soil protection and also marketing and quality control.

This approach culminated in the renowned Swynnerton Plan in 1952 his coherent programme for the ‘Intensification of small holder agriculture in Africa’ brought together the depth of experience in the colony of both the Agricultural Advisers and their African assistants, and opened the door for increased investment and other reforms (such as the highly controversial land consolidation programme). There may not have been much consensus and consultation here but land consolidation was vital and was at the heart of work in the 1950s.

Now, sixty five years later, Kenya is a solidly agricultural economy; programmes initiated in the colonial period – tea, coffee, flowers (earlier it had been pyrethrum) and maize. A professor at Egerton Agricultural University in Kenya told me ‘Kenya agriculture is based on the colonial period’. The trial and error of the early days paid off in the end – the experiments and uncertainties literally bore fruit. But the settler agriculture also paved the way for the

currently strong agricultural sector – pioneering with crops and styles of cultivation – and experimenting and investing, building knowledge among the land owners and among Africans that worked on the farms. The transfer of knowledge was not particularly planned – indeed many of the more intransigent settlers were always reluctant to enhance the capacity of their African workers for fear they challenge the status quo (although by ignoring African wishes they reinforced the suspicions and tensions that underlay rebellion in the 1940s and 1950s).

There is not that much systematic ex post evaluation of the colonial agricultural period but two studies are interesting. Between 1978 and 1984 Oxford University carried out a review of projects undertaken in Africa in the Colonial period. Economist Anne Thurston led an examination into the development of small holder agriculture in Kenya, post Swynnerton. In undertaking her research she interviewed many of the agricultural officers who had been working in Kenya in the 1940s and 1950s, most of whom had been working in Kenya in the 1940s and earlier – many of whom were Owen’s colleagues (and he would have been interviewed had he not died in 1970). (These papers were actually a wonderful contribution to my research). Thurston concludes that although some officials hoped that the Swynnerton Plan would achieve miracles, it was not actually designed to do so. But it was a realistic agricultural programme based on field experience, and this, she argues, lies at the heart of the programme. She wrote: ‘The agricultural history over a 30 year period illustrates aspects of the colonial development and development generally. While the broad lines of policy were discussed in London and Nairobi, the content of development in specific parts of Kenya was evolved by the men in the field. When political restrictions at the centre prevented them from being able to either extend the land unit or offer economic benefits, they were unable to work effectively. When they could offer incentives, with technical and administrative back up they achieved high standards rapidly. Perhaps the most crucial lesson to be drawn from the Swynnerton Plan is the importance of the field officer’s role in development. Local solutions do not solve national problems, but when Swynnerton was able to draw them together and amplify them, with backing from the centre, there was a breakthrough. But the Plan succeeded in a way that present international projects often do not because it was rooted in the field’ – grounded in the work that the agricultural offices had been doing over thirty years’. The Plan had succeeded in shifting the emphasis in Kenyan agricultural policy from large scale European farming side by side with African subsistence agriculture to commercial

peasant agriculture and a growth in cash cropping – coffee, tea, pyrethrum – met or exceeded plan goals and transformed lives with production of coffee.

In Kenya itself some of the contribution of the colonial field officers and administrators is slowly being re-evaluated. Writing in 2010, a young Tugen academic, Daniel Kandagor, puts the case that the Colonial period effectively transformed society by the introduction of modern and much more productive agriculture, even in his a remote and ‘primitive’ tribe (his words) due to a combination of factors, training and interaction with education and the Missions.

Another academic, a Kenda Mutongi, Kenyan woman at Chicago university sought to illustrate the ‘callous immorality of the colonial rule’ by interviewing widows of her tribe, to assess how well they were looked after once they had lost their husbands. She found that her respondents overwhelmingly thought that decisions made under the District Commissioners were fairer and less influenced by family and peer groups than was later the case. ‘We had schools and hospitals, the white people took good care of us’, or ‘white teachers were serious about teaching, unlike teachers today who take naps in the class room or don’t turn up’. She is very surprised by these responses, and cannot quite believe them – ‘perhaps the old women were too old to remember correctly’. And of course some nostalgia would be in remembrance of expectations of post colonial bliss, or be motivated by a wish to challenge current political leaders.’ But still, perhaps reasonably dispassionate administration was a contribution – part of ‘we must have done something right’.

Another study surveyed the generation of colonial officers who are now retired and still alive, those who would have gone overseas in the 1950s and ‘60s. The survey asked them what their motivation was for joining the Colonial Service; what they thought they were doing, what were their achievements and failures and what did the people – ‘they’ – think of them. Their motivation was a mixture of service and adventure; they all saw themselves as helping to build societies that would be ready for self government in a generation (or two or three), with a rule of law and social and physical infrastructure – schools, health services, roads and ports. Their definitions of successes were wide ranging depending on their territory and their particular interests, but on the question of failure there was much consensus; that they had to leave too soon, they had not been able to finish the job training civil servants, lawyers, police and politicians to take over the British governance structures and build a developed state. That is with the benefit of hindsight; but I wonder whether the colonial servants who were

leaving Africa in the 1960s could have imagined that most of the population in these new nation states would still be living in grinding poverty, five decades later?

The fifth question – what did ‘they’ – the subject peoples – think of you? brought more guarded responses. Some felt there was affection, others mere politeness. Some thought that there was little affection; but almost all felt that they were respected by the native population for what they were doing and for a sense of dispassionate even-handed governance. In truth, that has been, on the whole, my feeling in my thirty years of travels in the developing world. Indeed, my direct interlocutors and counterparts in developing countries have been – more or less by definition – educated and professionals. But as a development economist one has the opportunity of meeting many types of people, exploring different business areas, poking one’s nose into all sorts of situations, interviewing villagers or factory owners, and I was rarely aware of anything less than politeness and a degree of respect.

But could they have done better? In the introduction to this book I suggested that this is a contested history and indeed it is. I have tried to show that at the very least the Department of Agriculture in the period between the wars pursued a policy of development and strengthening of African agriculture, albeit with very limited resources, but with a strong commitment to betterment of the African lot. The exact amount of available resources devoted to African agriculture is not clear, but analysts writing later talk bitterly of the destructive, coercive nature of agricultural policy in the reserves. Historical analysis needs distancing tools to understand the wider arguments, but in terms of the work Owen and his contemporaries were trying to do, I doubt that they would recognize themselves in this, a quote from a Marxist historical analysis of 2000: ‘My intention in this paper is to examine the colonial narratives about agriculture and the environment in Kenya in the 25 years between 1920 and 1945. This was a period that saw *the increasing reliance of the state on African agricultural production from the Depression onwards* (my italics) and growing evidence of environmental costs of policies to expand such production. ...From the early 1920s, the doctrine of ‘trusteeship’ which informed colonial thinking, drew increasingly on the authoritative claims of ‘scientific method’ ...to generate discourses of ‘betterment’ and ‘environmentalism’ which legitimated a deepening of administrative control.’ Owen and his colleagues would have seen themselves as trying to develop African agriculture and the notion of ‘trusteeship’ was to strengthen and build up African agriculture – with, always, the idea in the background that the final aim was to build a country ready for independence – very different from the later interpretation.

In a book of essays, Chinua Achebe, the great Nigerian writer, reflects on the impact of colonialism. He tells of how, in 1976, Kissinger spoke to Joseph Garba, Nigerian foreign Minister at the United Nations, and asked him what he thought America was doing wrong in Africa. ‘Everything’ replied Garba. Kissinger’s next comment was to say ‘Statistically that is impossible. Even if it is unintentional, we must be doing something right’. That exchange, writes Achebe, could easily have been about colonialism.

Even Achebe conceded that the British had left the profoundly transforming legacy of education. Begun formally through the mission schools many Africans quickly saw that this was one of the tools with which they could emulate the white man and his security and wealth. By the 1930s and 1940s there was a generation of Africans who saw the value of education – including education for women. When I was in Meru, I met the daughter of one of Owen’s agricultural instructors, Asenath Kaimuri Nyamu. She told me that her father had so appreciated the education and training he received as an agricultural instructor that he made sure that she, Asenath, should be educated, even though her mother was not an educated woman. Asenath went to the local Mission school, and now, as head of the Rural Community Development Agency, an NGO, is dealing with other quite different problems in Meru, supporting women with HIV or who have been abused as a result of local preoccupation with meera, a leafy and quite addictive stimulant (known in the Middle East as khat). Education is a liberating force, and particularly so for women. Wangari Maathai, Nobel peace prize winner and campaigner for environmental issues in Kenya writes in her autobiography of her delight when her father permitted her to go to school and they found the money for her as well as her brothers.

I reflect on why I went into this field? History casts strong shadows and I suppose my motivations were a combination of curiosity about life and the romance of Africa – as I have said I grew up with stories of Kenya surrounding me. But another motive must have been to redress the balance, to try to undo the malign legacies of Empire – or simply a desire for adventure and a sense of worthiness? Who knows. But it can be no coincidence that among my colleagues over the years in the ‘development business’ as it is now called, like me many are children of Empire with fathers in the Colonial Service’.

I conducted a very informal survey of a society of international economists that I belong to, to see how strong the empire inheritance is. The answer is – very. Of the 25 people who

responded half had some close relations in the empire – whether in administration military or commercial – which I’m sure is significant. In any event, there are many interesting stories.

And I suspect the motivation of the contemporary aid worker is similar to that which drove earlier generations. There is, undeniably, a sense of adventure and wanderlust among the aid working fraternity which echoes that of earlier colonial days, but most who work in this field have a strong sense of altruism and commitment to ‘do good’. But it is harder to reflect on what good one might have achieved. The world of Aid and technical assistance is paved with good intentions but what we nowadays call ‘outcomes’ may not be what was planned. A few years ago the OECD tried to codify best practice in aid in fragile states – states suffering from conflict or vulnerable in some other way – and concluded that one of the most important axioms should be ‘Do no harm’. Not an ambitious target perhaps, but looking at changing understanding and even fashions in aid over the past thirty years, it might be something one would be pleased to say after a career of meaning well.

(I have worked on forty or fifty projects in thirty or forty countries – and have visited over seventy. I have advised on banana marketing in the Windward Islands, village water supplies in the Sahel, heavy power plant in India, and the motor industry in Pakistan. I have written environmental management plans in China, in Syria and in Mauritius. I have worked on post war reconstruction projects in Egypt and the Lebanon. I have sat in more airport waiting lounges than most and eaten more local cuisine than most. I have sat in Ministries in ante rooms for hours at a time and have understood more about places than is ever possible as a tourist. It has been a fantastic life.)

Towards the end of the book I try to reflect on development itself, and to what extent these various generations of advisers have contributed. There have been substantial transfers of resources from North to South but it is hard to measure impact – there are no counterfactuals.

This is not the place to reflect on the wider outcomes of international aid over the past sixty years with its swings and fashions in policies and mechanisms. But it is worth making a couple of points. In the colonial days, the technical specialists and administrators were required, within the terms of their employment contract, to learn the local language(s) in the places where they were working – and they might spend a lifetime in the country. This is no longer the case. At government level, aid recipients are expected to work in English or French – the two great colonial languages; or through interpreters, which must reduce mutual understanding. Secondly, the short term nature of contracts today means that people cannot

develop deep knowledge of their development partners. Long term contracts mean two or three years; and organisations like the World Bank blow into a country with a team of 5 or 10 specialists, experts (like me) and stay for perhaps a week or two; make intense demands on the local administration, and then depart. Projects and programme are too often determined in Ministry buildings in the capital, while the needs and wishes of the people in the field are either ignored or taken for granted. So whether one can contribute much with short visits to a country where one talks through an interpreter is also a question that should be asked. Technical assistance should be a long term process – and the twenty or more years that Owen and his colleagues spent in a single country, with fluency in the language(s) would have enabled a far greater depth of understanding and knowledge than short term technical assistance and consultancy assignments.

But I can still feel ambivalent about empire and all that that entailed, however valid it seemed at the time. As Peter Hennessy says in the preface ‘Few in our generation are neutral about empire. It still has the capacity to induce an emotional spasm – and often sometime several conflicting spasms given the range of imperial motivations and experiences’. And I am not trying to justify Empire or the Colonial experiment. I simply think it was inevitable. The best we can hope for is that the rulers were – on the whole – fair, just and honest. Not perfect, but good enough. In this book I have tried to show that this true for a certain set of colonial servants in a certain place at a certain time.