



# *Oaksey*

## **Elspeth Huxley, Chronicler of Colonial Kenya**

Elspeth Huxley, a witty and energetic journalist and author of more than 30 books, including memoirs, biographies, crime stories and novels, many inspired by her childhood in colonial Kenya, died on January 10 in a nursing home in Tetbury, in Gloucestershire, England, a family friend said. She was 89.

Although her eclectic literary output reflected an extraordinary range of interests, Mrs Huxley was perhaps best known for a 1959 work of autobiographical fiction, "The Flame Trees of Thika," which was based on her early life among white settlers on her father's coffee plantation. Although some Kenyans denounced it as an apologia for colonial rule, the book was widely praised for its rich sense of humour, its affectionate personal portraits and its gentle evocation of life in a singular place. "The Flame Trees of Thika" became an immense popular best seller, and in 1981 was made into a television series in Britain. The next year it was shown on public television in the United States.

Elspeth Josceline Huxley was born in July 1907, the only child of Maj Josceline Grant, a scot, and his formidable wife, the former Nellie Grosvenor. Her father, whose failed business schemes included a plan to develop a new kind of motorcar, was a "gentle, humorous, dreamy person whose dreams never came true," she once said. Her mother was a daughter of Lord Stalbridge, who, despite being the younger brother of the first Duke of Westminster, had little money.

In any case, no money came to the family. When she was 5, her family moved to Kenya, taking possession of a 500 acre coffee farm that Major Grant had bought on a whim in the bar of a Nairobi hotel. They arrived on an ox cart, worked full time on the plantation and had major swings in financial fortune; when they ran out of money for petrol, for instance, they had to use oxen to pull the farm truck.

For her part, she was sometimes taught at home and sometimes in school. She had little choice, she later remembered, but to "to fall back on old copies of the Field, manuals of instruction on everything from lace-making to the erection of simple stills, and the volumes of pocket encyclopaedia in minute type." At one point she was sent to school in England, but the school sent her home in 1919 after it was discovered that she was running a book on the Derby horse race.

While still a teenager, she discovered that she could use her writing talent to make money. Her first published article, in a magazine called *The Magician Monthly*, was about a magic trick of her own invention. Later, under the pseudonym *Bamboo*, she wrote a polo column for the *East African Monthly*, answering readers' questions despite her ignorance about the game. By the time she was 17, she had had 65 articles published in Kenyan newspapers, some of them illustrated with her own photographs.

In 1925, she went to England, earning an agricultural degree from Reading University. Thanks to a wealthy uncle, she also studied agriculture at Cornell University in the United States. Her interest in farming remained throughout her life, and in 1960 she published "*Brave New Victuals: An Inquiry Into Modern Farm Production*," in which she questioned the increasing reliance on artificial farming methods.

Major Grant and his wife, now the owners of a pig and maize farm, had hoped that their daughter would eventually return to Kenya. But attracted to journalism, she wrote dozens of articles for British magazines and newspapers and took a job for £1 a week as a press officer at the Empire Marketing Board in England. The job evaporated during the Depression, but in 1931, she married her boss, Gervas Huxley, chief of the publicity department.

She soon had an opportunity to indulge her love of travel: Huxley, a grandson of the humanist Thomas Henry Huxley and a cousin of Aldous, the author, was appointed head of Ceylon Tea Propaganda Board, a job that required him to travel around the world, encouraging people to drink tea.

In 1935, Mrs Huxley published her first book, a biography of Lord Delamere, a white settler who revolutionised large-scale farming in Kenya. The book, "*White Man's Country: Lord Delamere and the Making of Kenya*," was regarded as an authoritative account of colonial eastern Africa. More books followed at a rapid pace, including three detective novels and "*Red Strangers*" (1939), a novel that told the story of white settlement from the view of several generations of native Kenyans.

During World War II, the Huxleys returned to England, settling on a pig and dairy farm in the Wiltshire countryside, where they remained the rest of their lives. Mrs Huxley worked for a time for the BBC's propaganda department, and in 1948 helped to establish the East African Literature Bureau, which worked to publish books by Africans.

In 1959 her "*Flame Trees of Thika*" appeared, followed in 1962 by a sequel, "*On the Edge of the Rift*." Mrs Huxley returned to the same themes in 1988 with a memoir, "*Out in the Midday Sun: My Kenya*." In a review in *The New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani wrote, "It makes us appreciate the peculiar mixture of courage, rashness, perseverance, idealism and opportunism that brought such a varied group of people to this beautiful, dangerous land."

Mrs Huxley was made a Commander of the British Empire in 1962. Her husband died in 1971; she is survived by their son, Charles, and three grandsons.

Mrs Huxley attributed much of her energy, sense of humour and intelligence to her mother, who had, among other things, compiled a Swahili-English dictionary that was published by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. (The dictionary was less than comprehensive and, Mrs Huxley later said, "It contained not very useful phrases like 'The idle slaves are scratching themselves'"). In 1980, she published a collection of her mother's letters along with a biographical essay, in "*Nellie: Letters From Africa*,"

As the African nationalist movement gathered steam, Mrs Huxley wrote a number of articles defending white settlers and colonial rule. She later wrote with lucid sympathy about the challenges facing the newly independent nations under majority rule.

Among Mrs Huxley's other books are a country diary about life in Wiltshire and biographies of Florence Nightingale and the Antarctic explorer Robert Scott. Her last book, a biography of Scott's son, the naturalist Peter Scott, was written when she was 83,. Energetic to the end, she last visited Africa in 1995, gardened enthusiastically, took an hour-long walk every day and corresponded with a wide circle of friends and acquaintances.

She also took on myriad causes, protesting the erosion of the countryside and the disappearance of rural post offices, for instance, while espousing euthanasia and the protection of rhinoceroses. But in her last Who's Who entry, she described her recreations as "resting and gossip."

**Sarah Lyall, The New York Times Saturday 18 January 1997**

**OPC Notes:** The Wiltshire Farm referred to is Woodfolds Farm at Oaksey, and the Country Diary is "Gallipot Eyes."