

Mary Kingsley

Mary Kingsley (1862 – 1900) spent her early life caring for her ailing family like a good, dutiful Victorian daughter. In 1892, when she was 30, her parents died within six weeks of one another. The next year she went to West Africa for six months. She returned in 1894 and stayed a year, working as a trader and gathering fish and fetishes. Kingsley volunteered as a nurse during the Boer War but died shortly after arriving in South Africa aged 38.¹

Notes²

Mary Kingsley's world

The single woman was a problem to herself and to society. Ideally she should not exist, but failing that she was expected either to emigrate to the colonies with an excess of men, or to devote herself to charity, console herself with religion and pay heed to her duties as daughter, sister or aunt – and to do so as inconspicuously as possible. Human ingenuity could always find some way in which a woman could fulfil her proper role of servicing men. (*Independent Women*, 1985, Martha Vicinus)

Many women were condemned to a life of sterile unfulfilment, 'Passion, intellect, moral activity – these three have never been satisfied in a woman,' wrote Florence Nightingale. 'In this cold and oppressive conventional atmosphere, they cannot be satisfied. In her *Cassandra*, written in 1852, Nightingale painted a vivid portrait of girls who at seventeen were full of noble ambitions and dreams but who, at thirty, were 'withered, paralysed, exhausted.' Many women married in order to escape mindless domesticity – and indeed marriage was the sole event in their lives – only to find that they had merely exchanged one thralldom, one master, for another.

By the 1860s there were some 750,000 unmarried women over thirty in Britain. By the end of the century one in three of all adult women in Britain would be single, and one in four would never marry.

Triumphing over a constrained upbringing, overcoming a lack of formal education, Mary Kingsley succeeded in a man's world. Like Florence Nightingale, she knew to the full the stultifying role assigned to women, and like her she overcame it. She broke the mould constructed to confine women. Yet consciously she was no feminist; she believed that women were inferior to men, that they should be denied the vote, and that their natural place was in the home. The sexes, she decided, should have complementary roles that were very different.

Summary of Mary Kingsley's character

Mary Kingsley was one of the most intriguing and unfathomable personalities of the late-Victorian period. She was a paradox. She was a rebel and yet a conformist, irreverent but also a traditionalist. She was a humorist of brilliance; she was a lonely and depressive personality. She 'skylarked' in Africa, 'puddling' up and down rivers; she had a solemn and dedicated seriousness of purpose. She was a friend of many Africans and admired African institutions and ideas. Indeed she even called herself an African. She paved the way for our modern understanding of Africa and is one of the few figures from history of the British empire who can be admired equally by members of all races. Yet she was also an outspoken racist, a polygenist who believed that the negro belonged to a separate species from the European. A struggle went on within her between her humility and pride, self-abnegation and self-esteem, between acceptance of a woman's lot and the assertion of her own abilities.

Mary Kingsley's family

An unconventional man, George Kingsley was a doctor who married the 35 year old Mary Bailey, an innkeeper's daughter. Four days later their daughter Mary was born. Son Charles arrived a few years later. George Kingsley spent only an average of two or three months a year at their Southwood Lane, Highgate home; preferring to have adventures abroad. He failed to provide for them financially, but Mary worshipped him.

¹ *The Virago Book of Women Travellers* edited by Mary Morris

² *Mary Kingsley : Light at the Heart of Darkness* by Robert Pearce, 1990 The Kensal Press.

Mary spent a lonely childhood and adolescence tending to an ill mother (sensitive and highly strung) and unable to see little of the outside world. Her father disapproved of educated women, so she spent her time doing domestic and nursing chores. She educated herself from her father's library and devouring *The English Mechanic* magazine.

Mary Kingsley at thirty

Physically she was undistinguished. In her 'teens she had been a thin pale girl of middle height, with straight fair hair and blue eyes, quiet and of domestic habits. Now, as a woman, she continued thin, pale and fair, and most people did not give her a second glance. She certainly did not dress to attract attention, being always soberly attired. Her voice was not unrefined, but she would keep dropping her h's. She was, after all, her mother's as well as her father's daughter.

She was reserved and somewhat awkward with strangers and there is no evidence of any romantic entanglement during her first thirty years. She seemed destined to remain a spinster. 'I now nothing myself of love. I have read about love. I see from men and women's actions that the thing exists just like I read about it in books, but I have never been in love, nor has anyone ever been in love with me.'

On the positive side, she learned to think for herself and to act on her own initiative. She became capable and practical and self-reliant, not easily deterred by set-backs. She escaped the enforced, decorous leisure that rendered many ladies 'sickly'. Intellectually, she would never follow established orthodoxies. She was never concerned with fashion, in dress or opinion.

Death of parents

With the death of her parents, things fell apart. Her *raison d'être* had disappeared. Like many a dutiful daughter who had faithfully given her life to father and mother, she seemed to have no reason for living when they were dead. She could look after her brother, accepting more drudgery, but Charley was soon to travel to China. Marriage seemed out of the question, she was the classic surplus woman. Maybe she should decide to die? Instead she resolved to do something almost as drastic – to travel alone to West Africa, the 'white man's grave'.

The Victorian woman traveller

By the middle of the 19th century the Victorian Miss was beginning to travel on her own in the Alps, or Italy, or even India, Japan and America. In 1894 a handbook for women travellers insisted that 'there is nothing to prevent a woman from seeing every civilised, even semi-civilised country in the world without other protection than her own modesty and good sense. But West Africa was considered beyond the pale of civilisation.

Mary Kingsley's decision to choose West Africa

'My life has been a comic one: dead tired and feeling no one had need of me any more, when Mother and Father died within six weeks of each other in '92 and my Brother went off to the East, I went down to West Africa to die. West Africa amused me and was kind to me and was scientifically interesting – and did not want to kill me just then. I am in no hurry.' Mary Kingsley letter 1899.

Travelling kit and budget

Mary Kingsley wished to travel as lightly as possible. Personal belongings included diaries, Horace's *Odes* and Dr Günther's authoritative *Study of Fishes*, together with precisely the clothes she wore in England. She also had to take specimen bottles for fish, together with preserving spirit, and photographic equipment; and these found their way into a long and ingenious waterproof sack which served her remarkably well, its only idiosyncrasy being 'that it had ideas of its own about the arrangements of its contents.'

Mary's costs were a mere £300. On this budget she had to make her way as a trader, living with the local people as they did, not shielded by wealth and power. In July 1893 she bought a one-way ticket from Liverpool to the West African coast. The steamship company did not issue returns as so few lived to complete the round trip.

[*En route to the river Gaboon*] It was an exhausting trip but Mary declined a night at a Roman Catholic mission on the grounds that she was too dishevelled and that the nuns might put me down as an ordinary specimen of Englishwoman, and so I should bring disgrace on my nation!

Philosophy of travel

'Be a man as fine as they make them, it is always advisable to supplement their charms with a revolver.'

Mary's writing

I would rather not publish it under my own name, as I really cannot draw the trail of the petticoat over the Coast of all places – neither can I had a picture of myself in trousers or any other excitements of that sort added. I went out there as a naturalist not as a sort of circus.

Other women in West Africa

Mary made a special point of visiting the redoubtable Scottish missionary Mary Slessor at Okyon. Miss Slessor, a former mill-hand, the daughter of an alcoholic shoemaker who had raised seven children in a one-room Dundee slum, had spent 18 years near Calabar. For the last six or seven she had been living 'as a veritable white chief' over the Okyon district, stamping out 'killing at funerals, ordeal by poison, and perpetual internecine wars.'

Fending off men and travelling along

When the black engineer climbed part way up the ladder [where Mary was perched on the steamer] and gazed hard at Mary, she gave him a wad of tobacco. 'Remember that whenever you see a man, black or white, filled with a nameless longing, it is tobacco he requires. Grim despair accompanied by a gutsy temper indicates something wrong with his pipe, in which case offer him a straightened-out hairpin.' [bless, you can't beat spinsters for missing the obvious!]

'Neither the Royal Geographical Society's list, in their Hints to Travellers, nor Messrs Silver, in their elaborate list of articles necessary for a traveller in tropical climates, make mention of husbands.'

Travel

Living in West Africa could indeed, she explained, be 'the most awful life in death imaginable' for a European, like being shut up in a library whose books you cannot read, all the mind tormented, terrified and bored.' But it was possible to 'fall under its spell,' to learn to see through the mists of fear and preconception.

One morning at 5:30 she was woken up by a noise which she assumed could only be the mission donkey having an epileptic fit. It turned out to be the morning service – the local people were singing hymns.

The first rapids soon approached... one of her men, M'bo, would should 'Jump for bank, sar,' using the term in which Africans seemed habitually to address Mary Kingsley. Mary promptly did so, scrambling for the bank and once hanging on to a rock 'in a manner more befitting an insect than an insect hunter' while the men used a strong chain fixed to the front of the canoe to haul it over the rocks.

Mary enjoyed the company and the humour of local Africans, deciding that 'if the aim of life were happiness and pleasure, Africa should send us missionaries instead of our sending them to her.'

The animal trap incident

Mary Kingsley fell into a fifteen-foot pit lined with twelve-inch ebony stakes.

'It is at these times you realise the blessings of a good thick skirt. Had I paid heed to the advice of many people in England... and adopted masculine garments, I should have been spiked to the bone, and done for. Whereas, save for a good many bruises, here I was with the fullness of my skirt tucked under me, sitting on nine ebony spikes some twelve inches long, in comparative comfort, howling lustily to be hauled out.'

Mary Kingsley's portrayal of herself in *Travels in West Africa*

Mary Kingsley portrayed herself as an amiable eccentric character who was undertaking tasks too great for her powers. This 'dilapidated lady' was continually losing hairpins and getting into water and 'had not other people taken care of me, goodness only knows what would have become of me.' 'I can confidently say I am not afraid of any wild animal –until I see it – and then – well I will yield to nobody in terror.'

Meeting Rudyard Kipling

He met her at a tea-party. They talked a good deal over the cups and more walking home afterwards. He invited her to come up to his rooms to talk it out. 'She agreed, as a man would, and then suddenly remembering said, 'Oh, I forgot I was a woman, 'Fraid I mustn't.'

Career after her travels

Mary Kingsley wrote a second best seller (after *Travels in West Africa*) called *West African Studies*, followed by the *Story of West Africa*; a memorial to her father *Notes on Sport and Travel* and dozens of article in magazines. She was hugely popular as a lecturer and often gave advice to government departments on African affairs. (They did not heed her advice most of the time; and she became embroiled on matters relating to traders and African rights.)

She was miserable in Britain and often ill with influenza, but could not return to West Africa; she was obliged to minister to her brother Charley. He kept planning to return to his passionate area of the world – the Far East – but ill health meant he postponed and prevaricated every year.

Early death

Frustrated, Mary Kingsley was only able to leave when the higher calling of becoming a nurse to the beleaguered soldiers fighting in the Boer War appeared. She sailed in March 1900 and travelled to Simonstown in the Cape. She didn't nurse British soldiers but volunteered to go and nurse Boer prisoners of war and casualties.

The understaffed hospital was filthy and disease was rife. After just a few months she contracted typhoid and died on 3rd June 1900. She was buried quietly at sea but when news of her death reached England there were huge outpourings of grief.