

Review by Ann Crichton-Harris

On call in Africa is a major contribution to the little known history of the WW1 campaign in East Africa. The hundredth anniversary of the Great War brought to the attention of the general public another theatre of war, far away from that in Europe. Documentaries, articles, and mentions began to appear here and there and people learned, often to their amazement, that this African field of battle extended over half a dozen countries: it was fought under physical conditions that we could barely imagine.

Norman Jewell, of English and Welsh stock but born and bred in Ireland, had a somewhat unorthodox childhood—he was fatherless from the age of three and had no formal education until the age of ten—but worked his way up to qualify in medicine from Trinity College, Dublin. An inveterate diarist, by the 1960's he had written a memoir of his life covering the period 1910-1932, but never published.

This gave his grandchildren, David, Sandra, Anthony and Richard, the impetus to collate his many photographs, add his personal diary entries, and embark on filling in the gaps in his extraordinary story. We learn of his early life in Dublin, then of his experience as a young colonial medical officer in the little known Seychelle Islands (on most maps, just dots in the Indian Ocean). When war broke out in 1914 he signed on for service as Captain in the 3rd East African Field Ambulance, and continued in post-war Africa as a civil medical officer. These experiences engendered his great love for Africa.

The perseverance of Dr. Jewell's grandchildren has given historians, both amateur and professional, a great deal more about the tropical medical challenges than hitherto known. We now have a first-hand account from the front lines of the African campaign and the day-to-day hell of four years of life in this malaria infested continent. There was no home leave; it was too dangerous to sail the Indian Ocean.

'Respite' from the Front came as a result of a dose of malaria, dysentery, bilharzia, sleeping sickness, black water fever, wounds inflicted by wild animals or by the wily enemy, the German trained African Askaris. A number of porters, and there were

hundreds in the Carrier Corps, were taken by lions or bitten by snakes. Rivers were crocodile-infested; poor food, unclean water and relentless heat debilitated everyone.

Dr. Jewell, working in this chaos and misery, noted everything: the topography, the vegetation, the insects, the local Africans' habits, clothing and diet, along with the habits and quirks of his fellow medics. He had so many narrow escapes, he must have had a charmed life. He found good or amusement in everything. He never complained; once he noted that after sixty-two hours of continuous work during a particularly raging battle in 1916, with wounded pouring in to the hospital tents, he finally fell into a deep sleep.

This is the most detailed personal story of the medical and ambulance units to have surfaced so far. Somehow Dr. Jewell found time to keep a diary and take photographs. Presumably he had a very good visual memory. The tales he heard when he first arrived in Africa sounded so preposterous he doubted their veracity but he soon learned that “in Africa the impossible can happen and often does”.

For serious historians of the African campaign and its medical and ambulance units, this account is an important starting point. Part II consists of recently transcribed Official Medical Diaries, (archived in The National Archives, Kew). An enormous ‘thank-you’ is owed historian Dr. Anne Samson for this on-going work. The diaries were written in pencil, in the field, and signed every day by the Officer Commanding of that particular ambulance brigade. There are over 800 diaries and, so far, most of those pertaining to this story have been transcribed. We learn that some officers took the risk of writing their fury at the incompetence of the higher command. Medicines, jugs for water, equipment for basic surgeries, were promised but often not delivered. Latrines were poorly maintained; shelter for the sick, with an army on the move, required bandas and stretchers to be improvised using local plant material. Discipline had to be meted out to orderlies who were lazy or just ran away. Food for patients frequently ran short.

Transport is something that Dr. Jewell enjoyed writing about. He rode the rails standing on the foot-plate when he could. Once he describes caterpillars so thick on the railway

line that the train's wheels could gain no purchase. Journeys by ox-wagon fascinated him. A team consisted of eighteen great lumbering creatures. "It seemed strange, at first, to discover that each of the oxen, from the leaders down, all had different names and that in each span the same names were applied to the animals in similar positions. The result was that any driver could take over the span of another team and still be able to call on any individual animal to pull its weight". Such details put the reader 'in Africa'.

This book has wonderful photographs, and the Official Diary transcriptions have full TNA citations. The Index of several hundred names is a boon to family historians; and a good Bibliography renders this a must-have book for the WWI East Africa enthusiast.