

A doctor's outstanding memoirs about life in the Seychelles and East Africa a century or so ago Alan Bateman

'On Call in Africa' joins a distinguished list of books and memoirs about various aspects of life, people and events in East Africa over the last century and more – but this book stands out from the crowd in several ways.

First, Dr Norman Jewell's notes and diaries are evocatively written with a moving immediacy and a telling eye for detail. From his early days and medical qualification in Ireland to four years in the Seychelles and then on to the 'meat' of the book, his full military involvement in the East African campaign of 1914-1918 – which to many might have seemed like a side-show to The Great War in Europe but which had its own character and horrors for those involved – his words and insights grip and move us in equal measure. This was an unusual and serious campaign when the Germans, under their highly respected general, Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, tied up the British and their allies, including many brave African askaris/soldiers on both sides, for the four years. That was always their plan.

Second, the diaries and memoirs are remarkable for their proven accuracy of the unpleasant conditions of the time, of the caring but primitive medical facilities throughout, and of the differing social and human realities which then existed.

The book continues on in peace-time with Dr Jewell's service in Nakuru, Mombasa, Nairobi and other parts of Kenya in their formative years, all described with verve, humour and sympathy, before his eventual return with his wife, Sydney, in 1932 to medical life in southern England.

Dr Jewell's memoirs have been edited and 'put together' by his four grandchildren, David, Sandra, Tony and Richard, and what a fine job they have done. The photographs, maps and illustrations are plentiful and very well reproduced, being almost a book and an education in themselves. This is a very handsomely produced volume indeed.

Finally, Dr Jewell's personal life is not overlooked by the editors and we are given, almost as a bonus, an accurate and detailed picture of his wife, Sydney Elizabeth Auchinleck, who must have been a warm, loyal yet formidably determined person in her own right, being one of the first female intake of forty women as undergraduates into Trinity College, Dublin, in 1904. (TCD was the first of the traditional British and Irish universities to grant degrees to women.)

Perhaps the following two quotes in Dr Jewell's own words will illustrate the appeal of this fascinating book.

"It was an uneventful voyage (...from Marseilles to the Seychelles in 1910...) apart from an incident that occurred when we docked at Aden. I had disembarked to visit a distant relative.....and on my way back in a local carriage.... the traces broke and the body of the car and the wheels parted company so that, when I reached the landing stage the ship's boat had gone. I got a local rowing boat with two Arabs to row me to the Melbourne , but the Melbourne was soon under way and we were fighting a losing battle until the Chief Steward saw me waving and the ship slowed down and I got safely aboard."

"Before I departed (...from Morogoro in modern-day Tanzania in 1916...) I visited the Native Hospital where there were many wounded German Askaris (African soldiers) one of whom informed me that he had been

wounded when 'a bird had laid an egg on him.' The unfortunate Askari was the first and only soldier I met during the whole of the East African campaign to have the misfortune of being wounded by a bomb released from an aircraft."

This is a book to treasure and enjoy; already I find myself dipping into its pages for sheer pleasure and interest. Please buy it!