



Edith Turner: Memories of Africa from Her Children

Frederick Turner
Irene H. Wellman (nee Turner)
Robert Turner

Memories of Africa

Frederick Turner

Back country Zambia in the early 'fifties was not much changed from the days of the nineteenth century African Raj. Where we lived there were no schools or hospitals within a day's journey; there was a rather pleasant and vague district commissioner, Denning, who mostly left our Ndembu hosts to their own devices.

Watching the Durrells in the BBC miniseries of Gerald Durrell's *My Family and Other Animals* gave me a definite feeling of déjà vu; Edie was very like Louisa Durrell in the series, my brother Bob the botanist was much like Gerry, Rene was a young Margo, and I was the Larry of the family. Vic was the quintessential anthropologist, with his open neck shirt, his disreputable trousers, his ability to drink and talk all night with the village mystic genius Muchona, his wicked sense of humor, his utter love of people, and his inner romantic.

For me the memories are too desperately nostalgic to be entirely real. I'll try to keep to the ones of Edie, since she's the one on the current menu. Edie schooled us in the mornings, subverting the correspondence courses we used into sheer magic. Vic was away most of the day, interviewing, driving on the dirt roads to rituals, surveying cassava fields, or banging away at the typewriter, but he told us stories he made up in the evenings or read us dozens of books by installments. Edie helped Vic in the afternoons, while Rene hung out with her weird little deaf friend Dora, Bob botanized, and I hung out with a bunch of naughty Ndembu boys led by an eleven-year-old hunter called Sakeru, my hero.

Edie had some training in first aid and hygiene, and used to have a queue of rather horrible disease and injury cases most days. Even with the most primitive medical supplies she must have saved quite a few lives. She was a definite lefty, and boiled inside about the malnutrition, infant mortality, and untreated infections of the village. She tried to get them to farm rice, and so have a cash crop and better nutrition than they could get from their cassava mounds. She rented two bullocks, Pendeka and Ndeleke (I think they were called), and plowed up a stretch of grassland. My job was to discourage the big purple ticks they acquired by rubbing them with a gasoline-

soaked rag on a stick. Nothing came of the rice-farming, though; they weren't used to it.

As an anthropologist Edie hung out with the women in the village, and they used to chatter for hours, giggling cynically at the doings of the men and, I think, making dirty jokes. She got to be in on all the women's rituals, which we bad boys were not allowed to see. When we tried to sneak into the seclusion hut area, we were driven off by evil gap-toothed old hags who threatened us with horrible curses and insults. One of my favorites was "Wanda weil", which meant "You have dirt under your foreskin," and was exceptionally cruel, with its contemptuous dismissal of the as yet uncircumcised.

We boys would swim in the brisk brook nearby, hunt or trap small animals like moles, get into rumbles with another gang, and arrange bloody ant wars by knocking off the top of a termite nest and dumping it on an ant nest. Despite the huge pincers of the warrior termites, the ants, even the small ones, usually won. For the big inch-long Nzewu, the black driver ant, the termites were a walkover; and for the deadliest ants of all, the red ants, the Nsarafu, the termites were simply lunch. Nasty boys. We climbed up the tall termite hills during the swarming season and ate the big juicy queens as they came bustling out of the portals of the mound, testing their wings before they flew off to create their own tribes.

What amazes me is how unterrified Edie was, utterly without the web of support everybody has in a modern city. We kids got malaria, and survived with enduring memories of ghastly fever-dreams (home-made horror movies). Bob and I ran into each other one evening, zooming around opposite sides of one of the village huts; it was bloody. My front teeth were knocked out of alignment and Bob bears the scar on his forehead to this day. I was up a tree one time when I realized that there was a green mamba on the trunk beneath me. Musona, our cook, distracted it with a stick while I went out on a long drooping branch, hung onto it with my arms, and dropped down in safety. Edie cheerfully put up with all of this, and even tolerated my hanging out with Samatamba, who was a famous witch-doctor with syphilis and two beautiful wives who fed me honey beer and made much of me. I was very fond of Samatamba, but he had a dreadful reputation.

We lived in a little cluster of grass huts on the edge of the village. We also had a permanent green canvas tent for our supplies, whose wall I used to lie against while I read and reread *The Swiss Family Robinson*. The kitchen hut caught fire on Rene's birthday, an event that has remained with the usually philosophical Rene ever since, sending her into a mild panic when Christmas or birthday candles are involved.

Every weekend we would take a long drive on the red dirt roads to one of our favorite picnic spots. The best was the Zambesi rapids, where the young vigorous river poured, in several clear cold branches, across a black granite outcrop, creating vast descending terraces of racing blue and white water into deep clear pools with little shady islands covered with a riot of orchids. There's a picture of Bob, Rene, and me sitting in the altogether in one of those long ramps of thin torrent, the force of the water making wings around each of us. And Edie, whom you can't see, taking the picture with her faithful Leica, her skirt hitched up, had wings too, around her ankles, like the god Mercury.

Memories of Africa, 1953

Irene H. Wellman (nee Turner)

I have only small flashbacks of Mwinilunga as I arrived there when I was only age 4. However I do remember that both Vic and Edie encouraged Fred, Bob, and myself to participate in many of the village activities, just as they too were immersed in all that went on. I remember making friends with a little deaf girl, Dora, who, like me, couldn't communicate well with the other village children. She and I spent many hours playing games in the red dirt between the village huts, among the roosters, chickens and their chicks. One chick imprinted on me and followed me wherever I went, but one day, I accidentally stepped on it. I still remember crying piteously over its limp body.

I also remember being encouraged by Edie to learn to dance the Nkanga, imitating the other little girls who were in early preparation for their puberty ritual. Another form of preparation for womanhood was the planting of a gourd that would be dried out to turn into a calabash for carrying water drawn from the river. I planted mine carefully and went often to water it and watch it swell. I was very proud of it, but sadly, left the area before it was fully ripe. I was also proud of the fact that I could balance a small pot on my head, with aid of a circular cloth, demonstrating this achievement in front of Edie, who also tried it, laughing as it fell from her head. And I remember Edie helping me gather black and red seeds to string together for necklaces to wear for dancing.

Sometimes, on festive nights when the deep drums began, Edie allowed me to join in the dancing with the other children. But mostly, I fell asleep to the drums' resonant sound in the dark distance. My bed consisted of an army cot draped with a mosquito net to ward off the large mosquitos that got in through the cracks in the mud and grass walls. Other nights, I remember Vic reading Shakespeare plays to us, using his acting skills inherited from his mother, an actress, to bring the voices to life. The books emerged from our time there with large round holes in the pages from the bites of hungry insects. Moths buzzed and burned against our paraffin lamp but my father kept reading to us through it all. And I remember once or twice waking in the middle of the night to hear far, far away the roar of lions in the grassland beyond the forest. Our household consisted of at least two huts, one being a kitchen hut where our hired cook, a tall quiet man, attempted to make English dishes that Edie had recommended at first with goat meat and tough chickens and store-bought butter and flour. I had expanded my diet by then and was quite happy eating the grubs of flying ants, boiled caterpillars, roasted grasshoppers, and balls of dipped cassava with the other children. However, on my fifth birthday, the kitchen suddenly went up in flames, very likely because of the strange demands made on the small oven our cook had devised. The whole village gathered around to watch the flames rise and die down while I cried, "My birthday's all gone!" I thought my birthday cake was lost in the fire, but Edie had somehow rescued it and suddenly produced it, replete with five candles, and all was well again. But after that, we all ate more like the people of the village, and shared food and drink often.

Fire was a real hazard in that area, and, one day, a huge fire came rushing through the forest towards the village. I remember sparks flying everywhere and the red glow coming ever closer. I had malaria at the time, despite our daily quinine pills, and I recall the strange sensation of being freezing from a fever, but growing hotter and hotter from the growing fire. After the flames passed, jumping over the village commons, the air smelled for days of charred wood and the leaves that had survived

had turned golden as if it was fall.

My favorite memory of all was of sitting between my Edie and Vic in the old Ford lorry, staring at the round dials on the wooden dashboard, while my brothers rode in the back, leaning against the cabin with Africans brought along for the ride. Through the open window, above the rattle of wheels and roar of engine, I could hear their rich harmonic singing and wished I could be behind there too. On one journey, we ended up stuck several times in mud from a big flood and arrived at our destination, caked with dirt, but relieved, to be greeted by white officials who gave us very curious glances. So-called civilization seemed odd to me then. I'll never forget arriving in Lusaka for the first time for many months and how amazed I was by the flat paved streets. I'd lived so completely among trees and bumpy earth that I'd forgotten the smooth asphalt-covered world I was born in. I had indeed become a tribal child.

These memories, like the memories of my brothers, are not the usual ones of childhood. Edie and Vic had brought us there in the spirit of adventure and inspiration, fully knowing the importance of being fully connected to the people we lived among. Like other children of who have been taken into the field, I hold a special place in my heart for this early experience and still feel it resonating in my very bones.

Mwinilunga Memories

Robert Turner

Such memories as I retain of my time in the bush village, Kajima, as a boy of 5 until 8 years old, are almost entirely happy ones. At home there, we lived in grass huts, swiftly built for us by local men using hewn branches, bark string and bundles of tall dried savannah grass as walls and thatch. The three of us children—Fred, me and Rene—slept in one hut, our parents Vic and Edie in another. A third hut, just a roof without walls, served as kitchen, where our cook and translator, Musona, held sway, making occasional valiant efforts to cook British-style means. Musona was very kind and forbearant with us children.

I remember long evenings with Vic reading to us children and Edie from a wide range of exciting novels, from John Buchan, Rider Haggard, *The Swiss Family Robinson*, to Shakespeare plays, by the hissing light of a Tilley pressure lamp, with its glowing white mantle. Vic had a huge gift for personification, a different and appropriate voice for every character, which went along with his fluency in the local Ndembu language.

I remember teaching myself to swim in a small clear stream, in places just deeper than the length of my six-year-old arms. I would push myself off at these points, and learned to doggy-paddle. It was in this stream I later discovered a Stone Age hand-axe, beautifully shaped by flaking from a shiny pink stone. When I showed it to Vic he recognised straight away what it was. Now it is on display in the museum in Livingstone.

I remember the many village rituals, often accompanied by exciting drumming, but I cannot remember the explanations of them. Sometimes the drumming continued late into the night, while we children were going to sleep in our camp beds—we could feel the drums through the hard earth which formed the floor of our hut. I remember the day I went exploring on my own, and came through the forest to a village perhaps

three miles away, with a ritual going on. I made a mental note of as much as I could follow, and ran home to tell Vic. He was pleased with me, not at all concerned that I could have got lost. He knew I could look after myself.

I remember the village spring, the source of the Nyarufanta stream, which rose abundantly in a clay hollow. Fred and I found that simply by pushing a finger into the clay we could make tiny springs. We took over a section of the clay wall and connected our springs to form a miniature river, with tributaries and tiny waterfalls. We even drew a map of it.

I remember Vic's friend Samatamba, who seemed very old and wrinkled, but kindly. He gave us honey beer to taste, powerfully aromatic with wild local honey and alcohol, with the occasional dead bee floating on the surface of the calabash. I remember the village hunter, with his ancient gun, for which Vic supplied him with bullets in return for an occasional antelope he shot. We all remember the hunter's dance, with its chant of "Yezhinai wo, yezhinai wo". I remember the taste of boiled duiker meat, and the biltong we made from what we could not eat at once. Around the village people kept chickens, guinea fowl and goats. I will not forget watching a goat being slaughtered, then being skinned and eviscerated, while Vic described the process, precisely, to his budding scientist son.

We got cow's milk once a week from a white farm five miles away. I don't know how they managed with rinderpest and the tsetse fly. We drank it fresh for an afternoon, and then boiled it to keep for another day or two.

I will never forget the tiny orchids in the grass, with their vivid velvety purple or yellow colours, all so different and distinct. Or the brilliant red blossoms on the flowering flamboyant trees, or the wild plums and other unique wild fruit. Or the tender colour of the new leaves emerging from the charred stumps of trees burnt in the forest fires, sometimes set in order to clear land for planting. Or the edible root, the inshindwa, with its extraordinary tang, and the delight in finding them, with their purplish tops protruding from the soil.

I remember joining the local children in catching and eating flying termites when they emerged, full of sweet glycogen, from their anthills at the mating time. Delicious and nutritious. I remember being occasionally welcomed at the chota, the little hut at the centre of the village, where the men sat, smoked, chatted, and snacked on cassava mush and whatever savoury relish could be provided. Sometimes it was roasted caterpillars.

I remember the rainy seasons, when the rain came down in torrents and the lightning and thunder were extreme. Lying in our camp beds during night storms, we revelled in the awesomeness of the elements. The dirt roads became waterways, with red mud.

I remember paddling and swimming in the rapids of the Zambezi, already quite a powerful river, although not yet far from its source. The rushing water made wings round our shoulders. On another occasion we visited the Zambezi's source, a quivering domed pool surrounded by a dusky cathedral-like 'itu' of tall rainforest trees. One of our favourite picnic spots was the Luakera Falls, now a tourist sight, but then we had it all to ourselves.