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“In Her Shoes”: Victorian Lady Explorers in Imperial Africa and their Relationship to  
Contemporary Travellers of a Commercialized, Nostalgic Landscape

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Victorian women embodied several different roles in British colonial Africa. Among the cast of women present in the colonies arose a group of explorers, naturalists, and travellers who battled adversity stemming from the overarching patriarchal institutions of their homeland in addition to the natural hazards of the “untamable” African landscape they hoped to conquer in a way separate from their male counterparts. By rejecting the acceptable or traditional role of a British woman in the colonies as a teacher or wife of an official, these women became active agents both in and in spite of imperialism. A key backdrop in these women’s experiences is the presence of the Cape to Cairo trek, a highly imperial installation of African continental domination imagined as a measure of a traveller’s determination. The Cape to Cairo trek was such an influential actor that its completion remains a goal of contemporary travellers, male and female alike. The journeys across Africa contributed to a unique brand of feminism that contradicted what a proper Victorian lady should be. These Victorian women were also full of contradictions – explicitly denouncing feminist principles while actively living feminist lifestyles. In contemporary travel narratives, a sense of Victorian imperial nostalgia is a harmful presence which contributes to negative class-gender-race stereotypes. Through the examination of three Victorian lady explorers, Mary Kingsley, Mary Hall, and Stella Court Treatt, this paper will observe the harmful affects of imperialistic and Orientalist writings on the Cape to Cairo trek and African travel in general. Those harmful affects will be traced to the contemporary African travel narratives of the British Adams and Le Breton families, American Mindy Budgor, and British actress Keira Knightley. While the acts of these Victorian lady travellers can be categorized as intrepid and trailblazing, the cultural myth of the Victorian lady on a physical and spiritual journey through the mystical African landscape is still present today, reinforcing the stereotypical treatment of Africa and Africans, and eventually leading to the exploitive commercialization of the African travel experience.

The Cape to Cairo trek begins in Cape Town, South Africa, and winds through eastern Africa, ending in Cairo, Egypt. Sir Henry Hamilton Johnston, British colonial official, famously coined the term “Cape to Cairo” in the 1890s (Baker 5). Johnston hoped the trek would unite Britain’s colonial holdings in East Africa and establish an undeniable mark of British domination over the land and African people (5). Figure 1 is Johnston’s ideal of the unification of British colonies, utilizing an insensitive color scheme referencing “black Africans, yellow Arabs, and white Europeans working together” (5). The Cape to Cairo trek was strengthened when Cecil Rhodes became determined to construct a railway and telegraph line along the route, “securing the ‘backbone’ of Africa for the British Empire” (Blake 348). By the 1920s, the trek was included among the five “classic long-distance routes” favored by British explorers, cementing its place in exploration and colonial lore (Clarsen 46). The trek embodied the drive to conquer Africa, and developed a distinctly gendered connotation as Africa was defined as “female” and exploration was likened to a “sexual conquest” (46; Blake 349). The Cape to Cairo route materialized out of imperialist principles and its completion became a goal of many travelers, intrepid British women being no exception (see Figure 2).

Exploration and travel in the Victorian era was predominantly masculine and rife with tales of conquest (Holland and Huggan 111). British gentlemen jumped into colonial exploration, albeit with a broad sense of “amateurism”, resulting in women having to fight for the right to travel as well (33). Patriarchal British society and gender roles hindered women from being able to explore the far reaches of empire as they were bogged down with domestic responsibilities. Only when those Victorian domestic duties were no longer a necessity could women travel (Birkett 32-39). Victorian women yearned to be free from the restrictive British patriarchy. In the introduction to their anthology on women’s travel, Bonnie Frederick and Susan McLeod write, “If a woman rejoices in the freedom of travel, the underlying comment is that such freedom does not exist at

home” (Frederick and McLeod, xix). In her noted text *Discourses of Difference*, feminist scholar Sara Mills asserts, “Little serious work has been undertaken to analyze women as agents within the colonial context” (Mills 58). In light of this lack of research, women did exercise copious amounts of agency within colonialism – many through their groundbreaking travel and published writings of their exploits.

Despite the influence of the patriarchy, a trailblazing crop of women explorers, naturalists, and travellers began to assert their right to see the world. The patriarchy did exert considerable influence over the Royal Geographical Society, a lecture and financing organization for natural pursuits. The Society provided an arena for “travel-related study, limited, however, to gentlemen of the right sort” (Early 68). Women were prohibited from Royal Geographical Society membership, which directly hindered the ability of middle-class women to fund their travel expeditions (68). In 1892, under pressure from successful female travellers including Mary Kingsley and Isabella Bird, the Society extended membership offers to twenty-two “well-qualified ladies” (68). This move was very controversial, and one upset member uttered his disdain that the Society would degenerate from a “learned fellowship into a Garden Party Society” (68). Additional membership offers were not offered to women until 1913, but the door was opened for Victorian lady explorers to receive funding for their trips and publication assistance (68).

With some practical barriers removed, this class of Victorian lady travellers stepped out of familiar, yet restrictive England, and into a world that was not fully their own. The women began writing of their travels, creating some of the first travel writing accounts of female origin within the imperial era. While trailblazing, these accounts were often not taken seriously by male contemporaries and classified as “disruptive” (Holland and Huggan 112). This idea of women “disrupting” the patriarchal colonial order is present in many of the readings examined in the course. According to Mills, travel narratives written by women became a Victorian era “taboo”,

and opened the door for male critics to accuse the women explorers of “exaggerated claims and even sexual impropriety” (Mills 41). This poses an interesting comparison between colonial women and Western women. It has been established that Western men were preoccupied with the corruptive abilities of native women’s bodies, but Mills’ claim extends that wariness of women’s bodies to include Western women as well. Professors Holland and Huggan explain the motivation of Victorian lady travellers very well, “By weaving themselves in and out of established places and social roles, women traveler-writers have fashioned a space in which to explore their own identities. They have used travel writing to liberate themselves from constraints place upon them by their own societies” (Holland and Huggan 112-113).

While Victorian lady explorers exerted their freedom in their journeys through the empire, most did not reject Victorian standards of dress and comportment (Frederick and McLeod 5). Rather than adopt comfortable and functional men’s style safari clothes, many Victorian women travellers opted for their traditional corsets, high-necked lace blouses, long skirts and smart jackets, topped with an intricate hat (5). Famed traveller Mary Kingsley wrote in her travel narrative, “I am a most lady-like person...never even wear a masculine collar and tie, and as for encasing the more earthward extremities of my anatomy in – you know what I mean – [trousers] well, I would rather perish on a public scaffold” (Kingsley, 502). Victorian world traveller Isabella Bird famously quipped, “Women travellers are privileged to do the most improper things with perfect propriety” (Frederick and McLeod 13). Under the guise of Victorian dress, female explorers could exercise their desired freedom while simultaneously using their appearance to convey imperial power and status.

Victorian lady explorers acted as artists, ethnographers, and naturalists while on their treks. Holland and Huggan write of their mindset, “being avid students and consumers of other, mostly non-European cultures whose impressive erudition affords another reminder of the imagined

superiority of her own imperial national culture” (Holland and Huggan 28). Women were integrated into the colonial and imperial mentality, and this was also expressed in their writings, especially concerning African treks. Travellers often “assimilated natives to a European frame of reference”, embodying the concept of mistaken frameworks that harm further action (33).

Women’s travel narratives often paint the colonies as “empty” and devoid of conflict, emphasizing colonial control over everything and highlighting the erasure of the colonized (Mills 22). The discourse of Orientalism is also present in some Victorian travel narratives, simultaneously “upholding and criticizing colonial rule” (34-35). This led to the early development of imperial nostalgia, defined as, “a prevalent, commodified mode of elegiac perception through which Western people sentimentalize the former relationship between Empire and its colonies...the wistful reminiscence that seeks control over, but not responsibility for, a mythicized version of the past” (Holland and Huggan 29). This imperial nostalgia is pertinent to the theme of the Victorian lady traveler on a physical and spiritual journey through the colonies and its harmful results. Colonial exploration, femininity, and imperialism are at odds and complicate both European and non-Western women’s existence in the colonial sphere. No one demonstrates the many contradictions of colonial exploration and feminisms than the “original colonial celebrity” of Mary Kingsley.

Mary Kingsley (1862-1900) traveled extensively throughout British West Africa in 1893-1894. She was the first great Victorian lady explorer. Kingsley traveled accompanied not by other Europeans, as was the custom, but with a band of Fan tribesmen (153). She supported her travels by trading at African trading posts along the route (153). Kingsley wrote of her exploits in her narrative *Travels in West Africa*, originally published in 1897. Kingsley grew up in a turbulent household caring for her invalid mother (Birkett 5). It was only after the deaths of her parents could she leave behind Victorian domestic responsibilities and pursue her love of travel (5).

Kingsley's narrative is humorous and full of self-deprecation, but also highlights some harmful aspects of imperialism and racial superiority. Kingsley is full of contradictions as she fully lived a feminist lifestyle, but opposed the suffrage movement and openly minimized her accomplishments while crediting her achievements to the men before her (Early 71). She referred to her lengthy journey as a simple "lark", minimizing the dangers she faced (Mills 153). Her contradictions extended to imperialist principles as her narrative "naturalizes the colonial presence in West Africa" and offers advice as to how the British should expand their trade practices to "improve rather than dismantle colonialism" (153-158). Kingsley's ignorant statement about the happiness of African women demonstrates the complicated relationship between Victorian lady explorers and the imperialist's superior mindset; "I believe, on the whole, that the African married woman is happier than the majority of English wives, because if the husband gets too bad she can poison him off and get someone else killed for it" (qtd. in Early 71). By all accounts, Kingsley was the first great Victorian lady explorer and left a legacy that many strove to build upon.

Mary Hall (born c. 1875) was the first woman to complete the Cape to Cairo trek. Hall completed the journey in 1905, and wrote of her travels in the spirit of Kingsley (Birkett 72). Hall traveled in a large party of European men and African guides, but often does not mention them in her 1907 narrative, *A Woman's Trek from the Cape to Cairo*. Hall's narrative contains elements of the harmful notion of the Victorian woman on a physical and spiritual journey through the wilds of Africa. Hall's narrative does contain humble proclamations and self-deprecation just like Kingsley's, in an effort to please the British patriarchy. Hall opens her narrative with a hope it will be "acceptable",

"As I am the first woman of any nationality to have accomplished the entire journey from the Cape to Cairo, I think perhaps a simple accounts of how I managed to do it quite alone may be of some interest to many who, for various reasons, real or imaginary, are unable to go so far afield. I hope that a book, written from a woman's point of view,



minus big game romances, and the usual exaggerations incidental to all things African, may be acceptable” (qtd. in Blake 347).

Blake unearths a key theme in Kingsley’s and Hall’s travels, as “Like the empire, they both assert authority over and depend upon the people they encounter” (348). While Hall’s narrative justifies that women *can* travel in Africa, she embodies elements of imperial racial superiority (352-353). Hall refers to herself as “the white Queen”, and writes of a disagreement with a Sudanese Sultan, “I think my own porters had remained so calm because they never doubted the omnipotence of white skin to overcome every difficulty” (352). Hall’s narrative is complex, as she tries to negotiate Africa while being “superior in race and class, and inferior in gender” (353). Hall’s journey builds on the colonial celebrity character which Kingsley created and Stella Court Treatt burst open.

Stella Court Treatt (b. 1894), accompanied by her husband, brother, guides, and photographers, completed a widely publicized Cape to Cairo trek in January 1926 having embarked in September 1924 (Zalmanovich 193). Treatt was tasked with recording the expedition’s progress for readers in Britain (194). The British press hoped the glamour of Treatt and her journey would inspire the nation after the horrors of World War I. Treatt’s narrative, *From Cape to Cairo*, cemented her status as a colonial celebrity (194). This new period of colonial travel began the commercialization of the African travel experience. The widely read newspaper dispatches from the Treatt’s expedition “contributed to the domestication and commodification of Africa”, more than ever before (195). Newspaper photographers portrayed Treatt as a rare English beauty, donned in safari attire on the windswept African plains. Treatt’s narrative is full of “Orientalist rhetoric”, as she classifies Africa as “the land of story-books” (qtd. in Zalmanovich 202). Treatt writes of the “big game” aspect of Africa, recalling the wild notions of Africa familiar to many, “I am writing this with my rifle over my knees, as this place is thick with leopards. I’d

love to get a shot at one” (qtd. in Zalmanovich 206). She also writes of her own rebirth through the hardships of the trek, as she “left my frivolous self behind” (qtd. in Zalmanovich 207). Similar to other narratives, Treatt’s lacks any mention of the great deal of assistance African guides and villagers provided (199). This erasure of Africans themselves is a prevalent theme across the commercialized African travel experience in general as the travellers instead focus on their own ability to conquer Africa’s mystical landscape rather than the rich culture and diversity of the many peoples present on the continent.

The Cape to Cairo trek did not fade away with decolonization, but remains a goal for many contemporary travelers. In 2009, the British Adams and Le Breton families completed a Cape to Cairo trek with their young sons (Adams 1 of 1). Both families had previously lived in Zimbabwe for several years and patriarch Robert Adams stated, “We know Africa well, with all her risks and rewards” (1 of 1). The trek was billed as a break from the stresses of everyday life, as well as an incredible educational experience for the young boys (1 of 1). The families drove the entire length of the 10,000-kilometer journey, and charted their experience in their *Jangano2009!* and *Harare to Cape Town (via Cairo)* blogs. Like imperial era explorers before them, the Adams’ and Le Bretons focused on the Orientalist framed empty wilds of Africa. There was little mention of any help received from African villagers, only mentions of the young boys curious ventures into Sudanese souks and the occasional visit to a local doctor. Adams’ statement in British newspaper, *The Guardian*, harks back to Rhodesian imperial notions of conquest, “One day in May, in western Tanzania, 18,000 miles and five months into the trip, we realized that our nomadic existence had become a way of life...And even though we knew that our journey could not last forever, I realized then that the sense of achievement, the knowledge that we could do this, would stay with us for the rest of our lives. This is what mountaineers mean when they say, ‘Because its there’” (1 of 1).

Twenty-seven year old American, Mindy Budgor, drew intense criticism for her experience training to become the first female Masai warrior chronicled in her narrative, *Warrior Princess*. Unsure what to do while awaiting business graduate school admissions, Budgor set off to Kenya with a volunteer organization (Budgor 1 of 1). After living among members of Kenya's Masai tribe, she discovered the supposed inequalities surrounding Masai women and their inability to become Masai warriors (1 of 1). Budgor writes, "Losing the integrity of a tribe because of westernization seemed unacceptable to me, but I felt one element of modern life – women's rights – could help the tribe continue while remaining true to its practices and beliefs" (1 of 1). Budgor completed a rigorous training process and was indeed made the first female Masai warrior. Budgor is charged with "perpetuating troubling stereotypes for personal gain", as "her account evokes popular narratives in Western imaginations that Africans have been battling to redress for years" (Kachipande 1 of 1). Her actions parallel those of the maternal imperialists studied in the course, as she took it upon herself to instill a wide-sweeping cultural change.

Perhaps the most interesting contemporary case study is British actress Keira Knightley's 2007 *Vogue* assignment and photo shoot on the Masai Mara, Kenya. Knightley spent two weeks keeping a diary of her stay at Calvin Cottar's 1920s Safari Camp on the Reserve. One entry reads, "Masai Mara is wide, green, and beautiful. We're right on the border with Tanzania, and the sun is shining. Cottar's 1920s Safari Camp is like something out of a fairy tale. Totally in the wild. White tents, huge four-poster beds with draped white mosquito nets. All the furniture is like something from *Out of Africa*" (qtd. in Sykes 1 of 1). Cottar's camp itself is problematic, as it was the original safari-style hotel established on the Mara in the early 1900s. The camp is a paramount example of the commercialization of Africa and the harmful elements of the glamourized imperial lifestyle that have eked into the modern day. *Vogue* writer Plum Sykes describes Cottar, "The safari is owned and run by Calvin Cottar, whose family settled in East Africa in the early 1900s

after hearing about Teddy Roosevelt's adventures there. Dressed in regulation khaki, Cottar is described as a Liam Neeson type who leaves female clients swooning when he leads the game drives and presides over his old-style camp" (Sykes 1 of 1).

*Vogue* unnervingly called Knightley "*Vogue's* African princess", and posed her in a decidedly Orientalist, *Out of Africa* themed photo shoot for the June 2007 feature story (Sykes 1 of 1). The photographs evoke strong sentiments of colonial nostalgia and are shockingly similar to photographs of Treatt and her party on her 1924-1926 Cape to Cairo trek. While not explicitly referenced in the article, one cannot help but wonder if *Vogue's* art directors used photographs of Treatt and her companions for inspiration. Figures 3 and 4 feature *Daily Express* journalist and Treatt companion Fred C. Law and Knightley posed at writing desks, Law under a rustic thatched-roof shelter and Knightley in one of Cottar's safari tents, a Persian rug under her feet. Figures 5 and 6 show Treatt and Knightley dressed in safari khakis, Treatt hugging the neck of a giraffe and Knightley cautiously approaching the animal. Figure 7 depicts Treatt and other members of her party at the foot of one of their supply trucks. Figure 8 features Knightley delicately perched on one of Cottar's safari trucks, accompanied by guides and a group of Masai warriors. While *Vogue's* photographs are beautiful and part of a fashion feature and interview, they are rich in Orientalist sub context and showcase harmful imperial nostalgia.

Victorian lady explorers did achieve great feats of bravery and strength in the face of many obstacles. These women embodied contradictions as they struggled to act as feminine beings within a masculine sphere. The rise of Victorian feminisms contrasted with the imperial legacy of empire. Victorian lady explorers even distanced themselves from British suffragettes, as they thought any association would "belittle their own reputations as travellers and professionals" (Birkett 200-201). The relationship between Victorian lady explorers and African women was also contemptuous as "African women were given a minimal role and placed as part of the

environment, exotic and interesting but far removed from the active mobility and self-possession of the travelling women” (Clarsen 56). The erasure of Africans is a troubling theme present in many accounts. The concept of African overland travel as a journey of personal fulfillment is a harmful conception resulting from colonial notions of conquest. Contemporary travelers embody the same conflicted relationship with the newly commercialized landscape of Africa. The imperial narrative present in the accounts of Victorian travelers has transformed into the colonial nostalgia image of Africa today, resulting in the neo-imperial commercialization of the continent.

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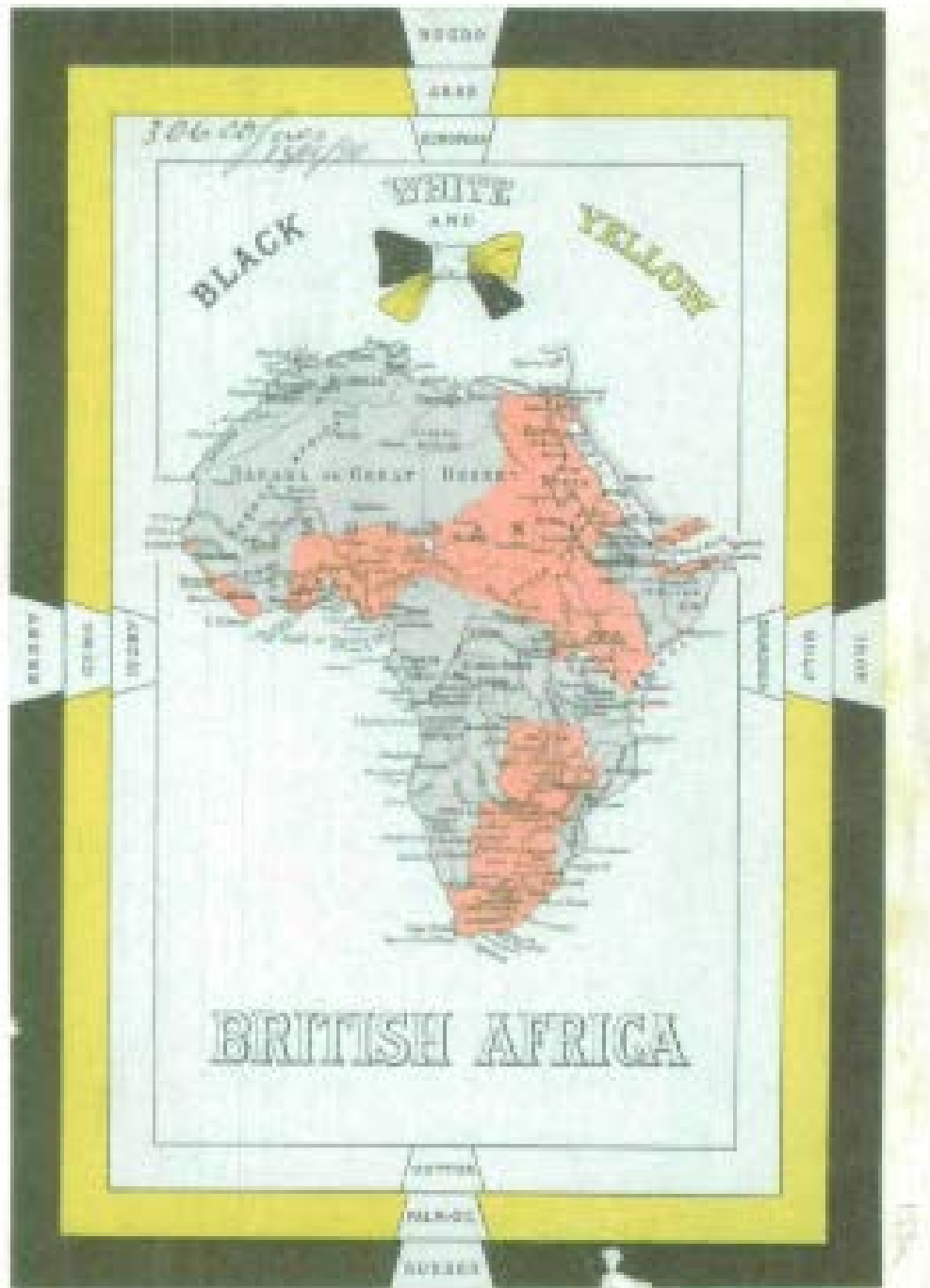
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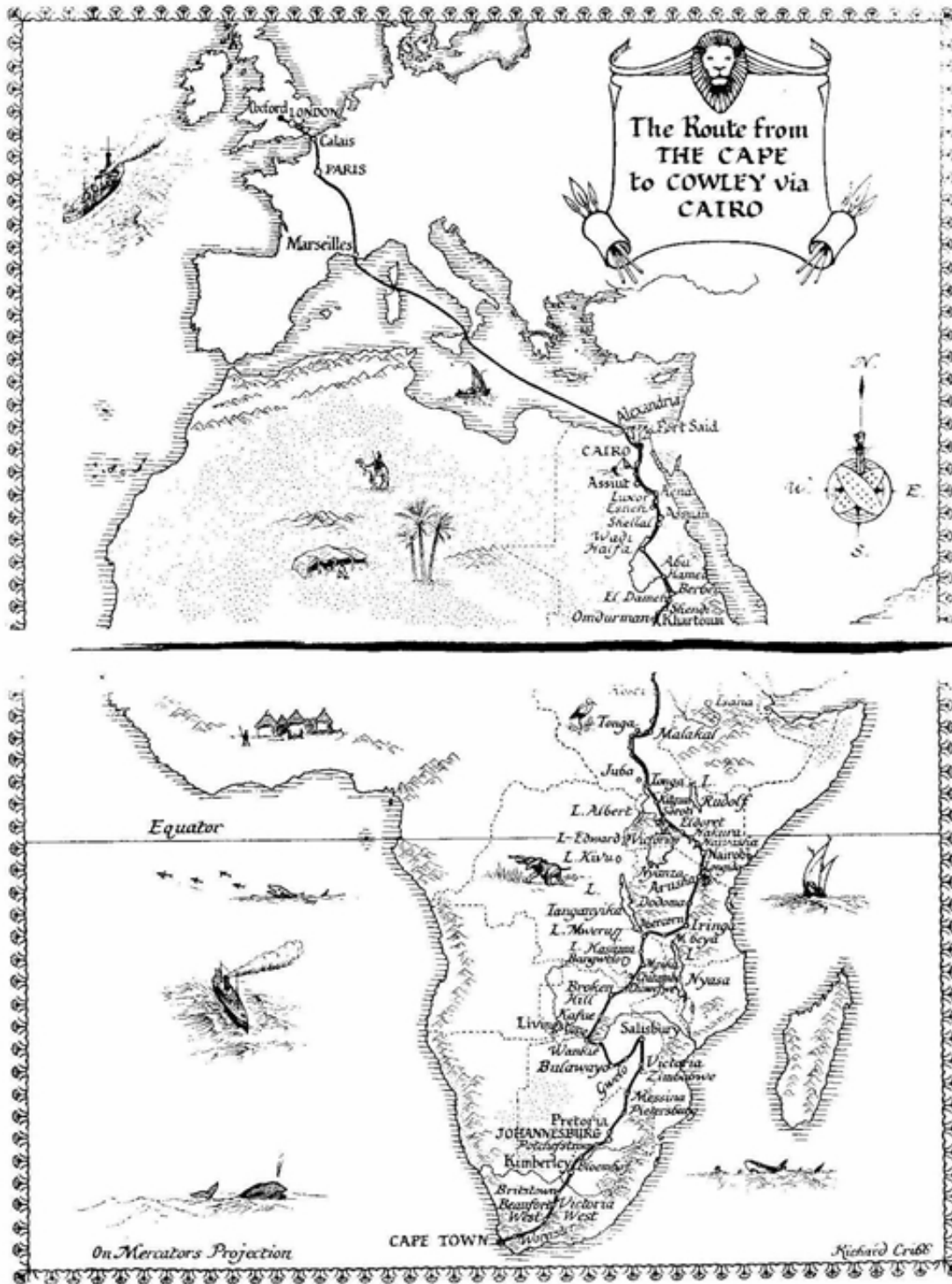
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**Figure 1.** "Johnston's colour-themed map." Illustration by Sir Henry Hamilton Johnson. 1890s. *Bartholomew Archive, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh. History Scotland Magazine* 10.4 (2010): 5. Print.





**Figure 2.** “Belcher and Budgell’s trip. 1932. Illustration by M.L. Belcher, *Cape to Cowley via Cairo in a Light Car* (1932). Featured in: Clarsen, Georgine. “Machines as the measure of women: Colonial irony in a Cape to Cairo Automobile journey, 1930.” *Journal of Transport History* 29.1 (2008): 44-63. Print.

*Note the Orientalism present in the map – only the areas of British East Africa have borders and cities labeled, leaving trite illustrations of camels, elephants, huts, and palm trees in the large expanse of the rest of the continent.*



**Figure 3 (black and white).** “Fred C. Law, the special correspondent for the *Daily Express* typing his articles from the road.” Photograph by Errol Hinds. 1925. Featured in: Zalmanovich, Tal. “‘Woman Pioneer of Empire’: the making of a female colonial celebrity.” *Postcolonial Studies* 12.2 (2009); 193-210. Print.

**Figure 4 (color).** Photograph by Arthur Elgort. 2007. Featured in: Sykes, Plum. “The Chronicles of Keira.” Interview with Keira Knightley. *Vogue Daily Online*. *Vogue* June 2007. Accessed 23 October 2013. <<http://www.vogue.com/magazine/print/keira-knightley-the-chronicles-of-keira>>. Web.



**Figure 5 (black and white).** “Glamorous even in the face of hardships and while wearing men’s safari attire: Stella Court Treatt and a baby giraffe.” 1925. Featured in: Zalmanovich, Tal. “‘Woman Pioneer of Empire’: the making of a female colonial celebrity.” *Postcolonial Studies* 12.2 (2009); 193-210. Print.

**Figure 6 (color).** Photograph by Arthur Elgort. 2007. Featured in: Sykes, Plum. “The Chronicles of Keira.” Interview with Keira Knightley. *Vogue Daily Online*. *Vogue* June 2007. Accessed 23 October 2013. <<http://www.vogue.com/magazine/print/keira-knightley-the-chronicles-of-keira>>



**Figure 7 (black and white).** “The expedition’s Crossley cars were celebrated participants in the expedition. The cars figure in the narratives of the journey as a symbol of the venture’s ‘modernity’ and in advertisements of the day as a symbol to British technological prowess. Here with Stella Court Treatt and Errol Hinds.” 1925. Featured in: Zalmanovich, Tal. “‘Woman Pioneer of Empire’: the making of a female colonial celebrity.” *Postcolonial Studies* 12.2 (2009); 193-210. Print.

**Figure 8 (color).** Photograph by Arthur Elgort. 2007. Featured in: Sykes, Plum. “The Chronicles of Keira.” Interview with Keira Knightley. *Vogue Daily Online*. *Vogue* June 2007. Accessed 23 October 2013. <<http://www.vogue.com/magazine/print/keira-knightley-the-chronicles-of-keira>>.





**Figure 9.** “The expedition’s official narratives omit the great dependence on African labour and expertise to overcome the complicated climate and geographical conditions. This picture reveals its centrality.” 1925. Featured in: Zalmanovich, Tal. “‘Woman Pioneer of Empire’: the making of a female colonial celebrity.” *Postcolonial Studies* 12.2 (2009); 193-210. Print.



**Figure 10.** “Bohunkus being hauled through a swamp”. Photograph by M.L. Belcher. 1930. *Cape to Cowley via Cairo in a Light Car* (1932). Featured in: Clarsen, Georgine. “Machines as the measure of women: Colonial irony in a Cape to Cairo Automobile journey, 1930.” *Journal of Transport History* 29.1 (2008): 44-63. Print.



**Figure 11.** “‘If you reach Libya, you’ve gone too far’...the families make a pitstop of the Great North Road, northern Kenya.” Photograph by Robert Adams. 2009. “Cape Town to Cairo – and back again.” *The Guardian Online*. 5 February 2010. Accessed 23 October 2013. <<http://www.theguardian.com/travel/2010/feb/06/road-Trip-africa-egypt-family/print>>. Web.



**Figure 12.** “Revisiting a favourite camp on the Botswana side of the Kalagadi Transfrontier park. As always, we had fabulous sightings of lion here, and woke up in the morning to find them all around our camp.” Photograph by Gus Le Breton. 2009. Le Breton, Gus. “The Post Script.” Photograph. *Harare to Cape Town (Via Cairo)*. 5 July 2009. Accessed 30 November 2013.

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