

## Book review

**Wilfred J Plumbe, *Cry of the Fish Eagle*. Glasgow: Dudu Nsomba, 1997, 180 pages. ISBN 09522233-9-2.**

Entries made in the "Suggestions Book" at Nkhota Kota Rest House during October 1963 include an exchange between the Curator of the Nyasaland Museum and the local Government Agent about the bats inhabiting the "dormitory." The Curator hoped they were Anson's Free-tailed Bats since that species had been found in neighbouring countries but not in Nyasaland. He concluded: "Needless to say, if this species still occurs, it may well prove to be of considerable attraction to tourists and worth including in your brochure."

Interests in the curiosities of local life and evidence of the patience to transcribe information serendipitously encountered run through Wilfred Plumbe's volume that is subtitled "Experiences in Malawi from initiation to deportation with an interlude in Morocco." The account of the "interlude" appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* during 1969, and need not detain us here. It is the Malawian material that is of interest, and the period covered is 1966 to 1972, when the diarist was helping to establish the University Library.

The volume is self-indulgent – not all the bye-ways down which Plumbe leads intrigue. A mainline, commercial publisher would, in the hope of producing a text of more general interest, would have insisted on cuts. However, Dudu Nsomba Publications is a modest, maverick operation with specific priorities and Plumbe's text, which includes details about getting his ears syringed, is presented at considerable length. The publisher, perhaps, assumes that the volume would be snapped up by librarians. A contingent of workers condemned by some popular myths to pedestrian existences and parallel tastes in reading material.

The extensive academic apparatus provided, which includes a list of *dramatis personae* and an index of place-names, might suggest that this book is of academic significance. It isn't. In view of the bias of the Index, the interest in bats etc., it has a bias towards geography and biology. As the uninspired title of the appendix, "Fragments of University of Malawi Early Library History Taken from Annual Reports," indicates, much of the book smells of the cataloguing room. Plumbe rightly found his vocation working with the Dewey Decimal System rather than, say, with Reuters.

The book is a minor chronicle of expatriate life. The record of 14 September 1969 is worth quoting at some length because it reveals so much about the world that Plumbe tried to measure:

Yesterday I was out to dinner at the Agnews. Swanzie wore a scarlet dress with a gold and scarlet Indian scarf and looked magnificent against a background of Agnew heirlooms. The other guests were the Uttings (John Utting is Dean, Chancellor College) and the Luckhams (he is the new Director of Extension Services and his wife is Guyanese). Swanzie's cook was too drunk to come into the house and the other servants dropped cutlery half a dozen times.

It was at this party Swanzie told me that when she and Fulque stayed at Nkata Bay Rest House, one of the hens belonging to John Kamanga, the manager, came into their rooms each day and laid an egg in the waste paper basket.

While I was on leave a large number of murders were perpetrated in Zingwangwa, the township near Limbe. Other murders have taken place in villages between Mulanje and Zomba – all because of a rumour that the President has promised to repay a £4 million loan from South Africa with blood – for medicinal purposes – of Malawians. Three policemen have been killed by Youth Leaguers; officials of the Malawi Congress party have been made to eat their party membership cards. One day last week McKnight Kamanja (ex library, now with the Lake Chilwa Research Project) turned up at my office saying he had come in from the lake as he was afraid of being murdered....

The entry, which continues with further observations on the "Blood" rumour and an account of purchases made in connection with the diarist's garden, concludes with a characteristic observation: "Small yellow wagtails and the neighbours' dogs are drinking from the bird bath." There is a Raj-feel to some of this – and it is more *Far Pavilions* than *Passage to Malawi*. Against the background noise of crockery dropped by clumsy staff, and while tittering at stories of local "informality," information is thrown in about horrendous events in near-by townships. One wishes, however, that someone else, any of the other diners mentioned, had been the reporter. Plumbe is too easily distracted: too easily tempted to dwell on Swanzie's red dress. He was reluctant, one feels, to listen carefully to what the remarkable professor of geography was saying.

Many harmless private diaries record such varied notes with scant regard for the feelings of those most involved or for the larger issues, many letters are written in much the same tone to friends and relatives. These documents are rarely thought worthy of publication unless the author is very interesting, or a very enlightening witness of

extraordinary events. Plumbe is neither “very interesting” nor particularly perceptive. He does not – how could one avoid saying it? – plumb the depths. However, he is unusual – a bit of a curiosity, and for two reasons. First, because, as foreigner in a newly independent African country, he invested the proceeds of a mature insurance policy in purchasing a local property, a lake-side cottage suitable for holiday lets. And, secondly, because he was deported.

Plumbe followed the cash investment with very considerable efforts to refurbish and maintain “Lake Cottage,” and all this drew him into a somewhat unusual contact with the country in which he was a migrant worker. His book records several car journeys from Blantyre to the Lake laden with assorted domestic items and fittings. He was also involved in new relationships, both with older members of the European community, including Grace Hilda Snowden the vendor of Lake Cottage, and with Malawian living by the Lake, such as Kandulu and Henderson, whom he employed to look after his property. By the act of becoming a property owner – and, presumably, considering “staying on,” or at least returning frequently, Plumbe shared some unusual experiences with the Central African European community.

The second reason why Plumbe is unusual is because – as anticipated above and by the sub-title to his volume - he was deported. He was not the first expatriate to be declared a Prohibited Immigrant by the Banda Government, nor was he by any means the last. The basic question raised by this event, “Why was Mr Plumbe deported?” is given “nine possible, but (in Plumbe’s opinion) sufficient, reasons.” Several suggest that the deed was done, Cleudo-style, in the Library. Various motives are given including the personal spite or ambition of local librarians. In following this scenario, the unsolved “case of attempted arson in the Library” (see entry for 2 April 1972 *et passim*) provides a suitably symbolic precursor to the “volcanic eruption” represented by the serving of the deportation order on 2 December 1972.

Plumbe also postulates that the action taken against him might have been prompted because of his handling of two sensitive books. He had, he records, “signed an order” for Philip Short’s *Banda* and Paul Theroux’s *Jungle Lovers*

was shown to a member of staff of the Department of English who showed it to a student. The book (he adds) had not been ordered for Chancellor College and I was unaware of its existence in our library. As librarian, however, I had to ‘carry the can’ for someone else’s indiscretion (p.160).

Incidentally, the relationship with the English Department had clearly been fraught with problems and some background is helpful because the examination of it raises questions about the way the book was put together.

In 1970 (see entry for 1 February), Plumbe “discovered that a member of the English department staff had asked students to complete (a) circular encouraging them to criticise the Library.” After being visited by three of the editorial staff of a students’ magazine, *Expression*, that was closely linked with the English Department, Plumbe recorded that their initially hostile attitude had been dispersed by “quiet answers that were factual and financial.” He adds that “a fair report” was subsequently published, and he concluded the entry “(Maybe (the students) will help to inject a little sense and courtesy into some of their lecturers.)” Reading this one wonders when, since the relevant issue of *Expression* must have appeared several months after the interview was given, the diary entry for 1 February 1970 was actually written. How many entries, one wonders, have been amended to reflect subsequent events. Is *Cry Of The Fish Eagle* based on a daily dairy as it appears to be?

Looking beyond the confines of the library for anything that might have prompted the issuing of the Deportation Order, Plumbe suggests he could have earned official wrath because of remarks he made about the treatment of Jehovah’s Witnesses in a family letter. The final three conjectures, which begin “I was one of the few Europeans who knew,” suggest that privileged knowledge prompted the deportation. They refer to his knowledge of (1) an assassination attempt on Banda in 1972, of (2) Banda’s policy of encouraging people in the Lower shire to believe he was a re-incarnation of Mbona, and, of (3) the fact “that in 1959 children in certain Malawian schools were taught to sing a parody of the Lord’s prayer.” He quotes the prayer as beginning “Our Kamuzu, who art in Blantyre....”

One of the elements missing from the book is any evidence of attempts to get to the bottom of all this. To start at the most obvious point, he does not draw out the implications of the fact that nine others were served deportation orders at the same time as he was (p.158). Since the publication date of *Cry of the Fish Eagle* was 1997 some perspective from the post-One Party State, post-Banda period could have been mentioned and would have been tremendously beneficial. Plumbe has not, it seems, taken advantage of the change of government to find out why he was deported. It is to be hoped that those who read his book, or even this notice of it, will be encouraged to investigate. The full “secret history” of the University Library has yet to be written. The murky depths in which Deportation Orders were prepared have still to be ... explored. The willingness to undertake such investigations is an essential element in the rebirth

of the democratic phoenix of Malawi from the ashes of Kamuzuism.

JAMES GIBBS  
8 VICTORIA SQUARE  
BRISTOL  
B58 4ET  
ENGLAND  
e-mail: James.Gibbs@uwe.ac.uk