

CAPE TOWN TO CAIRO IN A COLONIAL COCOON

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Introduction

In 1922 Australian Jessie Webb travelled from Cape Town to Cairo with Dr Georgina Sweet, maintaining a record of the journey as she went. This paper provides a brief introduction and possible explanation for the journey, then a commentary on one particular aspect, that of the *colonial cocoon*.

Many of their Melbourne friends at the time misunderstood the nature of this journey. They, along with others, were imbued with then popular views of Africa, fearing it would be a hazardous and life-threatening venture. They were horrified that these two middle aged women should consider travelling there.

However, Webb's record illustrates that it was far from being a difficult and dangerous trip through jungles inhabited with wild animals and spear throwing locals, as was supposed in 1922. This paper proposes that the journey was in fact, undertaken in a largely comfortable, *colonial cocoon* which strongly influenced the nature of the tale.

The record, which consists of letters, a diary and a few photos, had been sitting untouched in the Melbourne University's archives for many years and consequently has never been included in the literature of global women travellers, let alone that of Australian travellers in Africa.

While exploring my family history in 2008 I came across a reference to her journey in Ronald Ridley's memoir of Webb¹ and was motivated to locate, transcribe and analyse the material, and map their route. Subsequently, I went on to obtain material on other Cape to Cairo and journeys in the region from the 1890s-1930s as well as examining the theory of travel literature. These references have been useful for providing a context and comparison.

Background:

Jessie Webb, aged forty-one at the time, was a Melbourne University Historian and an Australian delegate to the League of Nations meeting in 1923. She was acting professor of History at the time of her death in 1944. In recognition of her forty-six years of service, a library in the History department is named after her.² Webb was accompanied by forty-six year old Dr Georgina Sweet, OBE, a parasitologist who specialised in the zoology of Australian native animals and the parasitology of stock and native fauna. Sweet was particularly well known for being Melbourne University's first female doctor of science and female member of the Council, as well as Australia's first female acting professor.

¹ Ridley 1994

² Ridley, 1994

Both women were very involved in women's organizations and were prime examples of the small group of early female Victorian graduates, many of whom developed impressive careers, and, inevitably, did not marry.

The Record and Possible Reasons for the Journey

Webb's record consists of a diary (complete concerning the Nile part of the journey) and letters (incomplete) which currently constitute 74 typed pages, and some photos. It does not indicate why this unusual journey, (if not unprecedented, for early Australian women), took place but there is evidence for some possible public and personal explanations.

Public reasons: The Prevailing Culture

For decades, public imagination in Britain had been captured by stories of the so-called *Dark Continent*, much of which was part of the British Empire at that time. The exploits of explorers such as Burton and Stanley, who became household names, as well as those of missionaries like Livingstone, were widely read and created images of considerable romance, including 'Highly coloured tales of heroic endeavour ...', with the British dutifully bringing the light of Christianity to the so-called poor savages of the Dark Continent. Stories about great hunting exploits, as well as dramatic, non-fictional tales by Ridder Haggard, Joseph Conrad and Jules Vern, added to the allure of the continent.

Even children's board games and books³ reiterated these images, helping to imbue future generations with the same mystique.

Together, this publicity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries clearly helped to paint Africa as a place of the exotic, of danger, romance, adventure and heroism, with the British playing a key role.

An additional image came into British consciousness towards the end of the nineteenth century when Cecil Rhodes became the very public exponent of the *Cape to Cairo* vision (although it was actually Edwin Arnold, an editor on the London Daily Telegraph, who first coined the phrase)⁴ and Sambourne's cartoon added a dramatic visual touch.

As Cape Town academic Ramusindela said in *Transfrontier Conservation in Africa*⁵, Rhodes used the phrase as his *leitmotif* for obtaining support for expanding beyond the Zambezi. He saw that the linking up of the existing northern (Egypt and Sudan) railways and the southern systems was essential for providing a backbone which would enable the promotion of trade and commerce, and especially of mining. Such a strong link would also inevitably strengthen the management of British colonial control in the region. It was therefore, a great imperially imbued image to promote, and one which also captured the imagination of the British public.

³ Norcia 2004, p 7.

⁴ Strage, 1973, p6

⁵ Ramusindela, 2007, p 127

These therefore were the prevailing conceptions of Africa at that time. Despite being far away, Australia, an enthusiastic and loyal member of Empire, was also exposed to this culture, including through sending its own soldiers, missionaries, foresters and mining engineers etc. to contribute to the enlightenment of the so-called 'dark continent'.

Personal Reasons: Family Background

Given this publicity, it is not all that surprising to discover that Sweet, who appears to have instigated the journey, had had a childhood dream to see Africa. In Rapke's interview circa 1934, Sweet told of a letter she had written to her father when she was nine years old in which '*... she declared that she must see Africa before she died*".

Rapke noted that Sweet:

... [had been] a serious minded little girl and even when quite young, was never allowed to read fairy stories or children's novels. She was brought up on Livingstone, Stanley, Drake and Jules Verne, which wetted sic her appetite for travel and romance. She especially wanted to see Africa and the Victoria Nyanza Falls.⁶

Sweet's involvement in the field of parasitology may have also been a factor in her interest, what with entomological problems such as tsetse fly influencing farming activities. Some evidence for this may exist in her scientific papers.

Webb, for her part, was, at the time, planning to undertake a sabbatical in Greece but seems to have been persuaded to change her route so as to accompany Sweet. Webb of course had a professional interest in the archaeology which they would come across enroute, including Great Zimbabwe, the Sudanese pyramids and the Meroe digs, and of course, the Egyptian treasures. In fact they arrived in Egypt within weeks of Tutankhamun's tomb being unearthed.

In addition, both women had relatives living in Africa, and whom they visited in South Africa and Tanganyika. Undoubtedly both were in receipt of some family tales of life on the continent which may have whetted their interest and reassured them that the trip would not be undertaken in a complete wilderness.

But many others, perhaps less well informed and gender biased (as per the era), held an opposite view of such the proposed journey. Some of Sweet's friends were reported to be so appalled that they even refused to see them off⁷ at Port Melbourne in March 1922. They were apparently convinced that the journey was madness for two white, middle aged women. Such sentiments, at least jokingly, were shared by Webb and Sweet's fellow ship's passengers who sent them, then on shore in Durban, a cable from the ship saying:

*Two learned ladies, bright and jolly
Set out for Cairo – surely folly
But if the blacks their ways are blocking*

⁶ Rapke nd. Note: Lake Victoria was known as the Victoria Nyanza, (which is surrounded by Uganda, Kenya and Tanganyika) whereas Victoria Falls is about 1,000 miles further south.

⁷ Rapke nd. p18

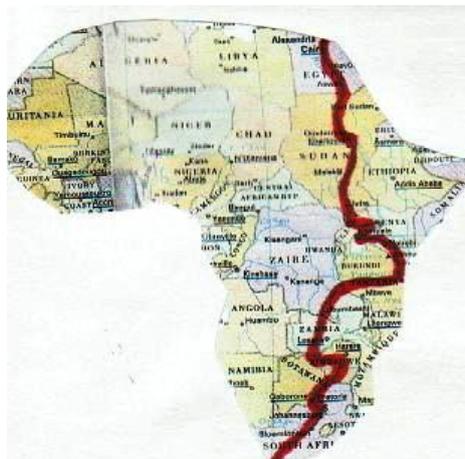
*Their money's safe: Tis' in their stocking.*⁸

Others such as Mr Gosling, Chief Treasurer of Kenya and the Captain of the *Clement Hill* while sailing on Lake Victoria, agreed, positively scotching the idea of their travelling via the Nile, saying that ‘... *the natives were unreliable, women shouldn't go it alone*’.⁹

Such adventures were obviously thought to be the preserve of heroic male explorers and hunters, not supposedly weak and unprotected females.

Evidence for the ‘Cocoon’ concept

Webb and Sweet's route was, with the exception of the Belgian Congo and the newly independent Egypt, imperially defined, largely being determined by the existing train and boat routes. After leaving Cape Town in April 1922 they travelled north through South Africa and into Southern and Northern Rhodesia. They then crossed into south eastern Belgian Congo and went on to Tanganyika, Zanzibar, Kenya, Uganda and Sudan, finally arriving in Egypt in November the same year (see map below). It was almost all, as Ridley said it might be, ‘*in the red*’¹⁰ ie apart from the exceptions, the countries were British colonial-administered, and consequently with familiar social expectations, language use and systems – and therefore, in many respects, not really foreign countries at all. They mainly used steam trains and boats.



The wilderness was only experienced in close proximity while on safari for eight days in southern Sudan where they were carried in camp chairs (Webb also walked for part of each morning) and accompanied by thirty-five porters.

The side trip out of ‘*the red*’ to the Belgian Congo was probably because Elizabethville was on the main train route of the time, connecting up from South Africa, as can be seen from a Time Table of the period¹¹.

⁸ Webb Transcript

⁹ Webb transcript

¹⁰ Ridley 1994

¹¹ Faith, 1990, opp. page 90, copy of an original timetable, no date but pre First World War.

Empire also played a role in establishing their status, even though they were mere travellers, not on official business. Their whiteness automatically imbued them with the characteristics and privileges of the all-powerful *master race*, and gave them the same authority and justification for being there. Even as middle class Australians they were very much part of Empire. This status also conferred an automatic protection and meant that there was never any fear of attack or robbery – those threats which had been so much feared by their friends. There is no mention in the record of being afraid at any time. In Uganda Webb confirmed this position, stating in regard to servants, that ‘*Old fashioned manners are most deferential, the whites being recorded the respect due to Chiefs*’.¹²

Their status as females does not appear to have caused any problems amongst the colonials, despite their not being the stereotypical female usually encountered i.e. travelling with a husband or to a job, as missionaries or nurses. The novelty of their being “learned ladies” may have had something to do with this acceptance of their presence, as may have been their age. Certainly they continued to play the accepted female role by dressing appropriately in long skirts, demure blouses, corsets, stockings and hats – as “proper” female members of Empire were meant to do, even if they were doing atypical things such as interviewing officials, taking notes and travelling unescorted by a male. Neither did they appear to criticise the system they were experiencing.

However, while they were given every assistance by the government officials, these courtesies were not because they were female as the same were extended to male travellers, such as Monson¹³ and Melland¹⁴. The women were however, given extra privileges on occasion because of their gender (which equated them with Bishops), in regard to ship board accommodation.¹⁵

The colonial system was obviously not set up to service tourists but certainly was very obliging to travellers. Also, that social nicety, *Letters of Introduction* were used in South Africa, and possibly elsewhere. These letters came from people in Melbourne such as businessman Sir Henry Jones¹⁶, were used to facilitate contacts and, often, hospitality.

Their activities were also largely colonial, rather than tourist oriented, as was their accommodation. In South Africa they visited academic colleagues (all European of course) in various universities, as well as some social contacts such as Lord and Lady de Villiers at Stellenbosch. They occasionally stayed in hotels when not on boats and trains. On reaching Kenya and Uganda, they spent a considerable amount of time in the homes of local colonial officials and a few missionaries, being passed on from one to another in a very hospitable manner. It is apparent that visitors were eagerly welcomed by the colonials who were often isolated from the ‘civilized’ world and eagerly sought the company of travellers, especially, perhaps, ones which had the

¹² Webb transcript

¹³ Monson, 1931

¹⁴ Melland and Cholmeley, 1912

¹⁵ Webb transcript

¹⁶ Hobart business man who regularly spent time in Melbourne, who had strong links to the Methodist Church (which is presumably how he knew Sweet) and the fruit industry, including in South Africa (hence an interest in entomology)

novelty of being 'learned ladies'. Webb even complained in Tanganyika of being rushed around rather too much by an overly enthusiastic hostess from one social event to another. She also commented that amongst the little British community of government officials in Tabora '*I felt like I had slipped into an Anglo Indian novel*'.¹⁷ Empire had migrated from one continent to another to welcome the antipodeans to its bosom.

A high standard of colonial social graces was maintained even at the end of the safari phase, in Rejaf, a small, battered place on the Nile in Southern Sudan while awaiting for four days the arrival of the boat which was to take them down river to Khartoum:

*Today has been madly gay – indeed. In Rejaf we may be said to have gone the pace, one day tea at the Mamurs, the next the Mamur and bey¹⁸ to tea with us, an extra visit, so to speak, from the Gunthers and Mr Holt, then today, Mr Holt and the Gunthers to tea with sardine sandwiches and buttonies, and, as a grand finale, Morris the Missionary arrived from Aba in the mission van and was invited to dinner.*¹⁹

The *Cocoon* was even maintained in regard to food, which oddly enough, regularly rates a mention in Webb's record, perhaps reflecting a desire for familiar home comforts on such a long journey. It tended to be very British or otherwise international, including Cross and Blackwell Bolonga tinned sausages, Ideal milk, butter and jam, custard, Julien soup, buttonies and the inexorable Marie biscuit. On the Congo river steam boat, food was more inter-national, including Dutch cheese, Norwegian sardines, Bombay butter and Swiss milk. The rituals of British style home life were maintained even while on Safari, where the Cook was reported to be making cakes for afternoon tea.²⁰ At no time did she report that they ate native food, apart from fresh fruit.

In terms of the local people, contact and relationships were limited and constrained in a typically colonial manner. Most of the commentary is objective, providing simple descriptions of what their tribal name was, how people looked, what they wore and sometimes about what they did. For a conservative Melbourne woman of the 1920s she appeared, from her record, to accept local 'attire' with equanimity (or perhaps, a stiff upper lip). In southern Sudan for example, at the end of the safari, she reported that

'... Mustapha in undress (meaning now off-duty and out of uniform) carrying my open basket, Errissa armed with cameras, 20 black nudes, the askari bearing my spear, as befitting his warriorship I suppose, and myself, in blue and white to complete the contrast, marched down to the boat. I have never seen so many natives in this savage condition of clothing as today.'

As with most Europeans, the closest she came to developing a relationship and reporting in a more subjective way, was with the "personal boys", Mavukola from the Congo (and wife and baby), and the Kenyans, Errissa the cook and Mustapha, the

¹⁷ Webb transcript

¹⁸ Mamur = Chief District Officer (Egyptian) and Bey = a District Administrator or military man

¹⁹ Webb transcript

²⁰ Webb transcript, various pages

askari. Webb's attitude to them was sympathetic, if not somewhat paternal or, (maternal), vaguely suggesting the commonly held attitude that the natives were like children. She also reported at times with sympathetic interest, stories about traditions, in no way denigrating their value. Only her failure to comment critically on a supposedly heroic South African tale about Oom Paul (Kruger) and an un-named Zulu demonstrated any inherent sense of racism.²¹ Her use of the commonly used term 'boy' (for local staff) appears however, devoid of any negative connotations.

Webb also illustrated an interest in matters political in various ways, including reporting at length on conversations with various officials and businessmen about matters of administration and the economy. Sweet obviously shared her enthusiasm for factual information, reported, at one point, to be avidly reading a borrowed copy of the 1921 African World Annual which was lent to her by the Administrator at Albertville.²² Webb's reporting of such factual information, although not as in-depth or as extensive, at times reads quite like Margery Perham's writing, as if she too was on a Rhodes Scholarship funded study tour.²³

Contributing to the concept of a *colonial cocoon* which insulates and restricts authentic experiences, was their experience of wild animals. Like many other early travellers, Webb mentions rarely seeing wildlife. She was ecstatic when finally sighting giraffe once in Kenya but said not long afterwards in Uganda that '*We haven't even heard a lion roar and the sight of an elephant sniffing the wind is for the chosen few, and not for us*'²⁴. This seems rather strange after five months in Africa but there are a number of possible reasons. Animals mostly move about at night and in the early morning and the season also affects sightings. Travelling by train at night at times and the noise of vehicles would have also contributed to animals not commonly being seen. But even on the safari in southern Sudan.

But in addition to their social life, their mode of travel being mainly train and boat (especially on the latter) meant that a large part of the journey was spent in a colonial enclave, small, enclosed worlds which encompassed their fellow travellers. These were almost all male and usually connected with the colonial system in one way or another. On boats they ate together for every meal and spent time socializing on deck. There are many descriptions of their personalities, their jobs and their political opinions, which helped to inform Webb and Sweet about current issues, albeit in a somewhat ad hoc manner. This world was quite separate from that of the locals, who travelled in open vans at the rear of trains or in barges towed by the steamboats. It was only on the safari that anything like a real relationship was developed, in this case with Mustapha the askari and Errisa the cook. Lack of local languages obviously was a major inhibitor of communication, as was the pace of travel.

Conclusion

It is apparent from Webb's record that it was perfectly feasible at that time for two middle aged women to travel the length of east Africa in reasonable comfort, without much risk. Far from being foreign and exotic, the journey was in fact, mostly one of

²¹ Webb transcript

²² Webb transcript

²³ Perham 1972

²⁴ Webb transcript

modern forms of transport and relative home comforts, surrounded largely by familiar language, accommodation, social graces and food. Foreignness was kept at bay by the veil of imperialism which shaped the space into a familiar, colonial world.

What discomfort there was, came largely from dusty, uncomfortable train carriages, stuffy and cockroach ridden boat cabins, primitive bathroom facilities, marauding insects, high humidity and violent thunderstorms, not from flying spears, roaring lions and charging elephants. Thus it was resilience rather than bravery which was required, and only the eight day safari constituted anything like a real adventure, and even that was in muted form.

It was similar in some respects, to a modern day overland truck journey which leaves the visitor more-or-less untouched by local life, while moving through from one place to the next – tourists turned in on their own kind, rather than travellers intimately experiencing local conditions and connecting on a personal level with local people. This was unlike some other travellers such as Mary Hall²⁵ and Helen Caddick²⁶ who used a more earth-bound form of transport and travelled at a much slower pace, and often camped along the way. However, what they had in common was the inability to speak local languages, although translators helped a little. Without language and time, as they all were, true cross-cultural communication would never have been possible.

However, Webb was not just the usual tourist, reporting only curious and exotic sights. Like many other early women travellers her communications reflected the observations of an intelligent, interested student of Empire, as befitting an academic. But her observations were necessarily impressionistic and her vantage point restricted by the imperially shaped landscape. Webb herself was aware of this. She said, five months into the trip, that *'Of the real life of the African people, we know no more at first hand, than we do of African wild animals. We see most of the one in service, as we do most of the other in zoos.'*²⁷

But it was this very environment which made the journey possible, and which, perhaps, enabled Webb to retain her somewhat dispassionate academic 'gaze' and remain detached from 'Other'.

In conclusion, Webb and Sweet did get to see the majestic Table Mountain, the spectacular Victoria Falls and the great Nyanza, as well as the scorching deserts of Egypt and everything in between, but the record is devoid of the purple prose so common when reporting on Africa of that era. As Mary Hall said in 1907 about her own book, it was *'... minus big game romances and the usual exaggeration incidental to all things African ...'*²⁸.

Nevertheless, Webb's record does provide an informative view of aspects of colonial, and something of local African life in 1922 and earns her, and Sweet, a rightful place in the membership of the *'Cape to Cairo Club'*, even if it was undertaken in a *colonial cocoon*. As such, her record deserves to be included in the historical global,

²⁵ Hall, 1907

²⁶ Caddick, 1900

²⁷ Webb transcript

²⁸ Hall, 1907, preface.

and Australian, travel literature. Further analysis is being undertaken on other aspects of the record, including gender, geography and race.

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