JOGOO
THE
ROOSTER

JOGOO THE ROOSTER

A memoir of an international conservation and environment adviser

A.J. TILLING

By the same author
Changing the Spots of the Leopard:
A Personal Conservation and Development Saga in Africa

Front cover photo: Obelisk at Porto do Barra, Inhambane, Mozambique.

All photos by the author or his family unless otherwise indicated.

Published 2025
by A.J. Tilling

ISBN 978-0-473-74627-8 (paperback)
ISBN 978-0-473-74628-5 (epub)

COPYPRESS
Printed by CopyPress, Nelson, New Zealand.

{REALNZBOOKS}
Distributed by Real NZ Books, Nelson, New Zealand.

www.copypress.co.nz

Contents

Preface

TODAY IT SEEMS crazy that a family of four from England would set out for East Africa after the Second World War to what people at 'home' seemed to think was a jungle inhabited by pygmies and wild animals. The general public probably had an image from the 'African Queen' movie, where Humphrey Bogart navigated a river boat down the murky waters of a river in the Congo, surrounded by crocodiles and hippos which would chomp you to pieces at any provocation. There were jungles of course but in many parts of east, central and southern Africa there are few jungles as such; rather there were plains or savannahs where the trees don't form a closed canopy but are open, interspersed with shrubs and patches of poor grasslands, verging onto deserts. Those of my dad's generation had a superficial knowledge of East and Central Africa but probably knew more about South Africa because of the Boer War. They could easily recite the location of capes, headlands, rivers and harbours in most of Africa because Britain was a maritime power, so controlling and maintaining access to the high seas was all important. Ask them about the interior, where we landed up, and they looked blank. This was the Dark Continent where the people were 'primitive'. It was the Arab traders who knew about the interior as for centuries they ventured deep into the interior in search of slaves. European ignorance of East and Central Africa was perhaps not surprising as the interior of East Africa was

not known to Europeans until as recent as the mid 19C. Lake Victoria was only 'discovered' by Burton and Speke in 1858 and Speke is credited with 'discovering' of the source of the Nile in 1862. Most Britons were probably familiar with Dr Livingstone's crossing of the continent and his naming of Victoria Falls in honour of Queen Victoria on his second Zambezi expedition between 1854–6. Every schoolboy would have learned about Henry Stanley's greeting: 'Dr Livingstone, I presume', when he found Dr Livingstone at Ujiji on the shores of Lake Tanganyika in November 1871. For our family, we were embarking on an adventure to Tanganyika which had been ceded to Germany following the Berlin Conference of 1884–85 in the 'carve-up of Africa'. The British colonial government only got the League of Nations mandated to administer the territory after WW1, so the country was largely underdeveloped. It was 'ripe' for a large-scale development scheme, which piqued my dad's interest.

Why my parents decided to leave Britain in 1947–8 can be traced back to the Second World War. They were born in High Wycombe, 30 miles west of London. My dad, Roger Warner Tilling, was the youngest of three siblings. He was born in 1921. My mum, (Eileen) Betty Ellis, was born in 1924. She was an only child. Her parents (my grandparents) were Walter Edwin Ellis and (Violet) Nellie White. They were part owners of a furniture factory that made all types of wooden furniture, popular at that time. Her dad bought himself out of the furniture business and bought a licence for the Red Lion pub in London Road, Wycombe Marsh.

My dad always lamented the 'loss' of the furniture business as he was hoping for an inheritance. It was never to be. My mum lived next door to my dad and used to play with him. They were childhood sweethearts. They were engaged when my mum was 16 and married on 20 June 1942 in High Wycombe, when my mum was just 18 years old.

My parents left school after matriculating and had no further qualifications. This placed them at a disadvantage in terms of job opportunities. Hence, my dad worked in an administrative job. My mum was fifteen and half years old when war was declared in 1939. She worked for AC Cossor, an electronics company founded in 1859 that designed and manufactured

electronic valves, radio sets and television receivers. She worked in the office as a typist and then as a private secretary in a building away from the factory. Unbeknown to her, the company made radar equipment for the government during the war. 'It was all very hush hush,' she said.

High Wycombe escaped most of the Blitz as it was 30 miles from London, but thousands of bombs and two V2 rockets fell on the county but not on the town itself. German bombers usually dropped high explosives and incendiary bombs. The fires and the bombing of London were heard and seen from many miles around in the Home Counties. As a Fire Watcher in High Wycombe, my mum remembered the excitement of watching the flames from the docks in London's East End after a heavy night of bombing.[1]

Although High Wycombe largely emerged unscathed by the bombings, there were significant potential targets there, notably the headquarters of the 8th USAAF in Wycombe Abbey school for girls. From May 1942 to July 1945, the Eighth Air Force planned and precisely executed America's daylight strategic bombing campaign against Nazi-occupied Europe. What nobody knew at the time was that General Eisenhower was living in a secluded house in the woods near Princes Risborough. Nearby, Aston Abbotts became the home of the Czech government in exile. Other potential targets included the Hawker Aircraft Factory at Langley. The significance of High Wycombe as an important centre of furniture was due to the proximity to the beech forests in the Chiltern Hills. During WW2 furniture firms such Hearne were vital in the production of the de Havilland Mosquito, a multirole aeroplane using Chiltern beech wood as a main component of its airframe, and Broom and Wade which made Churchill tanks. Luckily these industries survived intact, escaping the bombing.

My dad was 18 years old at the start of the war. He didn't join up until just before he was 21 when he was conscripted. He never mentioned whether he went willingly, though he later said 'never volunteer for anything'. He enlisted in the RAF and was inducted in Penarth, Swansea. He was groundcrew at Bomber Command, where he loaded bombs onto aircraft, amongst other duties.

At the end of the war, there was mass unemployment in Britain after

the demobbing of the troops. My dad was offered his administrative job back in a furniture factory, but at the same wage as before war broke out, without the promotion he'd been promised. This didn't impress him, nor did the weather which was bleak. Between January 1947 and March 1947 snow fell somewhere in the UK for 55 consecutive days. Temperatures fell to -22C. What's more, Britain had won a pyrrhic victory in the war as the country was nearly bankrupt, with food shortages and rationing. (Rationing continued until the mid 1950's).

My parents, (who by this time had two children, my brother David, born in 1944 and me, born in 1946) were billeted at my Aunt Elizabeth's house on London Road, High Wycombe, as she had spare rooms, thus avoiding taking unknown lodgers which one was obliged to do if one had room in one's house. This couldn't have been an easy time for any of them. Life was tough. For instance, my mum had to push a double pram up a hill to the gasworks to get coke, which was free.

Emigration was one response to these conditions. Boatloads of Britons and Europeans emigrated to the colonies and the dominions to start a new life. Most had probably no intention or prospect of returning 'home'. Some, though, were going to work as colonial civil servants or going on short-term development projects in Africa. My parents went to Tanganyika to work on the Groundnut Scheme. So began our wonderings through Africa and my subsequent emigration to Australia and New Zealand.

PART I

My Early African Life

I.

Escaping to the bush

MY DAD HAD seen a job advert in a newspaper. He never said a word to my mum – just announced one day that he was going to London for an interview. On his return home he told my mum that he had accepted a job in Tanganyika on the Groundnut Scheme. He was recruited by the Crown Agents in London to work for the government-run Overseas Food Corporation in Tanganyika.[2] He didn't know much about the job or the conditions he and the family were to put up with, but returning to civvy street with no prospects depressed him: Africa seemed alluring. Although surprised, my mum went along with this. For them, this was an exciting prospect, from which they'd return to England in the not-too-distant future. This was unlike the British settlers who had gone before them to settle permanently.

The headquarters of the Groundnut Scheme was in Kongwa which was 380 km inland from the coast, on the edge of the Maasai Steppes, near a town called Dodoma. The plan was to grow peanuts to meet a chronic shortage of cooking oils and fats in Britain after World War Two. I recall this saga in my book *Changing the Spots of the Leopard: A personal conservation and development saga in Africa*, so I won't go into detail here.

Within weeks my dad flew out to Tanganyika in 1948 on a BOAC Short Sunderland flying boat. The Short Sunderland was the most powerful and widely used flying boat during the Second World War. After the war it was

converted for civilian use. It departed from Southampton. The exact route varied but the general route to Dar es Salaam was via Lisbon, Marseille, Cairo, Khartoum, Mombasa and then on to Dar. I don't know for sure as my dad was a shy man and never talked about it. I never asked him, so we'll never know.

It would have been a great thrill to have done that trip, even as an adult. But my mum, brother David (four years old) and I were not so lucky. Instead, we departed for East Africa by sea on 10 February 1949 on board the Dunnottar Castle from Tilbury, outbound via Gibraltar, Marseilles, Port Said, Massawa, Aden, Mombasa, Zanzibar and Tanga arriving in Dar es Salaam, the 'haven of peace'. I don't remember anything about this trip but have been told that after Aden my brother David had dysentery which made the voyage very difficult for my mum.

RMS Dunnottar Castle*, 15,054 tons. (web archive)*

In the meantime, my dad went inland to Kongwa but because the scheme was set up in a hurry he had to sleep in a tent until we arrived. He didn't seem to mind as he had been a King's Scout in England before the War, so camping was another outdoor adventure. However, compared to the frequent inclement British summers, the dry, hot conditions he was soon to encounter would have been a different kettle of fish.

When we eventually arrived in Kongwa about 100 expatriate families were accommodated in timber cottages. I was too young to remember much about the place, except that it was very hot and dry, with a few patches of grass, interspersed with baobab trees.

(L to r) Me, Mum and brother David in Kongwa 1951.

One of the justifications for choosing the area for groundnuts was that it was sparsely populated. This was not surprising as the grasslands were inhabited by herder-gatherers who had customary but no legal rights, as the land was not 'adjudicated' (free-holded). It was also infested with tsetse fly. The cattle that the nomadic graziers kept would have been affected, though some breeds were tolerant. A person bitten by tsetse fly develops sleeping sickness which can be fatal but with bush clearance this danger could be overcome by the project. Wildlife, (which was not affected by tsetse fly, but are vectors) was not as abundant as in other parts of the Maasai Steppes such as in Serengeti National Park or Ngorongoro or in the Maasai Mara and the East African savannah. The exception was the notorious camp follower: the hyenas. They hung around the settlement. At night they used to visit us.

'Clunk, clunk, clatter, clatter. Hee, hee, hee,' their incessant laughing rang out as they rummaged through our garbage bin, which was outside our back door. I was scared stiff and dared not go to the dunny which was in the back of the garden. The dunny was a long-drop. Even if you made it there safely, there were other perils. A neighbour came running out once, swearing that he had been bitten by a snake. It turned out to be a chicken which took a fancy to his bare backside.

Baobab tree in our back garden, Kongwa. C.1950

A few other brushes with wildlife stick in my mind. A huge baobab tree grew in our back garden where a huge chattering flock of lovebirds lived. They liked to build their nests in the hollows of trees. The baobab is ideal, as it is hollow inside.

Every morning and every night I would watch the lovebirds emerging and returning to their nests in a phalanx of chattering colour. One day a

little bird, no bigger than the palm of my hand, fluttered injured onto the stoep of our house in Kongwa. My dad rescued it.

We used to visit a picnic spot in our company Land Rover, where we would see a forlorn kudu kept in a *boma*. On the way there, we crossed a *donga* – a dry, incised ravine – which had a narrow one-way bridge, probably made of log planks, with no side rails. On one occasion, after the picnic, we set off to return home. In the meantime, torrential rain fell. The soil was so parched that a flash flood resulted, making the dried-up-river bed a raging torrent. We had to re-negotiate the *donga*, which was now in full flood. But we had to wait at the top as a car had careered over the edge of the bridge. Only the rear of the car was still on the bridge; the front wheels being suspended in mid-air.

'Look daddy, what should we do?' My brother and I were very excited as we had never seen a flash flood before. Luckily the car was towed back up by one of the other Land Rovers in the queue.

My dad's use of the Land Rover would have been a privilege that few civilians of his generation would have had access to in Britain, due to the austere conditions there. I used to play in it too. There's an old photo of me in the driver's seat, almost stark naked with my dad's bush hat on.

Another special incident was seeing a civet cat running down the edge of a ploughed field, but the most worrying brush with nature was a column of *siafu* ants. It was many metres long and about 50mm wide. There must have been millions of them. Unfortunately, I didn't see them in time and stood right in the middle of them. At once, they crawled up my leg.

'Quickly,' my mum said, 'into the bath.'

Another marvel were the "white ants" (termites) which built their nests inside huge earthen mounds, which can be up to fifteen metres high, dotting the landscape, built up over years and years. The worker termites feed a solitary queen deep inside the nest with plant fibres. They wreaked havoc on the timber-framed staff houses. When they emerged from their nests after rains to fly away and mate, they were caught and eaten by the local Africans, providing the Africans an eagerly anticipated source of protein. Referring to the Groundnut Scheme, Alan Wood said the British government was *"proposing*

a colossal engineering and agricultural revolution, something comparable on a small scale to the Russian Five-Year Plans, without even realising what they were doing".[3] Caution was thrown to the wind. No pilot study was carried out. Assumptions were made about its feasibility based on false and incomplete data and ignorance of the situation on the ground, which included the hot dry conditions, the fickle rains and the inappropriate soil conditions for groundnuts. There was no environmental or social impact study. The occurrence of baobab trees in the Kongwa area should have been a bioindicator of the inappropriateness of the area for groundnuts, as baobabs usually grow in hot dry locations. Furthermore, there was a bureaucratic managerial system, dictated from London and incompetence on the ground.[4] The decision to grow groundnuts in Tanganyika was political, not one based on science. Not surprisingly, the Scheme was an abject failure. Recalling the gross size of the project and the arrogance in which it was implemented, made me forever suspicious of hastily devised and implemented grand schemes. There was no way that it could have been sustainable. Rightfully, the Scheme gained notoriety as the biggest British development failure in history. I could later boast about my connection to this fiasco during my development career, without bearing any responsibility for it!

Although Kongwa was the back end of beyond, my parents rather enjoyed the place, even though there were no big town attractions. They were amongst a small band of ex-patriates who formed lasting friendships. My dad enjoyed the outdoor life and my mum developed an interest in birding which she would write to me about in later years. As for me, the experience there had an indelible effect, as the hot, open savannah epitomises Africa to me.

Luckily my dad had been fortunate to get a new job in Nairobi as a colonial civil servant with the East African Railways and Harbours Administration (EAR&H). We abandoned the bush for a life in the big city.