

Dr. Diana Powell-Cotton (Diana Cotton) 1908-1986

Diana was born in April 1908 and brought up at Quex. On the outbreak of the Great War, the three girls of whom Diana was the oldest with Governess and Nurse were evacuated to Leamington Spa; there was widespread concern that Thanet might be invaded. After a few months, the party returned to Quex but to the Bothy, not the main house which had been converted to a Red Cross auxiliary hospital for wounded soldiers. The Bothy had been built as lodging for the unmarried workers in the garden and on the estate and for a housekeeper who looked after them. It accommodated during the war the three girls, Governess, nanny and a maid.

After the War, the two older girls went to schools locally and later to Wycombe Abbey, a well known girls public school. On finishing her schooling, Diana spent some time in Belgium learning French and later in Italy studying both art and Italian. She attended the Royal College of Art in London and obtained the Certificate but then decided that she was unsuited to teaching and lacked the talent necessary to establish herself as an artist.

She therefore accepted with alacrity the opportunity to accompany her father on his proposed trip to the Red Sea Hills in the Sudan and to Italian Somaliland (Somalia). She greatly enjoyed life in the bush, did some shooting to collect zoological specimens, including a wild ass which proved to be a new sub species and was named after her. When the time came for her father to return home, she elected to stay on in Somaliland to continue her collection of artefacts and her study of the Somali people.

On her return to England, she was engaged for some months in listing, labelling and sorting the material which she had collected and dividing the items between the Museum at Quex, the ethnographical Department of the British Museum, Oxford and Cambridge. It was, however, not long before she began to plan with her younger sister Tony who had in the meantime been with their father to Zululand in southern Africa, a joint trip to southern Angola to collect and to study in the area of the Ovambo tribes, on the border with South West Africa (Namibia). This enterprise took some months to set up but eventually they sailed with all the necessary permits, provisions and requisites for a 7 to 8 months trip in the winter of 1935.

They landed at Lobito, bought a second hand lorry and set off for the south. The roads were atrocious; the most southerly Portuguese stations were normally isolated from the north for some months during and after the rains by flooding. After sundry mishaps they reached Njeva and were able to begin their study of the Kwanyama. They returned to England in the autumn of 1936 and repeated the journey and resumed their work in the following year. They made a large and interesting collection of artefacts and made a satisfactory record in photographs and on film.

On her return to England, Diana put into operation her ambition to qualify as a doctor and to practise in Africa. She was then 29 and since she had studied little science at school, she had to start from scratch but she was eventually

accepted as a medical student at the Royal Free Hospital. By the end of the War she had qualified and was doing the necessary junior hospital jobs to complete her training. She took also the Diploma in Child Health in order to practise as a paediatrician. In 1950, she went out to Uganda to stay with her brother Christopher who was working in Kampala as an administrative officer. She was fortunate in obtaining an appointment in the principal Government African Hospital, and later in a Catholic Mission hospital before deciding to move onto private practice in Kenya, at first in partnership at Kipkarren and later on her own at Mau Narok. Her last medical appointment was as the doctor at the agricultural college at Njoro. On retirement she went to live above Lake Elmentita in the Rift Valley and spent much of her time filming and photographing birds on the lake and both animals and birds in the Kenya National Parks whenever opportunity offered. She made useful photographic records of both the birds, particularly when breeding on the Rift Valley lakes.

As her health began to deteriorate and having had two operations for cancer in mid 1969 she decided that the time had come for her to return to England. She settled in Norfolk at first between Swaffham and Fakenham and later in Swaffham, spending the last few months of her life in a nursing home near Canterbury.

The Museum is indebted to her for outstanding ethnographical collections from Somalia and southern Angola supported by exhaustive field notes, some good ethnographic films and photographic records of crafts and customs and attractive films and photographs of Kenyan and Ugandan birds and wildlife. Finally she bequeathed to the Museum the residue of her estate, a very welcome and valuable legacy.