

I loved Christina Lamb's "The Africa House." It's a vividly descriptive, historic account of Sir Stewart Gore-Browne's attempt to civilize a remote corner of the African bush. It encapsulates the sheer bloody-mindedness of British colonials in Africa and Lamb's writing is a treat.

The story is told over a drink with the author while sitting in a languid bar in Lusaka. The action begins in Northern Rhodesia, now Zambia, by Shiwa Ngandu Lake at a time when the sun never set on the British Empire. Lamb writes, "The lake is cupped in a circle of hills, garbed with lush grass and trees. Here and there a sensual burst of colour broke up the green - the scarlet of a bubu tree, bursting with African tulips, a pair of tiny flame-breasted sunbirds singing, and a patch of yellow diamonds on the ground which rose up and became a cloud of butterflies."

You may never get to Zambia, see a bubu tree or hear a sunbird and you certainly won't experience it as did Gore-Browne. But, Gore-Browne kept detailed diaries and wrote long letters that were Lamb's research documents. As you read, you'll be transported.

Sir Stewart Gore-Brown was born privileged in 1893. He went to Wixenford prep and onto Harrow. His bad eye-sight kept him out of the navy. The Boer War and a word from his aunt Ethel, friend of several generals, got him a commission in the Royal Field Artillery and his first taste of Africa. Unlike regular Tommies who entered the Great War in 1914, he not only survived unscathed, but he received a medal for service behind the scenes at the Battle of the Somme. And unlike most war veterans, in 1920 he was able to buy 23,000 acres of land adjacent to Shiwa Ngandu from the British South Africa Company.

Gore-Browne paid a shilling an acre for 11,000 acres and he received the balance as a grant to an ex-soldier. He hired natives as servants. He clad them in calico shirts and shorts with black and yellow waistcoats. He picked the colours to set off their coppery skin.

With the arrogance, inequities and exploitation, you might be tempted to shred this book for cabbage mulch. But, the chronicle casts a spell. Gore-Browne emerges as a sympathetic anachronism even in his own time. He has a series of peculiar relationships with women. His devotion to aunt Ethel is unfathomable. The scantness of actual contact with his first and strongest love, Lorna, suggests a gambolling imagination and the details of his married life are pitiful.

He pours money into doomed attempts to transform his estate into a profitable English manor. He tries livestock and various crops. He experiments with growing exotic plants to procure their essential oils. But in the end, the land, climate, wildlife and native people vanquish his efforts. Gore-Browne dies, his buildings crumble and the servants disperse. You're left staring with disbelief at your empty glass in that Lusaka bar.

Upon reflection I concluded that Gore-Browne's culture and values blinded him more than his poor eye sight. He couldn't see that when he took possession of his estate it wasn't pristine, uninhabited or truly his. The natives of Shiwa Ngandu, the Bemba, over millennia, had evolved a complex civilization which matched the idiosyncrasies of their environment. The match, so nearly perfect, was invisible to the British.

The tragedy of colonialism is that it irreparably and heartlessly shatters civilizations. The process continues as global homogeneity swallows cultural diversity. That thought may make you catch the barman's eye.