

Elspeth Huxley

# A voice from the flame trees

**E**LSPETH Huxley, who has died aged 89, was one of the most distinguished and versatile writers of her generation. Her acute powers of observation and her wit will be manifest to readers of *The Flame Trees of Thika*. Her works included biographies, studies of African countries based on personal experience, novels and crime books, as well as journalism. She was a vivid and delightful person who enjoyed life to the full, especially in relation to country people and their activities both at home and abroad.

Elspeth was born in London into the privileged circle of the Grosvenors, her grandfather being the younger brother of the first Duke of Westminster. None of the family wealth came to her parents who had a continuous struggle to make ends meet farming in Kenya. Her father, Jos Grant, was an affectionate parent but was constantly immersed in starting up risky enterprises. Elspeth remembered him as "a gentle, humorous, dreamy person whose dreams never came true." Her mother, Nellie, whose correspondence with Elspeth was published in 1980, was a highly intelligent and amusing woman who could have had a successful academic career, had it been thought appropriate in those days. She was undoubtedly a major influence on Elspeth as shown by the number of books Elspeth dedicated to her.

Elspeth's childhood was spent mostly with the Africans who worked on the Grants' two farms at Thika and later, Njoro. This was the origin of her great love of African life including animals of which, as a child, she kept a variety — both domesticated and wild, including a cheetah which she raised from a kitten. She became an excellent horsewoman and shot, although her enthusiasm for

shooting wild animals soon disappeared as she saw their numbers dwindling. Her education at home was patchy, due to her mother having to work most of the time on the farm and garden. In her words she often "had to fall back on old copies of the Field, manuals of instruction on everything from lace-making to the erection of simple stills and the volumes of a pocket encyclopedia in minute type."

This, however did not prevent her earning money by writing anonymous articles on Kenyan polo and hunting from the age of 14: by the time she was 17 she had had 65 articles published in Kenyan newspapers and three in the Field, some illustrated with her own photographs, for which she expected an extra fee. Not even her parents knew she was writing these articles until their suspicions were aroused by the arrival of a steady stream of parcels from England containing the Poetry Society's volumes on the war poets (she knew many of Siegfried Sassoon's by heart), and books on conjuring tricks and photography. She was to become an excellent photographer, illustrating many of her books herself.

She was finally sent to the Government European School in Nairobi, where, at the age of 16, she won the Royal Colonial Institute annual Empire Essay prize in 1924 which was entitled *Improved Communications as a Factor of Imperial History*. The original of this is in the Commonwealth library in Cambridge.

In 1925 Elspeth went to Reading University and later, Cornell in the US obtaining a diploma in agriculture, a subject which remained one of her consuming interests.

In 1929 she became assistant press officer at the Empire Marketing Board, where she developed her journalistic skills by writing over 135 articles on scientific research and its application in the Brit-

ish Commonwealth and Empire; they were always recognisable by their clarity and wit. Here also she met her future husband, Gervas Huxley, then secretary of the Board, who was to find in Elspeth a loving and supportive wife. Their only child, Charles, was born in 1944. They were always very close to Gervas's cousin Aldous, and his wife, whom they later often visited in America.

Elspeth was encouraged in her work by Patrick Ryan, also working for the EMB, and she later described him as the person "from whom I learnt all I ever came to know about writing for newspapers." She was to write over 760 articles, many in the Times, Daily Telegraph, Punch and Time & Tide. When I once remarked on the number and variety of articles she had written, she replied that as they were hard up, she wrote about anything she was asked to. Always her first loves were Africa, its people and their way of life; agriculture; and later, English country life.

**I**N 1931 Lady Delamere invited Elspeth to write the life of her late husband, Lord Delamere, one of the architects of modern Kenya: it was prescient of her to choose a young woman of 27 who had never written a book before. *White Man's Country* was published in 1935 to widespread acclaim, and remained in print for over 55 years. Later, feeling that she wanted to present the African point of view, she wrote a novel, *Red Strangers* (1939) about the Kikuyu. This brought her into conflict with Harold Macmillan, her then editor, who objected to her detailed description of female circumcision, possibly fearing that it would affect sales to the circulating libraries. Elspeth pointed to her guns in a letter pointing out that life in Africa was not how gentlemen in London clubs liked to imag-

ine. In consequence, Macmillan rejected it and Chatto & Windus published it in 1939.

By the second world war, Elspeth had started her career in broadcasting in earnest — her first venture into radio having been in 1929 for the EMB. She worked for Hilda Matheson on propaganda to raise morale throughout Britain and the Empire, subsequently moving to the Colonial Office as a link with the BBC on the same work. Her acute intelligence was soon recognised by the BBC and she was involved in over 240 broadcasts between 1946 and 1991, including *The Brains Trust*, *The Critics* and *Woman's Hour*.

Elspeth knew from experience that education was regarded by Africans as the door to a fuller life, and aware of the chronic shortage in East Africa of school books due to the war, she wrote two booklets, one for boys and one for girls in 1941 and 1942 through the SPCK. In 1945 the Colonial Office, keen to get education back on the rails, invited her to do a report on the needs of East Africa. This resulted in the formation of the African Literature Board in 1948 in Nairobi, with branches in Tanzania and Uganda.

Elspeth wrote four autobiographical novels — *The Flame Trees of Thika* (1959), *The Mottled Lizard* (1962), *Love Among the Daughters* (1968) and *Out in the Midday Sun* (1985), all of which are still in print. Her reason for turning to autobiography, though she always referred to the first two as novels, was perhaps contained in a passage from *The Mottled Lizard*: "The beauty of plain and forest and mountain does not alter but the beauty of the people has declined and nearly all of the wild animals have vanished. I was lucky to spend my childhood on perhaps the very last territorial frontier where men and women lived close to nature, disaster and adventure as they



Close to the land . . . Africa and its people held a lifelong fascination for Huxley

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had for centuries." Her picture of those days remains as popular today as it was when *The Flame Trees of Thika* was adapted for television in 1982.

In 1960 Elspeth was appointed as the only woman on the Monckton Commission, convened to study the viability of the then Central African Federation (Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland). The conclusion was that "partnership was a sham". Her ironic views on this were included in her novel *The Merry Hippo* (1963).

In *Four Guineas* (1954) she turned her attention to West Africa. Her humour did not always appeal to prominent Africans such as Dr J B Danquah, a leading lawyer and politician in Ghana, who accused her of libel by criticis-

ing the state of his wife's kitchen: this was a misunderstanding of the expression "the pot calling the kettle black".

Elspeth had always been a farmer at heart, often, in the war, working singlehanded on her Wiltshire farm during her most active writing periods. A widow once sent Elspeth several pairs of her late husband's woollen combinations, to be given to African workers in Kenya: as it was then 15 degrees below freezing in England and over 100 degrees fahrenheit in Kenya, she decided to use them herself. She visited Africa for the last time in 1995, and by then her writing had turned in part to English country life. *Brave New Victuals* (1960) expressed her unease about artificial

farming methods. Her approach to questions of country life and conservation were always fair-minded. Her energy was unbounded — an hour's walk every day was considered essential — and she gardened with enthusiasm until her death. Deploring the disappearance of village post offices, she commented, "Why does the Conservative government think that privatisation is always the solution to everything?" As a person, Elspeth was warm-hearted and very good company; she once told me of her lecture at the LSE in 1937 on *The Influence of Environment and Kinship on Land Tenure with Specific Reference to the Kikuyu*, only to find Jomo Kenyatta in the front row — "ridiculous for me to read a paper on his land

tenure and kinship!" When I asked what Joy Adamson was like she replied, "Mad and maddening".

In her foreword to *Elspeth Huxley, A Bibliography* (1996), she wrote, "Today journalism of any kind commands a pretty low rating in public esteem, but in my youth it was a much more respected profession." Surely no one could more justly claim to be a leading member of an honourable profession whose life and writing showed her unbounded love and concern for humanity and for nature which supports it.

Robert Cross

Elspeth Josceline Huxley, writer, born July 23, 1907; died January 10, 1997