

DC 233/2/110/7/11
GLASGOW UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

20472

22nd March, 1934.

Dear Miss Robertson,

In connection with the sittings of the Committee considering the question of opening the Diplomatic and Consular Service to women, I have been asked to produce any examples of Scottish University women who have carried on in difficult surroundings, as to climate, protection, etc. The reasons suggested against opening these Services to women (to the very small number that might eventually be qualified) is that women cannot live in a bad climate, cannot be without the protection of her countrymen, cannot act officially in Mohammedan and Eastern countries as their position would not be understood. Against that examples to the contrary can be quoted to my knowledge.

The case of yourself working in Central Africa in an unhealthy climate affected by the tsetse fly, with, I have understood, no white protection but your own camp of natives, would be another case in point, if I could quote it quite correctly. Might I ask you one or two questions so that my information may be accurate ?

- (1) What was the research on which you were engaged in Africa ?
- (2) What body commissioned you to carry it out ? Was it the Government or a scientific corporation ?
- (3) Where were you stationed ?
- (4) For how long did you continue your investigations ?
- (5) Was the place specially unhealthy ?
- (6) What about malaria and the tsetse fly ? What about danger from natives ?
- (7) What white protection had you ?
- (8) Did you find the job harder because you happened to be a woman ?

I should be very grateful if you would give me some information on these lines, and mention any other point of interest on which I have not touched.

As the questions are asked in the interest of university women
I/

I think you will forgive their length and urgency.

Yours sincerely,

It would be doubly helpful if I could have some reply not later than Monday, 26th inst.

TELEGRAMS:
"BACTERIOLOGY, SLOANE, LONDON."
TELEPHONE:
SLOANE 2181-2.

1. THE LISTER INSTITUTE,
CHELSEA BRIDGE ROAD,
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DC233/2/10/7/11

24/3/34

GLASGOW UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

Dear Miss Bellinck

You would hardly have found a more inappropriate moment for your questionnaire, particularly as you wish a reply by return of post. I am writing this in haste at 2 am in the intervals of watching a growth curve of an organism in my laboratory.

However I shall do what I can to answer your questions while not having any particular to bring to you as "data".

(1) I was engaged upon a purely scientific investigation into the life cycles of the ^{anosome} trypanosomes causing various forms of infective in man and animals. A considerable part of the work was carried out under conditions of perfect ease and safety in a laboratory. A part of it was carried out in the field and native heads were investigated. I was here given all possible help from the political officers - i.e. the district and assistant district commissioners.

(2.) The Royal Society recommended me as a suitable person but I was actually appointed to the Colonial Office. I held a temporary government appointment with all its valuable facilities and several prestige.

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24/3/34.

Dear Miss Melville,

You could hardly have found a more inappropriate moment for your questionnaire, particularly as you wish a reply by return of post. I am writing this in haste at 2 a.m. in the intervals of watching a growth curve of an organism in my laboratory.

However I shall do what I can to answer your questions while not having any particular liking for figuring as "data".

(1) I was engaged upon a purely scientific investigation into the life cycles of the Trypanosoma causing various forms of infection in man and animals. A considerable part of this work was carried out under conditions of perfect ease and safety in a laboratory. A part of it was carried out in the field and native herds were investigated. I was here given all possible help from the political officers i.e. the district and assistant district commissioners.

(2) The Royal Society recommended me as a suitable person, but I was actually appointed by the Colonial office. I held a temporary government appointment with all its valuable facilities in transport and general prestige.

(3) I was stationed during the first 18 months at the Sleeping Sickness scientific laboratory of Mpumu in the province of Kiaque, within 30 miles of Kampala. Later on when my white colleague Dr. Duke went on leave, I was moved into Kampala as the administration did not wish to have the responsibility of having me live alone on the site of Mpumu. Rather paradoxically they however permitted me to go on tour from Kampala and I spent nine months or thereabouts in the field.

I was in no danger in either set of conditions. I was on tour in rather remote parts of the country, but always under the very powerful protection of the general Pax Britannica and the political officers always knew where I was.

(4) I was a total of two years and 10 or 11 months in Africa in the Protectorate of Uganda. My service was continuous.

(5) No. The place was not especially unhealthy at all. I did and (6) while on tour pass some months in malarious and not very salubrious places, but although I had malaria it was not a bad attack. There were tsetse fly in some of these places, but as regards that kind of danger it is ridiculous to talk of it seriously. Any nurse in a civil hospital in Europe runs more risk of infection with serious disease than one did in the actual investigation of sleeping sickness.

(7) While working in Mpumu I had a white colleague, one of the officers in the Uganda medical service. In Kampala I had the protection of the whole white station. On Safari I had sometimes a couple of black native askari - a sort of policeman with me, but he was of course an African - sometimes I did not have one or two of these. I had 35 or so African porters. I was sometimes at a considerable distance actually from any white officer, but I should like you to understand that although I could have been murdered in the night, the prestige and power of the British rule rendered me perfectly safe at that time. I was asked by the administration not to sleep outside the administered territory on the Karamoja border, but I was allowed to go into this country for expeditions in search of fly areas and so on.

I should also however like to point out that a woman's safety is always vicarious and while that is true to a certain extent also of a man alone it has an especial bearing on a woman's position.

In general my own view is, that for a woman to be successful in these countries, she needs more balance and sense than a man, and there certainly are especial difficulties in her way.

My path was smoothed by a number of curious circumstances - I had learned the language - I had a natural avenue to native confidence in that they insisted on considering me medically helpful although I am not a doctor and ^{usually} ~~usually~~ did the usual medical care of obvious things such as one does for one's porter and people generally.

Further, Uganda was a cheerfully mixed Pagan country with Christian patches, and there was that early golden age touch about the business in that the white population had not been there very long and only rather good kinds had arrived.

The Mohammedan element was not very strongly represented, but I do remember that an Arab trader came nine miles out of his way to call on me in my camp because he wished to learn for himself if I really existed, or was only a fable. He considered me to be a "kitallo" or a wonder. Unfortunately a woman has in Africa (and also in Europe) a news value and that is even truer today than it was 20 years ago.

The answer is in general that if you could get a few Gertrude Bells they would be of the greatest value. In the modern world a woman would find especial difficulties in many places, - Germany for one, but if you can get the unusually wise individual woman, now as always, she will make good in a difficult place.

Further, the argument about "not being understood in Mohammedan countries" simply makes me tired; it is high time we taught the Mohammedan countries better. The conservative English idea that has taught Hindoo India nothing in a hundred years of administration because it has always left its ethics and religion alone is to my thinking reprehensible. I am prepared to move Mohammedan, Hindoo, and even English opinion.

In conclusion I should beg you not to use me as propaganda as I had no spectacular difficulties to encounter and was most helpfully and considerately supported by the administration. Also I was doing my work in Africa before the war which was undoubtedly a more civilised period in the world's history than the present time.

I hope I have given you the information you require, but I do not wish to be used as an example of a woman working under any conditions of difficulty, and I had no administrative responsibility in the sense of committing the government to any action on the basis of my judgment. You will find the greatest jealousy on just this point. Also if young Mr. Jones makes a bad mistake it is easily dealt with, if a woman loses her head there is always, or nearly always, the devil to pay.

Yours sincerely,
MURIEL ROBERTSON.