

# ResearchOnline@JCU

This is the **Accepted Version** of a paper published in the journal *Travel Medicine and Infectious Disease*:

Bauer, Irmgard (2014) Book review of "Travels in West Africa" by M. Kingsley, Cover Publication, New York, NY, USA, 2003. *Travel Medicine and Infectious Disease*, 12 (2). pp. 201-202.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tmaid.2013.11.003>

## **BOOK REVIEW**

Kingsley, M. (2003)  
*Travels in West Africa*  
Cover Publication, New York  
(re-publication of original 1879 edition)

### **Travel Health in 19<sup>th</sup> century West Africa – through the eyes of the intrepid spinster Mary Kingsley (1862-1900)**

Housebound as a child to nurse her ailing mother, Mary Kingsley's only escape were the books in her father's library, books about explorations in Africa. At the age of 30, after her parents had just died in quick succession, she was finally free. She left for West Africa, expecting to die there. Luckily for us, she did not die, she travelled along the west coast of Africa, meticulously recording her observations, encounters and experiences resulting in her first book, the now classic *Travels in West Africa: Congo Français, Corisco and Cameroons* (1897). Impeccably dressed, she travelled and was thrilled by the people she encountered (locals and expatriates), their culture and customs and the landscapes of Africa. Not afraid of putting her opinions bluntly in writing, she was critical of the presence and work of missionaries and the British colonialists, and of their often poor attitudes towards the African people. This ruffled quite a few feathers at home. She also made a few withering assessments of the local people for which, today, a public apology would not be suffice. Nevertheless, the 700+-page book is a joy to read, not so much because of the very detailed ethnographic and naturalistic descriptions but because of her beautifully crafted sentences. With dry humour, she tells of her unflattering observations of expatriates and of dreadful mishaps. Once, having fallen into a large animal trap with long sharp spikes, she merely commented 'it is at these times that you realise the blessings of a good thick skirt'.

The main purpose of her travel was the collection of innumerable fish which she sent pickled to the British Museum, discovering a few new species along the way. Mary

Kingsley expected to die in West Africa, well-known as 'the white man's grave'. Health issues were of great interest to her, and throughout her book, there are several references to diseases, ill persons, treatments and precautions. The main culprit for the appalling death toll among Europeans was a number of coastal fevers. This included malaria, caused by a 'myetozoic malarial bacillus' with amoebic movements that attacks the red corpuscles. The meticulous use of grains of quinine (not too much to avoid deafness) was the best safeguard against the deadliness of the climate: '... no other region in the world that can match West Africa for the steady kill, kill, kill that its malaria works on the white men who come under its influence' (p. 681). She estimated that about 85% of Europeans to West Africa would die or return home with permanent health problems. So high was the mortality that some cemeteries had always a couple of freshly dug graves ready in anticipation. She strongly suggested a number of scientific research approaches into the high malaria mortality as well as the controversy of abandoning or not the use of quinine in haematuria, a constant point of contention between the German and French doctors.

Other health hazards were the 'Yellow Jack', leeches (treated with salt), ulcers, *kraw kraw* (skin condition – onchocerciasis?), filariae that get into the eye (*Loa loa*), filariae that get under the skin, guinea worms (she advises not to employ a sufferer as the winding up of the worm in the morning causes delays in a day's work). Large animals were a constant threat on her travels as was deadly mud. '... and sinking into it means staying in it, at any rate until some geologist of the remote future may come across you, in a fossilised state...of course if you really want a truly safe investment in fame, and really care about Posterity, and Posterity's Sciences, you will jump over into the black batter-like, stinking slime, cheered by the thought of the terrific sensation you will produce 20,000 years hence, and the care you will be taken of then by your fellow creatures, in a museum.' (p.89)

Some treatments of the time were quinine, calomel (mercury chloride), arsenic, colocynth, opium, carbolic acid and alcohol preparations.

She was advised (and presumably passes this advice on to the readers) on keeping out of the direct rays of the sun, of taking 4 grains of quinine daily for 2 weeks before approaching rivers and to make friends with the Wesleyans as they had the only hearse with feathers. To make boiled water more palatable, a red-hot iron should be plunged into it. Alcohol was recommended as a stimulant (in proper amounts at proper times) and as medication. The many deaths from 'cork fever' suggest that this advice was well heeded. Despite all preventions, she urged that 'the full-blooded, corpulent and vigorous should avoid West Africa like the plague'. Kingsley was not only interested in the health of her fellow-Europeans but shared in much detail her interesting observations on local health behaviour, customs and rituals including autopsies and the practice of witch-doctors.

Mary Kingsley travelled last to Africa in 1900 as a volunteer nurse in a South African prison camp. On 3 June 1900, she died aged 38 of typhoid fever contracted from a patient. One wishes she could have lived longer, travelled more and written a couple of more fascinating books.

Dr. Irmgard Bauer

James Cook University

Townsville, Australia