STEEL SAFARI:
TRAVEL WRITING AND CRITICAL STUDY

Volume 1

Travel Writing

Steel Safari: Cairo to Cape Town by Train (Where Possible)

Volume 2

Critical Study

Structuring Travel Narrative: Text and Paratext

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctorate of Philosophy in Creative Writing
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To my ever-patient family and support team – Mark and Elaine, my mother Jennifer, and my friend, Judy. Above all, thanks to the Oncology and Radiotherapy teams at the Colchester General Hospital and the Neurosurgery Team at Queen's Hospital, Romford.

Reserve your right to think, for even to think wrongly is
better than not to think at all.

Hypatia of Alexandria (b. c.350-70 AD, d. 415 AD).

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Abstract

This Creative Writing PhD is presented in two parts: a Creative Work and a Critical Study. The Creative Work consists of a substantial portion of a work of travel writing, submitted as proof of concept. Written at a time when much published travel writing is focussed on the relatively introspective world of nature writing and walking, this work deliberately moves to investigate Africa's industrial and colonial heritage. In following the author's personal journey by rail from Cairo to Cape Town, it utilises the complex interdisciplinary structure of post-millennial travel writing in order to examine the impact of the railways' arrival on the political, social, economic and military life of Africa over more than two hundred years. Although excellent books have been written on individual lines, no one has previously attempted to discuss the many effects of railway travel, from state building to the spread of cholera, the technical education of thousands and the creation of railway missions, over the whole route.

The Critical Study offers a detailed exploration of the paratext surrounding the main travel text, using the theories of literary philosophers such as Gerard Genette and Roland Barthes, along with the writings of a wide variety of authors and journalists. It is the first time that a study of this magnitude has been undertaken within the travel genre, involving a comparison with the work of many twentieth and twenty-first century travel writers alongside a discussion of the author's own decision-making processes with regard to topics that range from the use of chapter titles to mapping and illustration in both print and digital texts.

Preface

In 2009, I was the fortunate recipient of a Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship, offering me the funding for the travel and on-the-ground research for a book I had first envisaged writing at least ten years earlier. The Churchill Memorial Trust (http://www.wcmt.org.uk), the UK's memorial to Sir Winston Churchill, offers citizens from all walks of life research grants to travel the world in search of innovative solutions for today's most pressing problems. The idea I had pitched, within the category, 'Writers: Journalists, Historians and Biographers', was a travel narrative book, *Steel Safari: How the Railways Made Modern Africa*, to be based, where possible, upon my own journey by rail from Cairo to Cape Town.

The scope of my subject was ambitious, stretching across nine countries, around 8,000 miles (12,000 km), 200 years and including multiple simultaneous narrative threads and some of the biggest events in world history. The resulting book would be creative non-fiction, roughly housed within the travel genre, although with probably greater historical and anthropological content than many travel books. It would be a containable, readable continuous narrative, interlacing the stories of the railways, the African people and continent and my personal experience. There have been many books and articles written on the individual railways previously and there have been one or two that have tackled the route from an engineering perspective. There have also been a number of different books on the Cape to Cairo route by various means of transport. To my knowledge, no one had ever previously attempted to examine the overall social and historical impact of the development of the railways as they spread their net to capture the continent. It was a daunting and exciting prospect.

Thanks to the WCMT scholarship of £7,200, over a total of nine weeks during the course of 2010, I made four trips to Africa – two, to Kenya, and Egypt and Sudan, with my partner, Mark Fogg Elliot; the second two – to Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe, and to South Africa – on my own. At the time, I was a working travel writer of many years' standing and the author of over thirty guidebooks, six of them on countries and areas along the route I was taking for this project. I was well used to researching in foreign countries. In order to stretch the budget as far as possible, I

additionally took on a number of commercial commissions, allowing me to source some accommodation in Egypt, Sudan and Kenya, a short press trip in Zimbabwe and various facilities in South Africa. Tourist office contacts also proved invaluable in setting up meetings, particularly in more bureaucratic countries such as Egypt, and in gaining permissions which might otherwise have been refused. Many of the countries along the route, such as Zimbabwe, are wary of people with notebooks and cameras and in all of them it was forbidden to photograph anything of strategic or military importance. As all railways are counted within this ban, it was vital to travel openly, with official permission, if I were to achieve my aims. In Egypt, Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa, a partial programme of activities was set up, introductions were written and appointments with key functionaries made before I left the UK. In all cases, I left time to work independently as well. Sudan has no real tourist industry, no effective tourist office, and is deeply suspicious of all journalists, so I initially entered the country on a tourist visa, with no appointments made, realising shortly after arrival that I would need to gain official permission both as a writer and photographer were I to have any chance of achieving the smallest of goals. Luckily, as I describe within the creative text, the manager of the Acropole Hotel in Khartoum was able to assist me in gaining the relevant papers and appointments.

Tanzania and Zambia do not have official tourist representation either so, for my trip on the Tazara railway, I relied more heavily on the private tourist network. It proved difficult to find up-to-date information on the Tazara railway, on safe, affordable accommodation and transport in Tanzania and Zambia, and, more crucially, on booking methods for the train, so I turned to social media. It proved to be a resounding success. In 2010, Twitter was four years old and had not yet achieved the level of global dominance it has today; I had joined the network only recently. My request for help was answered by local specialists in both Dar es Salaam and Lusaka, enabling me to tap into local and even familial resource networks that had previously only been available on the ground. As a result, I found accommodation in both Tanzania and Zambia, a method of booking and paying for my Tazara train ticket from the UK (an essential if I were not to have a two-week delay in Dar es Salaam) and, most importantly, a wealth of information from people who have continued to offer invaluable advice to this day.

What was different about this project was not the research or even the organisation of the travel but the writing of the book itself. It needed a different approach from my usual fact-based guidebook research methods. From the start, my own story, experiences and emotions became part of my research, an aspect of the project magnified once it became a PhD with its critical study and all the possibilities that offered for self-reflection. I travelled with a laptop, camera and tape recorder, producing articles, blogs, photographs and radio reports, as well as around forty hours of taped notes and interviews that have contributed to the research for the book. It was the first time I had used audio rather than notebooks as my chief source of note-taking. This was done chiefly because I had been asked to put together a broadcast for BBC Radio Four. There were some drawbacks. Transcribing proved to be too big a task so I ended by working directly from the audio. While this was sometimes a lengthy process, the immediacy of the sound recordings and the accuracy of the words proved vital in recalling atmosphere and conversations. Amongst the interviews, sound effects and factual notes are my own audio musings – stream of consciousness meanderings about the journey, the view from the train window, the effect of my surroundings. The ease of the push-button technology creates incoherence fairly frequently but also allowed me to capture thoughts before they vanished, in a way that had not previously been possible. A few short sections of these verbatim texts, such as this description of the countryside from an Egyptian train, in Chapter 2, have made it into the finished creative text virtually unedited; most are simply useful pointers to my mood and preoccupations at any given point of the journey:

> Cattle egrets are flying white against the crops; water buffalo, cattle, people fishing, sitting cross-legged patiently on the banks of the canal, washing hung out to dry absolutely everywhere. A great flock of egrets takes to the sky. It looks as if they are building a bridge there… donkey carts… oxen being used for ploughing in some of the fields, donkeys laden with alfalfa trotting along beside some of the fields, working. Bananas, small groups of banana fields. Every now and again, dotted between the fields, there's a small tomb and dotted between them are the satellite masts. The houses, however ramshackle they look, always seem to have satellites.
> (Vol 1, p. 31)

The idea for turning the existing book project into a PhD began over a year after my return from the final trip. With no further funding, I was struggling to find time to write. While I had done the fieldwork and interviews, there was considerably more archival and historical research still to complete. Above all, structurally, the complexity of the topic necessitated a sophistication of approach that continued to elude me. A friend's suggestion of a return to academia as a way of breaking the impasse was followed by a great deal of thought, the complete rearrangement of my life, and a lengthy search for the correct partnership, the ideal degree format and supervisor, finally found fortuitously close to home.

My PhD began therefore as an existing project, the basic principles of the creative strand clearly mapped, with the on-the-ground research already in place and only small adjustments that had no bearing on the basic outline needed to fit the core concept within the context of a Creative Writing degree. The title remained the same although the sub-title was altered and eventually altered again, with the project initially named *Steel Safari: Cairo to Cape Town by Train (Where Possible),* for reasons I discuss in the Critical Study (Section 3.2). As I began to write, the style and content continued inevitably to evolve. This had further implications on the format and structure of the book, also addressed in later sections.

This Creative Writing PhD is presented in two volumes. Volume 1 is the Creative Work; Volume 2 is the Critical Study. There are occasional references in the Critical Study to sections of the Creative Work which have not been submitted for examination. Due to the length of the Creative Work, a decision was taken to submit only the first half, covering the countries of Egypt, Sudan and Kenya.

Acknowledgements

From my notebook: Fiction writers say that a project takes on a life of its own, that characters go off in unexpected directions. I hadn't expected a work of non-fiction to do the same thing but from the moment I started this project, it's veered off at weird tangents. It truly does have a life of its own and I don't really know where it's going. The book that I thought I was going to write twenty years ago is certainly not the book I thought I was going to write when I went in to see the Winston Churchill Fellowship people and I don't think that the book that I am actually going to write now is the same book I proposed to them that day...

From the moment I set foot back in Africa, it's morphed into something else, something more vivid – and I'm not entirely sure where it is heading. Absolutely, there is still that sense of the past but there is an ever-present sense of the future while the present is crumbling visibly around me. I seem to have arrived at a junction, which is a very good railway term. I've just been called a jinx and an angel of death for the railways – which is not very nice – wandering across Africa shutting them down. Botswana cancelled all its passenger services just before I set off, Sudan doing the same thing virtually as I'm here. Hopefully no more will follow suit, as it would actually be quite nice to travel on a train or two! But even if it's a book about transport, it's also a book about movement and people. It's also a book about nationhood, it's a book about the past, it's a book about imperialism, old and new because I think there's a new sort of Chinese imperialism going on as well. It's a book about communities, building communities, building communities in extraordinary ways.

All I can do is write it all down and hope that the amorphous whole makes sense at the end of it. Perhaps the thoughts are enough.

I wrote those words in my hotel room in Khartoum in 2010, partway through the journey, long before I settled down to the serious business of converting my jottings into a book and long before I ever considered turning the whole project into a PhD. That became possibly the strangest and most challenging tangent of all. In terms of what the book is about, I think I came pretty close back in 2010, but

would add just one more element. This is a book about restoration, redefinition and reclamation, about finding new identities in a world of change. It has also been a project assisted by many.

First and foremost, I must thank the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust (www.wcmt.org.uk), whose faith in awarding me a travelling scholarship in 2009 allowed me to embark on the journey of a lifetime which led into writing *Steel Safari* and this PhD. The Trust has helped thousands of individuals fulfil long-held ambitions, learn and grow, and, through these extraordinary fellows, has spread a wealth of knowledge and best practice. I am honoured to count myself amongst them.

Next thanks must go to my academic team at the University of Essex, starting with my supervisor, Emeritus Professor Peter Hulme, a wise voice of authority who has quietly and calmly asked questions and kept me on the level; it has been a privilege to work with you. Equally sage advice has come from Professor John Gillies, Professor Chris McCully and Dr James Canton. My cohort of fellow PhD students have proved to be both true friends and inspiration. Special mention should go to Dr Steph Driver who worked with me on the maps and illustrations for the creative work, providing a new dimension that I would never have been able to add on my own; Dr Elaine Ewart, who has offered much support, practical and emotional advice; and Benedict Hudson who stepped in to proofread and edit the text for me. Thanks too to Drs Katja Waschneck and Lin Su who helped with research and translation from German and Chinese, respectively. And also to the wider LiFTS Dept, to Professor Liz Kuti, the academic staff, Dr Daniela Wachsening, Deanna McCarthy, Rachele Winn and the whole admin team.

Returning to university in later life, self-funded, is very disruptive to family life. I am extraordinarily lucky to have a close extended family who have encouraged me throughout and supported me both mentally and financially. First of all, greatest thanks go to my partner, Mark Fogg Elliot, who has not only stuck with me throughout the travels and the writing, suffering as I tried out various drafts on him. Above all, he was a delightful travelling companion, except when waiting at airports, is brilliant at carrying heavy bags, and has allowed me to feature him within the book (albeit in a toned-down version, no one would believe

the real one). My mother, Jennifer Shales, and my very dear friend, Judy Sykes, both helped with funds at crucial moments when my ability to teach my way out of an overdraft became perilous. I know how very lucky and privileged I am.

Organising and researching my research trips to Africa took a vast volume of work and organization. when you are working and travelling in foreign countries, you are reliant, much of the time, upon other people to have the connections, open doors, know the ropes and find a way through the maze of local sensitivities to get you to where you need to be. I have had an extraordinary amount of help along the way on this project. It seems to have fired the imagination of those I have met, whether officially or in passing and individuals, organizations and government departments the length and breadth of Africa and Britain have been immensely generous with their time and resources. The acknowledgements section is very long, but very necessary.

In the UK, thanks to Sarah Monaghan for information on the Gabon Railway (this didn't go in eventually, but perhaps next book?); Stuart Arnold, now no longer with us, a fellow travel writer and true rail enthusiast for some wonderful stories of the Zambian Sawmills Railway; Anthony Lambert, who generously allowed me to hold onto a prized book for years without too many complaints while researching; Bradt Guides who armed me with excellent up-to-date guide books for all the relevant destinations; Hills Balfour Synergy who helped with information on behalf of the Kenya Tourist Office in London; Virgin Atlantic, from whom I won a pair of air tickets to Nairobi in a prize draw, helping to stretch travel funds still further; and Paul Smith of the Thomas Cook Archives, who opened the doors and allowed me to browse freely.

In Egypt, thanks go to the Egypt Tourism Authority, who provided huge amounts of assistance, and in particular to Mr Khaled Ramy, then Director of the London Office, and the two Mohameds, who were both super-efficient and thoroughly good company. Thanks too to Azza Soliman of the Foreign Press Center for arranging my press accreditation efficiently. In addition, I would like to thank Egyptian National Railways who opened their doors to me, gave me time and information, and allowed me to photograph the trains and stations. In particular, I'd like to thank Engineer Reda Abu Harga, Director General for the

Presidency Affairs of ENR for his information and support, Engineer Abdel Aziz Abdelrazek of the Alexandria office for a fascinating interview, and Hakmat Ebrahiem and Nahed Elkattib for a wonderful morning at the sadly now defunct Railway Museum in Cairo.

Arrangements for my Sudan trip really began when I sat next to Linda Battersby of Action Water (www.actionwater.org.uk) at a dinner for starting me on the correct path for my Sudan visit. George Pagoulatos is the legendary owner of the Acropole Hotel in Khartoum, my base for my trip to Sudan and I can never thank him enough for quite literally making the whole trip possible. I could not have done it without him, his family and his staff. Thanks to Sumia El Hadi, Director of the External Information Council, for arranging permission for me to research within Sudan.

The Sudan Railways Corporation might not have been running passenger trains while I was there, but their PR wing, in the persons of Sami Babiker in Atbara and his deputy, Azim el Rasheed, in Khartoum, could not have been more hospitable. Thank you too to Anis Wataki who set up the meeting to allow to explore Kitchener’s gunboat, and to Hanan Mohamed Abdel Karim, who took time from a busy schedule not only to introduce me to Osama Nour Elhuda, Commodore of the Blue Nile Sailing Club, but took us out to dinner – adopting total strangers with huge generosity. Thank you so much for your great hospitality.

First thanks in Kenya go to family and friends, in the person of my sister, Penelope Shales, who not only provided ongoing support but accommodation in Nairobi while we were there and Mike Meegan of iCross, who provided all sorts of useful background on Kenya and a great book on the railways. John – Kenya’s finest taxi driver – became part of our Nairobi family while David spent a day explaining the museum to me in enthusiastic detail and sold me two watercolours of the Jambo Express de Luxe of which I am exceedingly fond. Rift Valley Railways and Kenya Railways Corporation both took time to talk to me and explain the finer points of their great heritage, as did Maurice Barassa, curator of the Nairobi Railway Museum. Serena Hotels gave us a generous media rate at the Mombasa Beach Hotel and Kilagunu Lodge, both extraordinarily beautiful hotels, allowing me to turn a research trip into a treat as well.

To be continued…

Acknowledgements for the final segments of the journey will be added as the last chapters of the book are completed.

Finally, I acknowledge the assistance of Dr Elaine Ewart with the post-viva corrections.

VOLUME 1

TRAVEL WRITING

STEEL SAFARI: CAIRO TO CAPE TOWN BY TRAIN (WHERE POSSIBLE)

Melissa Shales

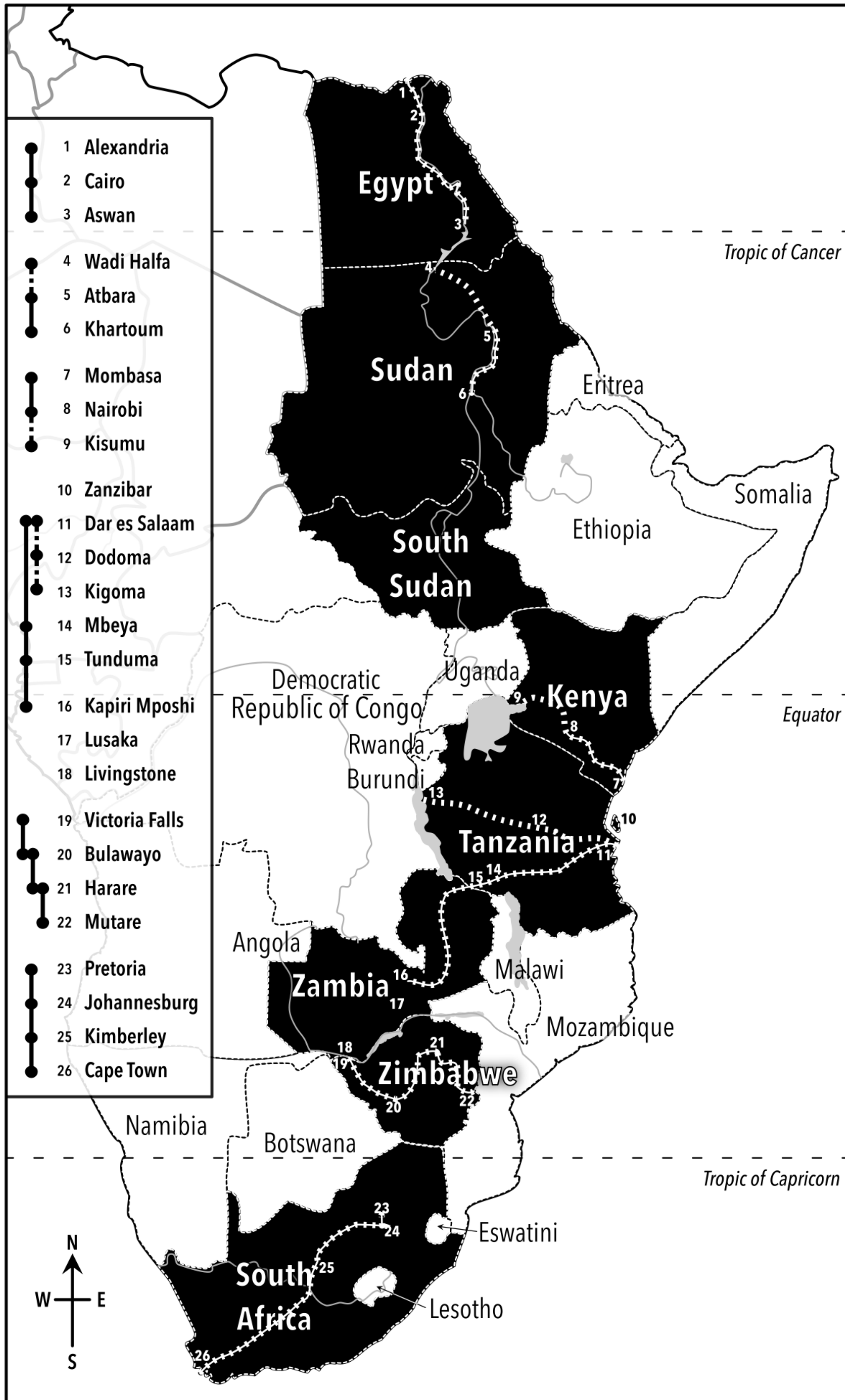

Fig 1 Map of Africa showing rail routes travelled by Melissa. © Steph Driver

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... to be continued. Additional chapters will be added after submission as the book is completed.

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Tbc… *Additional maps and illustrations will be added as the book is completed.*

Forward

Shosholoza
Kule ... Zontaba
Stimela siphume South Africa
(Go forward, Go forward
from those mountains
on this train from South Africa)[1]

The roar of a Rugby World Cup stadium, a picture of Nelson Mandela in a Springbok shirt dancing in the Cape Town sun in 1995, the South African crowd at last united in sporting triumph: "*Shosholoza, Shosholoza*." The strident yowl of the vuvuzelas is yet to join the howl of victory being thrown around the crowd. That belongs to another great sporting moment – football's "Africa" World Cup. And that is still in the future. *Shosholoza*. Go forward. For now, it's February 2010 and at the moment, I am still in the far north, on the edge of Africa, in Alexandria, the continent stretched out before me and South Africa still a thousand adventures away.

There are still six months to go until the FIFA World Cup bursts onto our TV screens and Soweto, for a while, will become the coolest place on the planet, but from top to toe and east to west, Africa is ablaze with Coca Cola ads already welcoming soccer to the continent. For once, famine, civil war and other such incidentals have been left behind as its people unite behind their true passion – a small, round black and white ball. The tsunami of excitement is rolling across the sand dunes of the Namib Desert, cresting the Ruwenzoris, trailing through jungles and urban jungles and cascading down the Nile. There is a frenzy of activity. No mahogany tree is safe, no piece of soapstone remains uncarved and every t-shirt for thousands of miles is festooned in flags. The souvenir trade is in frenzied overdrive. Thousands of miles from the action, expectations are high that a tourist bonanza will line streets from Morocco to Mozambique with football-fevered gold.

For many, it's the first time they might have some chance of getting to a World Cup football match in person and the bars are full of chatter about homegrown heroes such as Cameroonian Samuel Eto'o and Ivorian Didier Drogba alongside European footballing greats from Wayne Rooney to Thierry Henry. Everyone wants a

piece of the action. People are poring over plane and train timetables and even oiling up rusty bicycles. Ancient armies of battered buses and matatus are planning to drive south from as far afield as Nigeria and Cameroon, Kenya and Zambia. In the end, many won't go – ticket prices are simply too high for the ordinary folk of Africa. But for now, in Dar es Salaam, there is even talk about a special train on the rickety Tazara line to take people thousands of miles south to watch the games. Africa is united.

Shosholoza
Kule ... Zontaba
Stimela siphum'e South Africa.

Shosholoza is known across the world as a sporting song – it came to be *the* song of the Africa World Cup – but it began on the railways. These words echo back along the tracks to the first work gangs who laid the gleaming rails, their rhythms designed to throw the chant along the backbreaking line of steel. *Shosholoza*, the sigh of steam released, *stimela*, the clang of hammer on iron, the Ndebele word for a steam train, *siphume*, the sibilant hiss of brakes. *Shosholoza.* It began with the birth of the railways and picked up the chatter of the wheels clacking over the sleepers as Ndebele workers headed south from Bulawayo to the mines in Johannesburg. *Shosholoza* – it became an anthem in the mines, uniting Zulu, Xhosa and Tswana bent double as they heaved gold ore into carts and shoved them along rail tracks thousands of feet deep below the ground. *Shosholoza* – it bound the weary workers in common cause in their struggle against apartheid, their gumboots shuffling and stomping after work in tired dusty dance. *Shosholoza* – it reaffirmed its political solidarity on Robben Island where Nelson Mandela wielded a pick and the prisoners sang its call and response as they were forced to labour in the blinding lime pits. Mandela later called it 'a song that compares the apartheid struggle to the motion of an oncoming train'. *Shosholoza* – the roar of a rugby crowd, the song of the Africa World Cup, a shout of triumph, a nation reborn, a continent reawakening filled with the possibilities of its own promise, a phoenix in flight. South Africa's railway spiritual.

Shosholoza
Kule ... Zontaba
Stimela siphume South Africa.

Go forward. It's February 2010 and for now, South Africa is a thousand adventures away. I am still in the far north, on the edge of Africa, on the Mediterranean coast, the

Middle Earth of the ancient world, and the continent stretches out before me. By sheer, strange coincidence, I am also in the place where Africa's great railway adventure first began. Go forward on this train to South Africa.

PART 1

THE DESERT RAILWAYS

Fig 2 Melissa on the station at Alexandria, ready to leave at the start of her journey by train down to Cape Town. Computer-aided artwork © Steph Driver

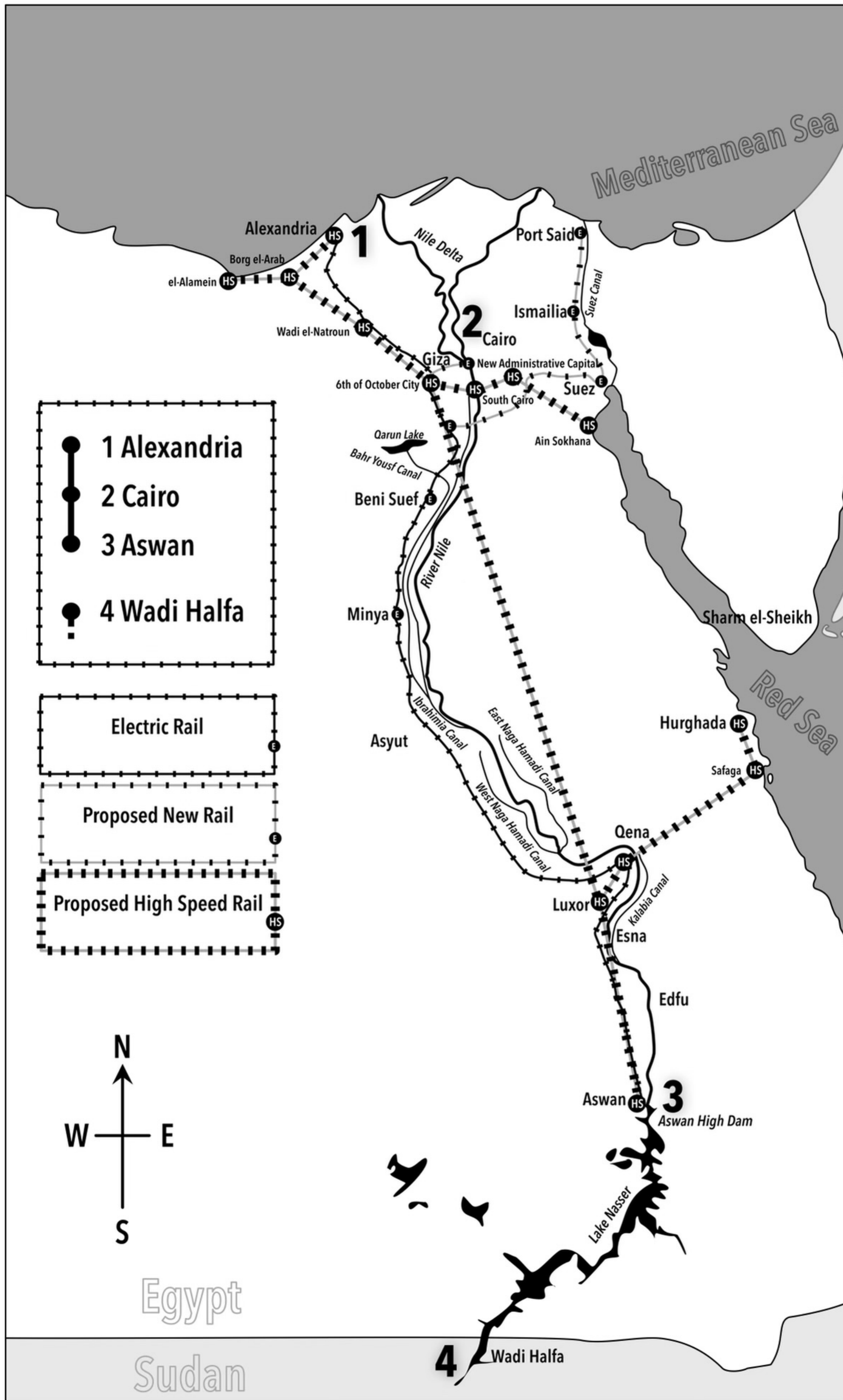


Fig 3 Map of Egypt, showing railways, canals and main cities. © Steph Driver

Chapter One – Alexandria

We gazed at the Caesarium, and felt the pang of standing next to history. (Trust me; it is extremely similar to the pang of badly wanting a sit-down and a drink of cold water).

Lindsey Davis, *Alexandria* [2]

"I am 28 years old. I need a wife." Ginger Mohamed paused and waved his fork at me. "I'd like to marry an English wife. Can you find me an English wife?"

Beside me, Mark spluttered through his mouthful. "He could marry Vicky! She's single." He looked like a hamster with a falafel tucked into one cheek. I wondered what Vicky would say. Ginger Mohamed wondered what Vicky was like.

"Oh, she's lovely," Mark continued, swallowing, "she's blonde, very beautiful, about your age. Yes, it's perfect. You can introduce them, Mel." He looked very pleased with himself. So did Ginger Mohamed. So did Banker Mohamed who was watching the exchange with the superior satisfaction of a man who was not only married but had recently produced his first son – duty done. I was imagining Vicky's reaction to this long-distance blind date and feeling somewhat less sanguine. There was a flicker of introspective despair. I had back been in Africa for less than 24 hours and I was already facing my first crisis of post-colonial angst. I did the only thing possible in the circumstances and became very British.

"Hmmm," I said, fixing Mark with what he describes as my Queen Victoria look, and asked Mohamed cautiously, "What's wrong with Egyptian women? They're beautiful."

"Oh yes," Mohamed replied, "very beautiful, but they come with Egyptian mothers-in-law. I think English girls are more free." Banker Mohamed looked for a moment as if he needed to defend the honour of his new wife and mother-in-law. I rapidly overthought everything and wondered if a lesson on feminist theory would work. We both subsided. Mark, blissfully unaware of my struggles with the cultural crosscurrents in the conversation, had by now finished his own lunch and was eyeing mine with the pathetic eyes of a starving puppy. I wrapped a defensive arm around my plate.

"Anyway," Ginger Mohamed continued, "I've met all the girls in Alexandria already."

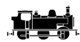
"I'll see what she says," I replied, weakly, and returned to my falafels and pitta bread.

We were in a café in the backstreets of Alexandria during our 'official' sightseeing day, courtesy of the Egyptian State Tourist Office. Neon lights buzzed quietly to themselves and an ancient fan creaked benignly and ineffectually overhead. The thick bead screens were equally efficient at blocking flies, sunlight and fresh air. The room smelled of heat and cooking oil, grilled meat and dust, onion and lemon. In the corner, a round man with a round head, no hair and a huge moustache sat and pretended to read the paper while he tried to follow our conversation, although I'm not convinced he understood any English. The tiny glass of ferociously strong black tea in front of him was replenished frequently and he sighed every now and then with the occasional snort thrown in for good measure.

It had taken us a matter of hours to realise that most of the male population of Egypt appears to be called Mohamed. It quickly became confusing and we had found ourselves, out of their hearing at least, giving them extra markers for differentiation. Ginger Mohamed had been named for his flamboyant hair, unusual in an Egyptian, while Banker Mohamed was uber-sleek: his perfectly cut suit and impeccably groomed hair would have been perfectly in place in any City of London boardroom. The two of them were our official minders for the day, deputed by the Ministry of Tourism to whisk us around the city in air-conditioned luxury.

I wasn't sure, at first, why we needed one each, but it turned out that Banker Mohamed had come up from Cairo HQ while Ginger Mohamed was the local Alexandria lad. This was a year before the Arab Spring when Egypt's intelligentsia had taken to the streets in search of a brave new world of freedom and democracy, only to find that the Egyptian people chose to vote in a repressive religious regime. The resulting mayhem was still to come, but al Qaeda had already begun targeting tourists in Egypt and the authorities were jumpy. The Mohameds were there as much to mind me as to mind out for me, shepherding us politely and firmly along a path politically acceptable to the Mubarak regime and to ensure we didn't do anything as untidy as get blown up. As it happened, I wasn't there as a hard newshound and didn't want to do anything controversial, so all four of us were immensely pleased with the situation, we were being hosted royally and having a whale of a day. Alexandria was the perfect jumping off point for the start of my long journey down through Africa, part adventure, part visit home for me. I had grown up in Zimbabwe and have spent

much of my life wandering Africa, a hybrid diasporan soul with a foot on each continent. To Mark, who is firmly English, this was all new territory, unknown and way outside his usual comfort zone. Luckily, he's game to try most things. The Mohameds explained happily that a stint guiding VIPs for the Tourist Office was a regular stop on the fast-track career path for eager young men from the privileged families. It helped to polish them after their national service before an overseas posting, after which they would come home and rocket up the career ladder. A day out with us, it appeared, was a job jealously guarded for scions of the Mubarak supporters' club. I've often wondered what happened to those eager young men.



I'm a slow eater and a great talker, so I was still not finished when Banker Mohamed suddenly wiped his hands and stood up.

"Come, we need to go. We must be there in 15 minutes."

I pushed my kebab over towards Mark and watched it vanish with some regret but we could not miss our appointment. Back outside on the main road, the others were soon ahead of me. I paused to let a sky-blue tram trundle past. Behind it two bearded men in identical blue and yellow jumpers were enthusiastically taking photos of it. Alexandrian trams come in blue and yellow and the blue of the jumper perfectly matched the tram. As it turned out, this was no accident.

"She comes from Denmark, you know," one of the photographers said to me.

Astonishingly, I did. The jolly Danish cars are only the latest incarnation of one of the oldest public transport systems in the world and, for train geeks, right up there with Cleopatra's capital. By sheer coincidence, I was on my way to see Mr Sherin, Head of the Alexandria Passenger Transportation Authority. It turned out that Tweedledum and Tweedledee were part of an eight-strong contingent of Danish train enthusiasts who were in Alexandria specifically to look at (and ride on) the tram. They had just left Mr Sherin's office and were bubbling over with nerdy enthusiasm. According to the front page of the APTA website:

> Tram Alexandria or tramway Alexandria is the first collective means of transport in Egypt, Africa, and most popular, where he began run tram Alexandria in 1860, and this is a tram Alexandria oldest tram in Africa, and among the oldest in the world

> … There are blue tram vehicle dedicated for ladies only, and coach of the men, and a hybrid vehicle, but it most often find that ladies stormed the vehicles for men severely crowded in carts ladies. And joined the blue with yellow tram in Raml Station, one of the main fields in Alexandria, which is where you started from first tram trips.[3]

I was looking forward to hearing more and also felt that the storming ladies of Alexandria held immense possibilities. I knew they bred powerful women here – Cleopatra was a pretty good role model and not averse to a bit of storming herself. This promised to be spectacular entertainment. Who needs the seven wonders of the ancient world when you have trams?

Actually, I suspected that I might. While Mark hunkered down to an enthusiastic conversation with the Danes about overhead cables and signalling systems, I couldn't help casting a slightly wistful glance towards the gleaming glass and steel of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina[4], the modern successor to the great Library of Alexandria. Home to millions of books and fifteen different institutes, museums and specialist collections, it takes up a whole city block and spreads, underground, across several more. It is Magnificent – definitely worth a capital letter and a worthy successor to the original.

That had been founded by the Ptolemies in the 3rd century BC and, thanks to some somewhat ruthless collecting methods, became one of the greatest centres of learning in the world. It's said that any ship coming into the harbour would have to surrender all manuscripts. Copies would be made and handed back to the owners while the originals were tucked safely away into the library vaults. After Julius Caesar inadvertently burned it down in 48 BC, the love-struck Mark Anthony supposedly raided the Great Library in Pergamon in Asia Minor, its greatest rival, and handed over some 200,000 scrolls to restock Alexandria for Cleopatra. The librarians of Alexandria then compounded the woes of Pergamon by refusing to send them any papyrus paper. The Pergamenes, undeterred, invented something new to write on, the finely cured hides of baby goats, and introduced parchment to the world. The world changed thanks to the petty squabbles of librarians.

I was always taught at school that it was Julius Caesar who was responsible for the demise of the Alexandrian Library and according to Roman philosopher, Seneca, he did account for some 40,000 manuscripts, but this was only a fraction of

the whole library and it's something of a mystery as to how it actually did meet its end. Some say that its greatest treasures were simply scattered and many may have ended up in Constantinople when Constantine moved his base of operations there in the 4th century AD. In 391 AD, Emperor Theodosius I knocked down the Temple of Serapis and it's possible that the Library went at the same time. On the other hand, Arab sources, disputed by later scholars because there are no contemporary Christian or Jewish accounts to back up the evidence, claim that in 640 CE, the city was captured by Caliph Omar who ordered the destruction of all volumes saying that "If those books are in agreement with the Quran, we have no need of them; and if these are opposed to the Quran, destroy them." The scrolls were supposedly used as fuel in the city's bath houses, keeping them in hot water for six months.[5]

A blue tram vehicle clanked into the stop and we climbed onboard with one more backwards glance towards the Library. The tram was nothing out of the ordinary, rather beaten-up and tatty with torn plastic seats, but clean and serviceable, with little graffiti. I looked around eagerly for storming ladies, but only one modest young mother in a headscarf cradled her toddler son in her lap, watched over carefully by a protective husband. I spent much of the journey playing peekaboo with the boy while she and I smiled at each other across languages and the men all hung onto straps, ignoring each other rather too obviously, choosing to stand even though there were plenty of seats, as men often prefer to do.

Clinging to the fringe of the continent, the Nile Delta and the Sahara Desert clawing at her back, Alexandria could be forgiven for looking north, across the Mediterranean towards the kinder and more hospitable land of her forefathers, Alexander of Macedonia, the Ptolemies and even the Albanian-born Mohamed Ali Pasha. Part Greek, part Arab, with a dash of French flair and almost nothing of Africa, the city was one of the dazzling jewels of the ancient world. It became one of the great Bohemian playgrounds of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the British and French chattering classes flocked in to overwinter here, transforming the broad bay and Arab-Greek streets into an exotic, Art Deco approximation of Le Touquet.

A hundred years later, Alexandria is beautiful but tired, a lady in severe need of some new makeup and kind lighting. She was getting neither today, her flaws only too obvious under the grey winter light but I had fallen instantly in love with her

shabby chic, the brilliant mosaics of successive generations of local art students, hung like paste jewellery round a wrinkled neck, only serving to highlight her wrinkles. The city, more than any other I've ever been in, has an obsession with the sea and has stretched itself out along the coast to about 40 miles long and one mile wide. With nearly 10 million people now crammed into its fading Belle Epoque apartment blocks and a million more arriving each summer, you spend a vast proportion of your time in a traffic jam along the Corniche, but at least you have glorious sea views. A block back, on our rickety tram, there was a certain satisfaction in passing all the traffic, as the Mediterranean flickered occasionally into view, framed by Arabic shop signs and crumbling Art Deco trim.

British writer, EM Forster, a conscientious objector, was stationed in Alexandria as a Red Cross volunteer, searching for men missing in action, during World War I. Between hospital duties, he spent much of his time drinking coffee and discussing poetry with the famous Greek Alexandrian poet, Constantine Cavafy. He also set out to explore the city, writing a detailed *History and Guide to Alexandria* which he described in a letter to Forrest Reid in January 1919 as "a superior sort of guide book with a good deal of history to it."[6] He even managed to find time to write a series of features for a couple of local newspapers, borrowing his pen name, Pharos, from the city's vanished lighthouse, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.[7] After its eventual collapse, much of the surviving stone from this magnificent affair went into building the Qait Bay Fort in Alexandria Harbour and nothing more was known until French archaeologist, Jean-Yves Empereur, discovered further remains underwater in 1994. There they've stayed, although there have been rumours of excavations.

> When first built in around 280 BC by Ptolemy I Soter, the Pharos was the world's tallest building, at some 110m (350ft) high, while its mirror of polished bronze became the prototype for all lighthouses since. Sailors claimed to be able to see its beam up to 100 miles away. With working space for up to 300 scientists and mathematicians it was also effectively one of the first great universities. It was damaged three times by earthquakes, before it eventually tumbled into the sea in 1323AD.

Forster was fascinated by Alexandria yet had trouble pinning down the elusive charm of a city that was ever-shifting and all too often downright ugly. In 1922, he wrote, "Alexandria is still alive and alters even while one tries to sum her up… Politically she is now more closely connected with the rest of Egypt than ever in the past, but the old foreign elements remain… Her future like that of other great commercial cities is dubious."[8] He thought little of the way the tram created urban sprawl along the coast, at one point calling it "execrable" but he was a true romantic, ever searching for connections of the body, mind and soul.

One day, while riding on the blue Ramleh tram – a much prettier affair in those days, with wooden shutters and gingerbread scrolling around the roof – a beautiful young Egyptian conductor, Mohamed el Adl, caught his eye. He pursued the young man determinedly, riding the rails at all hours of the day and night to continue the conversation and at one point even risking him his job. Finally Mohamed agreed to meet him "Any time any place any hour" and their friendship blossomed into a true love affair. It proved to be one of the defining moments in Forster's life. Forster returned to England and El Adl died tragically young, in 1922, but he was never forgotten. A couple of years later, inspired by a rereading of their letters, Forster began writing *A Passage to India* as a memorial to Mohamed, basing the extraordinary character of Dr Aziz on his lost Egyptian love.[9]

During the Second World War, the British literary torch was passed to Lawrence Durrell, who escaped to Alexandria when Corfu fell to the Germans, serving out the war as the press attaché to the British embassies in Cairo and Alexandria. The city became the backdrop for his ambitious multi-layered masterwork, *The Alexandria Quartet*. However, Alexandria hadn't been his first choice, it was simply a matter of convenience; his earliest notes for the interlinked stories set them in London's West End. The books brood with the atmosphere of the city but contain relatively little physical description of its streets. Durrell was obsessed by people and, like Forster, was fascinated by the cosmopolitan complexity of this ancient town. Both authors proved themselves willing, like so many other travelling writers before and since, to whitewash over cracked walls and peeling paint, and look back longingly to a romanticised past. At the end of *Justine*, the narrator, Darley, says:

> Somewhere, out there… lies Alexandria, maintaining its tenuous grasp on one's affections through memories… of friends, of incidents long past. The slow unreality of time begins to grip them, blurring the outlines–so sometimes I wonder whether these pages record the actions of real human beings…[10]

In 1977, Durrell returned to Alexandria for the last time. In the intervening years, Nasser had nationalised Egypt, the colonial powers were gone and Egypt's Arabic roots were once more coming to the fore. It was a visit which shook his memories, showed him cracks he could not ignore and made him bitterly unhappy. In

his introduction to the new edition of Forster's *History and Guide to Alexandria,* Durrell complained, "All foreign posters and advertisements have vanished, everything is in Arabic; … Now a leaden uniformity rules."[11] He went on to describe the city as "depressing beyond endurance". Was he right?

As I now stood on this northern edge of Africa, in a place that I could not recognise as African, I felt the incredible weight of history and heard the words of generations of travellers and commentators echo back to me. The Arab skin on a European skeleton intrigued. Who now owned the soul of Alexander's city? Of course Alexandria's literary tradition had continued, but it was no longer mine. The baton had passed from Durrell, shortlisted but passed over for the Nobel prize on account of the homoerotic content of the *Quartet*, to Egypt's homegrown Nobel Laureate, Maguib Mahfouz, who consciously studied Durrell when he wrote about Alexandria in *Miramar,* alongside his more famous *Cairo Trilogy*. Mahfouz is one of a tiny handful of Egyptian writers who have been translated into English. I was now shut out of the literary conversation in the city and the country, views entrenched by lack of language. I could hear but I could not understand. I could read but I could not comprehend. I could look back to the 1920s or the 1950s and find a portrait of Alexandria, however one-sided. To talk of the present and the future, I needed a guide and a translator to help me continue the conversation between two literary worlds. As Forster himself had said, way back in 1910, if I could "only connect!"[12] I had no literary salon or Alexandrian sages to help me, but I did have a pair of Mohameds for the day and I'd just shared a whole conversation using nothing more than smiles and a happy child.

I tried to peer forward. On this peaceful day in 2010, Alexandria seemed as if she could look forward not perhaps to palaces and potentates but to a plentiful future of mass-market timeshare and tourists.

I was wrong. By the following year, her streets were ablaze and the tourists had vanished. In the years that were to follow, the jolly Alexandrian trams were to be bombed and burned. Alexandria's immediate future, at least, did indeed seem dubious. We all knew that there were problems but none of us foresaw the Arab Spring that afternoon.

"Come in, come in, it is a pleasure to meet you. Many, many people come to visit us to talk about our trams. They are very famous. Alexandria's tram is the second oldest in the world, you know? I think the first one was Germany or England, then us." Engineer Sherin bustled us gravely into his bright white office. He was a solid middle-aged businessman with iron-grey hair, a handsome moustache and a charcoal grey business suit. He came with a matching female sidekick, Engineer Maha Hamdy, in a matching grey suit (with floor-length skirt) and snazzy blue and yellow company headscarf. She too was squareish and serious and was the Chief Manager of Trams, in charge of keeping the system working. They had obviously lost none of their enthusiasm for the Alexandria Passenger Transportation Authority (APTA) and bristled with pride as we pored over the various awards, flags and model trams in the wooden display cabinets that lined the room. We talked trams for a good hour over several small glasses of tea.

I learned how the first horse-drawn trams were licensed in 1860 and began operating in the city on 8th January, 1863, the same year that the first steam-hauled service began on the London underground. I learned about how Alexandria's Belgian-built trams were converted first to steam before being electrified between 1902 and 1904. I heard all about how the tramworkers played a crucial role in Egypt's nationalists' and workers' movements from the moment they first went on strike in November 1900 for better working conditions and greater equality with foreign workers to the moment that black-draped trams transported bodies through the streets of Alexandria during the 1952 revolution that brought Egypt its independence and its republic.

The system is intimately bound up with the social fabric of the city. Nearly 2,000 people were working here by the time we visited and, for many, a job on the trams was a job for life and a family affair. Engineer Hamdy described how she had been with the trams for 35 years, how her husband also worked there, as had her father-in-law.

"The systems here must have special ways to transfer the information from one generation to the other, so everyone here has to train directly," explained Engineer Sherin. "You can't find the information, even in the Faculty of Engineering. No one can come in from the outside. Everyone must learn from someone else. For a few years now what we do often is take children when they are fourteen or fifteen and begin to complete their learning and train them in our workshops. They learn just like

any school and beside it they get technical training. Most of them are the children of our workers.

"We started with about 100 children but now there are less than this. I don't know why – being a worker is not so popular. People prefer to sit in a chair in an office, even if they get less money." We agreed that it was a sad truth, the world over, that fewer people were willing to get their hands dirty and how people with education inevitably went off in search of white-collar jobs.

I was curious about how Engineer Hamdy had achieved her status in such a male industry in a male-dominated country and asked her. Engineer Sherin leapt in again.

"I will answer this instead of her. As you said, she is a woman, but she is working as a strong man, maybe stronger than me. Maha Hamdy is a very good worker, a very good engineer. She has talent, she is very hard with the workers, and they obey her with no questions. All of them are afraid of her. So you are saying she is a woman. She appears only like a woman. And, you know, she's proud of this."

I got absolutely no sense from Engineer Hamdy's deadpan face what she thought of this rather backhanded compliment.

"No, I think it's easy for any woman to work if she plan her time and she read lots about her job and use the time in a good way," she added, in her quiet, measured fashion. She made it sound easy. And discussion moved on to the inner workings of the modern tram system.

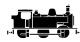
I learned way more than I needed to about the tram's 38 stops and 32 km (20 miles) of line, how the two lines, though now electrified, work on different systems. Apparently, the Danish tramcars were also only part of the story – others came from Algeria, Germany and Japan as well as being home-grown in Alexandria. Some historic trams, around 50 years old, are still in use. None of the original cars exist but a rebuilt version of a 1931 car was still trundling round the streets as a tourist attraction.

"It is a very lovely way to transfer in Alexandria because the tram are covering in Alexandria from most east to the west. It takes almost 73% of the passengers now, about 170 million passengers every year." Engineer Sherin was beginning to talk, with a fanatic's gleam, of plans for improvements to the tracks, of extensions to the lines, of the projected new Alexandria metro system and of a day touring the tram sheds. He also talked enthusiastically of potential new joint projects

with a Leipzig-based company to build complete new tram systems for Damascus and Khartoum, projects that seem, with hindsight, unbelievably sad. I decided, politely, to make my escape, Mark following rather dejectedly behind me. He would have loved nothing better than a day getting greasy amongst the engines. However, I knew there would be other opportunities later in the trip.

As we left, Engineer Sherin grasped my hand in both of his and looked earnestly into my eyes.

"You do know that it was all because of your Napoleon, don't you?" I could quite believe Napoleon was responsible – he was to blame for almost everything, after all but he was definitely Not *my* Napoleon!



An hour or so later, I was sitting alone on a terrace of the Qait Bay Fort, built in 1477 from the ruins of the great lighthouse by the Mamluk Sultan Qāʾit Bāy, looking out over the broad sweep of the bay, where the fishing boats were just beginning to make themselves ready to go out for the night. The sun was finally breaking through the veil of cloud, just in time for sunset, and I could see the Mohameds sitting and smoking on the sea wall below, enjoying the late afternoon glow across the water. Mark was off scaling the battlements, a turquoise beanpole within a sea of blue and white uniformed school children who thought he was the best entertainment they'd had all day. Alarmed at first at being mobbed, he was now enjoying himself thoroughly and I could hear his laughter booming through the stone corridors above. It was all so still and peaceful. I felt as if I were living in a watercolour painting.

It must have been very different on 1st July 1798 when the French fleet appeared in the bay – thirteen ships of the line, fourteen frigates and 400 transports, carrying 10,000 sailors and 40,000 soldiers.[13] It was invasion on a grand scale, a magnificent but terrifying sight for the Alexandrians. Yet why did Napoleon decide to invade Egypt and what on earth did that have to do with trains?

Back in 1798, in Britain, George III was on the British throne and William Pitt the Younger was in charge of the country. The first phase of the Industrial Revolution had bedded in, British mills were clattering away in northern valleys,

and, at Coalbrookdale and Loughborough, experiments were progressing on turning old wooden wagonways into iron rails and introducing the flanged wheel – rail transport was about to be born.

Britain was still reeling from the loss of the American War of Independence and with it, half her empire. More importantly, she had lost her New World revenues. India and the Eastern Empire had suddenly become vastly more important economically both as a way of feeding the hungry cotton mills and as a market for finished goods. Pitt was forced to introduce income tax for the first time in December 1799 in order to pay for the Napoleonic Wars.

It was a Colonel James Capper who had first had the bright idea of using the Red Sea route, long travelled by Muslims, for transshipping goods between Suez and Alexandria. Capper visited Cairo in 1764 and 1775, trying to get permission, and making such a nuisance of himself that by 1779, the Ottoman authorities banned British ships from Suez for five years! By 1794, they were back, however, with a firman (official decree) signed by the Ottoman Sultan allowing safe passage of British ships, goods, mail and passengers. The Red Sea route was open for business; no longer did ships have to slog right round the southern toe of Africa en route to and from India. With two fleets, one in the Indian Ocean and one in the Mediterranean and Atlantic, and a quick land transit between, months could be cut from the journey.

Meanwhile, the Napoleonic Wars were in full swing. Napoleon had conquered pretty much the whole of mainland Europe in 1797, leaving only British naval supremacy to thwart his ambition. The Little Corporal, desperate for any advantage, began to look east, not only for ways of increasing his own empire, but at ways of cutting Britain off from theirs. Poring over maps, Napoleon realised that Egypt was gatekeeper to the trade route. His keen strategic mind went one stage further and saw the possibilities of opening up the ancient canals through the narrow Suez isthmus, unlocking the gates to the Mediterranean, with France holding the keys. What's more, once Egypt was secured, he planned to send forces on to India to assist the Indian rebel, Tipu Sultan, who was creating mayhem for the British in the southern states. If successful, he would gain an empire, control of the trade routes and defeat his greatest enemy in one fell swoop.

In Istanbul, Sultan Selim III was on the Ottoman throne, nominally in charge of a vast empire, stretching from Greece through the Balkans down to Egypt and across Central Asia. For centuries the sultans had faced challenges at home and abroad from their power-hungry slave armies. Brought into service as children,

captured from foreign colonies and trained as an imperial guard and civil service, the Janissaries at the Ottoman court and the Mamluks in Egypt had become fiercely powerful dynasties who terrorised the people and challenged the very power of the throne, simply disposing of those who got in their way. In Egypt, they effectively ruled an autonomous nation and while they were extremely interested in western technology, had absolutely no desire for democratic reform. A sensitive soul, a poet and composer, Selim was keen to drag his lands into the age of enlightenment, creating a plan for comprehensive state education across the empire. Unfortunately, he also attempted a comprehensive reorganization of the military along western lines, a move which was definitely not to the liking of the Janissaries, and one which was ultimately to lose him his throne and his life.

So everything was in place. The first experiments in the use of rails for transport were poised to explode into the nineteenth-century railway revolution. The door to opportunity was open and the great Imperial armies were quivering on the starting blocks, ready for what became known as the Scramble for Africa. And when Napoleon sailed into Alexandria, he fired the starting pistol, changing Africa forever.

The French walked into Egypt with relative ease. Napoleon himself arrived on the *Orient*, adopting Islamic dress and the role of a liberator from Ottoman and Mamluk oppression. He spent the voyage polishing a grandiloquent speech that was aimed at enticing the people to rise and join his cause. The rational man of enlightenment even proved himself willing to embrace Islam:

> People of Egypt, they have told you that I come to destroy your religion, but do not believe it; [tell them] in reply [that] I come to restore your rights, punish the usurpers and that I respect God, his prophet and the Quran more than the Mamluks. Tell them that all men are equal before God; wisdom, talents, virtues are the only things to make one man different from another... Is there a more beautiful land? It belongs to the Mamluks. If Egypt is their farm, then they should show the lease that God gave them for it... [14]

The Egyptians didn't seem too impressed, but nevertheless, Napoleon and his land forces pressed on, heading towards Cairo in a series of fierce but successful battles against the Mamluk armies. However, his easy victories proved short-lived.

A month later, the British fleet caught up with the French fleet at Aboukir, 32 km (20 miles) north east of Alexandria and the ensuing Battle of the Nile became one

of Nelson's most famous victories. Admiral Nelson, who seems to have been either extraordinarily unlucky or extraordinarily careless, was already missing an eye and an arm; this time he was shot in the head by a French sniper. Thankfully, he survived to be created Lord Nelson of the Nile, before being shot again and finally dying famously at Trafalgar.

Napoleon, with his fleet destroyed, was left with no way to get home, so he began to try and behave like a ruler. It was a disaster. The French troops behaved appallingly, leading to revolution in Cairo. His actions led the British and Ottomans to find common cause, their armies working together against the French in Egypt and Syria, offering the British their first real powerbase in Ottoman territory and giving Egypt back to the Ottomans. A year later, on 18 August 1799, Napoleon slunk ignominiously out of Alexandria and back to France via Syria, without telling his troops that he was leaving. The dispirited French army limped on for another two years before a surrender and withdrawal was finally arranged with the British. By that stage, disease had also taken its toll and only 20,000 men were left alive. Napoleon, never one to admit defeat, was still searching for ways to put a positive spin on what had been a political, military and humanitarian disaster.

Nelson survived the Battle of Aboukir Bay. Someone not quite so lucky was Giocante de Casabianca, son of the captain of Napoleon's flagship, *L'Orient*, who refused to leave his post without permission and went down with his burning ship. His heroism was later immortalised in rhyme by Felicia Dorothea Hemans' much parodied 1826 poem, *Casabianca*, which starts:
'The boy stood on the burning deck
Whence all but he had fled;
The flame that lit the battle's wreck
Shone round him o'er the dead.'[15]

He found the answer in the *corps de savants* he had taken with him during the invasion. This group of 151 academics, artists, historians, scientists and engineers used their year in Egypt to blistering effect. Napoleon simply decided to rebrand the whole exercise as a giant scientific expedition. Led by geographer, Gaspard Monge, and chemist, Claude-Louis Bertholet, on arrival in Egypt, the corps set up the *Institut d'Égypte* and set about studying the country in detail, recording and drawing many of the country's antiquities for the first time. On their return to Paris, the corps worked steadily for decades to produce the 22-volume *Déscription de l'Égypte*, a masterpiece which was published between 1809 and 1828. It created a frenzy of Egyptomania across Europe, resulting in everything from fashionable

Amongst the discoveries of the French corps de savants was a stone in Rosetta, in the Nile Delta, near Alexandria. The Rosetta Stone, with the same inscription in Greek, demotic Egyptian and hieroglyphs, became the key to decoding hieroglyphs. As such it is one of the most important archaeological discoveries ever made. When the French left, the British forced them to hand it over and it is now displayed in the British Museum. The Egyptians would like to have it back.[16]

hairstyles to the archaeological boom which led to the great discoveries such as the Valley of the Kings.[17] In addition they produced the first serious engineering projections for the Suez Canal and perhaps, most importantly of all, while in Egypt, held weekly public seminars which were attended by many of the Egyptian intelligentsia, opening them up to western science for the first time. The money-making possibilities of steam and iron seemed tempting to the trade-loving Mamluks and Ottomans. They left behind a legacy of industrial promise.

As the French retreated, the Ottomans sent Albanian-born general, Mohamed Ali, to Egypt to restore order. By 1805, he had been made Khedive (Viceroy), but the Mamluks were still causing chaos. His solution was like something from a medieval horror story. On 1st March, 1811, he invited 500 of them to a grand feast and procession at the Cairo citadel. The entrance was via a narrow passage and the guests had to wind their way through single file. Once safely imprisoned, the gates at either end were slammed shut and the greatest of the Mamluk families died in a rain of murderous fire. Up to 3,000 others were hunted down and killed.

Massacre over, Mohamed Ali and his family settled down to become the new hereditary rulers of Egypt (still nominally under Ottoman rule), an ostensibly progressive, western-looking dynasty eager to embrace new technology.

Chapter Two – Alexandria to Cairo

"Egypt is henceforth part of Europe, not of Africa."
The Khedive, Ismail, Speech at the Opening of the Suez Canal, 1869[18]

"Actually I have been working for ten years in Cairo but I am displaced just last month from Cairo to Alex. I am Alexandrian native but I am here only a month from Cairo," said the Egyptian National Railway Manager for Short Distance, Engineer Abdel Aziz Abdelrazek.

"By your own choice?" I asked.

"Now we haven't choice, we are like soldiers, go here, go there according to the orders, the needs of the job itself. The Headquarters said I would be useful here, so I am here." He had spent his entire life working on the railways and he was, without question, a company man, through and through.

"But presumably happy to be home?"

"Of course, of course."

It was the next day and Mark and I were seated in another bright white office, with yet more small glasses of strong, black tea, this time in Alexandria Misr Station. Misr simply means "the land" in Arabic and is the traditional Egyptian name for Egypt, a name which also overflows with the sentiment of home and the motherland. This is Egypt Station, the point from which all transport flows, at which all journeys begin and end, and there could be no more fitting place in which to talk of the beginning of my journey and Engineer Abdelrazek's happy homecoming. This is where the story of Africa's railways began. Actually, technically, this new baroque-style station, designed by Greek and Italian architects, was just down the road from Alexandria's original railway terminus, built in 1927 to reflect Alexandria's growing fame as an international resort.[19] The noise of trains and traffic through the open windows was nearly deafening while, high above our heads, a fan flapped lazily like an exhausted wasp. The room was enormous, built both for colonial grandeur and, more practically, to allow plenty of space for the hot air to rise during the sweltering Egyptian summers. We talked about change.

"I have seen many changes, especially in the last five years," said Engineer Abdelrazek. "The railways had become like an old man so we started to study other structures. And then they put a plan for the other structures. Before, you know, we never think about whether we make a profit or not; now we think about the finances. Now we think about how much we spend, how much we make.

"In Egypt, it is very important to do a passenger service, it is a social service, especially south to Aswan where there are not enough buses, but it is not possible to increase the price of tickets." Capitalism was belatedly catching up with one of the last remaining state monopolies and he seemed both bemused and excited by the concept of profit and loss. He also began to talk of new beginnings.

"We have a study, made by Spanish and Italian railways, that we run a train from Alexandria to Aswan in the desert. At the moment, as you know, all our trains are in the green land. This train will be high-speed, about 300 km per hour. We think about rolling stock and think to make it electric traction, but still this is not clear. Just now, it is a dream.

"We have to make railways in the Sinai. I have the impression that in a very few years we will have railways from Port Said, from Ismailia through. And we have to make railways in the west. There are water wells which can be made there in the Western Desert to make new cities, a new society. We live in only four or six percent of our land."

"So a railway line would open up a whole new region of the country?" I asked.

"It's the same as what happens in the States," he replied. "They started in the East and with the railways, civilisation comes after. Very good, I think. So whenever we have these new lines, we have civilisation. This is our generation's dream. The people who come after us will do this. There is no other way."

I was fascinated by this philosophical engineer, with his dream of the railway that would build civilisations from wastelands and green the desert. I was thrown back 150 years to the court of Mohammed Ali Pasha and began to realise that I had, quite fortuitously, timed my journey for an extraordinary moment in history, standing at the waist of the hourglass, watching as colonial imperialism crossed over into neo-imperialism. It was a feeling that continued to grow as I headed south. At that point in Egypt, no one had yet mentioned the role of the Chinese in Africa which was to become such a familiar refrain, nor had I become quite so familiar as I was to become

with the complex and often unholy trinity of corporate lobbies, government agendas and non-governmental organisations that govern much of Africa. Yet this was already the second mention of new railway projects in as many days – something was stirring on the continent which promised to be immensely exciting and, for me, quite terrifying. I had begun my research on the premise that I was dealing with the past and the present and even that could be a lifetime's work. Now I had to deal with the future too. My workload had suddenly doubled and my tangle of tenses, already complicated, was threatening to become impenetrable. A philosophical, historical and grammatical challenge!

As things turned out, in spite of all Egypt's turmoil, Engineer Abdelrazek didn't have to wait too long. On the 14th March 2015, an article in the *Cairo Post* reported that an initial agreement had been reached between the Egyptian Transport Minister and the China Harbor Engineering Company to build the 900 km line from Cairo to Aswan. It would cost US$10 billion. Egypt would provide twenty percent of the labour, local materials and executive oversight; the rest would be Chinese. The journey would cut travel time from twelve hours to three or four. Yet, in the end, this was not to be the civilisation-building line of Engineer Abdelrazek's dream, as it would run, not across the Western Desert, but through the green land down the Nile, via Cairo and Asyut, simply a faster replacement for the existing service.[20]

I was looking at this as a new wave of engineering, part of a two-stage process that began in the nineteenth century, stagnated for a hundred years and was now beginning again. Of course, I was completely wrong. The reality of Africa's railways is far more complicated than that. Their history is organic and tidal, with periods of construction followed by decay and reconstruction, the ebb and flow of efficiency and industry, of politics and power, of war and peace.

Back in the early nineteenth century, Mohammed Ali Pasha didn't actually get around to building any railways, although he did sow the seeds for their construction. Mad keen on western technology, he tasked Scottish-born Thomas Galloway Galloway and French engineer, de Cerisy, with building a foundry at Bulaq and looked into the idea of creating a naval dockyard at Alexandria. The idea was to supply all Egypt's uniforms and munitions locally but the country's lack of raw

materials and skills proved massive stumbling blocks and the whole idea faltered and died. In 1834, he even got as far as sending Galloway to England to get supplies to build the railway from Cairo to Suez before changing his mind, in part, it is thought, because he realised at the last minute how heavily indebted he would become to British money and political influence, if the 130 mile (210 km) line went ahead. Most of the ironmongery sat rusting on the Gabbari docks for fifteen years until it was eventually used by Stephenson on the Cairo to Alexandria line in 1851, although two short industrial lines were built, to ferry rocks from a quarry near the Cairo suburb of Maadi to the Nile waterfront, and between the El-Dekhla quarries and Alexandria harbour. While technically Africa’s first rail lines, both were horse-drawn.

Undeterred, and still fascinated by Western science and technology, Mohammed Ali Pasha sent academics to Europe to learn languages, bring home training manuals and translate them into Arabic for his administrators and army. He set up the first Arab printing press in 1822 and centralised the economy, forcing the people to buy and sell their cotton and grain through government outlets. He built irrigation canals and introduced the long-grain Jumel cotton that was in high demand to feed the British cotton mills, along with cash crops of sugar, wheat, maize and indigo.

Yet the biggest prize was always going to be trade. Napoleon’s efforts to build a canal at Suez had failed because his surveyors got their sums wrong and calculated a 10m difference in height between the two seas; the attempt was abandoned. However, the idea of transshipment remained. Huge amounts of time could be saved and vast amounts of money made for Egypt if people and goods could travel through Egypt instead of spending months going around the Cape of Good Hope, a journey that took anything up to eight months under sail and even took three using steamships. Mohammed Ali Pasha was simply concerned with keeping both control of the route and the resulting money in Egyptian hands, not those of the international superpowers. In 1819, he ordered the construction of the Mahmudiya Canal to allow barge traffic and steamships to trade between Alexandria and Cairo.

If things were tough for industrial workers in the European mills, they became far harder still for workers on these grand projects in what was essentially still a feudal system of autocratic government. Manpower came from a system, known in the nineteenth century as the *corvée* but used since the days of the Pharaohs, of forced, unpaid labour in lieu of tax. Peasant men, women and children, known locally as *fellahin*, were impressed without pay, food or water, given no equipment and simply worked until they dropped. Over 23,000 are said to have died within the first ten months of construction.

Barboori rye harye a
Barboori jeh
Barboori hchamil
Shukur woo sheh.

(Steam train coming
Steam train going
Steam train carrying
Sugar and tea).

Once upon a time, Egyptian children were rocked to sleep by this commercially minded lullaby. This song was collected in the Sinai, written phonetically and translated into English by Veronica Perrin in 1999.[21]

Although handfuls of passengers to India had been crossing Egypt for decades, the Overland Route, as it came to be known, became popular 1829, when a young Lieutenant in the Bombay Marine, Thomas Waghorn, managed to do the journey from London to Bombay in 40 days. By heading down from Rosetta by barge to Cairo (three to four days) then crossing the desert to Suez (three days), enormous amounts of time could be shaved off. What's more, with Egyptomania sweeping Europe, fuelled by the newly published *Déscription de l'Égypte,* there was an opportunity to stop off and see the sights en route.

Waghorn was desperate to control the route, but failed, although he was appointed the Post Office's official agent. He spent his time trying to find ways to capitalise on his early success and shave more and more time off his record run, prompting William Thackeray to write, in 1844:

> Lieutenant Waghorn is bouncing in and out of the courtyard full of business. He only left Bombay yesterday morning, seen in the Red Sea on Tuesday, is engaged to dinner this after in the Regent's Park, and (as it is about two minutes since I saw him in the courtyard) I make no doubt he is by this time at Alexandria, or at Malta, say, perhaps, at both… If any man can be at two places at once (which I don't believe or deny) Waghorn is he.[22]

Meanwhile, his great rival, transport agency, Hill & Co, employed Samuel Shepheard to run their hotels. He created some of Egypt's greatest historic hotels, still open today. Shipping companies such as the Peninsula & Orient (better known to us

today as P&O) began to organise scheduled services, linking up with either end of the Overland Route. In 1830, a British engineer, Captain FR Chesney of the Royal Artillery resurveyed the canal route, soon realising that Napoleon's calculations had been faulty; there was no reason for the building of the canal not to go ahead. In 1841, the head of P&O, Arthur Anderson, visited Mohammed Ali Pasha to try and pressure him into looking again at the Suez Canal project. However, the Khedive was shrewd enough to realize that he would lose any political control he might have over his own destiny once the canal was built, and fiercely resisted the blandishments of both the English and the French. The French, led by former Vice-Consul Ferdinand de Lesseps, continued to push for the Canal Scheme.

The British changed tack and began lobbying harder instead for the construction of railways, aiming to cut the journey time from Alexandria to Cairo down from a hard three days by barge to a comfortable six hours. As far as the Pasha was concerned, this still brought taxable ships and goods into his ports, passengers with spending money into his cities and jobs for his people. In the end, however, both the British and the French had to wait for a change of regime before they finally got the go-ahead to start building.

This came in the 1840s. Like so many effective dictators, Mohammed Ali eventually became too big for his boots and decided to take on his Ottoman overlords. The impatient British and French were only too happy to help cut him down to size and Egypt once again came under the direct rule of the Ottomans. In 1848, elderly and ill, the far-sighted Mohammed Ali Pasha was finally removed from office. His successors, effectively puppet rulers, were all far more pro-Western and far more naïve than he had been.

On 12th July, 1851, Abbas Hilmi I signed the first contract authorising the building of a railway from Alexandria to Cairo. On 30th September, 1854, Said Pasha signed an agreement with de Lesseps to build the Suez Canal. The race was on for control of the Red Sea route and the European superpowers had arrived in Africa.

Back downstairs in the main station, it was, finally, time to head south. We rescued our luggage from the boot of Ginger Mohamed's car. It was mid-afternoon and the station was hollow, surprisingly empty of people, with little puddles of

luggage, topped by wearily patient travellers, scattered across the vast concourse. High above us, the destination board was full of the promise of unknown adventures and there, in pride of place, was Cairo.

Our little procession trundled towards the platform, Mark head and shoulders above the rest, topped off with his travelling headgear of choice, a battered Panama, with a bent brim, courtesy variously of a malignant cricket ball and my having sat on it (entirely accidentally). Behind him, he was trailing a beaten-up old black suitcase. Could anyone be more obviously English? He knew it and played up to it at every opportunity. I was in full traveller mode, sporting the ultimate Tilley traveller's hat, which is squashable, washable, durable (it floats) and has supposedly even survived being eaten by an elephant. More to the point, it's shady, has sides which pop up and a drawstring for holding it on in high wind. I probably looked a mess, but it was Practical. At my heels rumbled Patty. At the start of the trip, I had reluctantly decided that my well-beloved and well-travelled old wheelie bag was no longer secure. It had holes in the bottom and would probably shake itself to pieces halfway through the trip. It was time to splash out on a new one. After exhaustive testing along the shopping aisles of Oxford Street, Covent Garden, Westfield Mall and Baker Street, Patty had entered my life, a rugged Samsonite wheelie bag with two compartments; one for clothes, one for work. She rapidly gained her name due to her unfortunate colour (the greenish-khaki of a particularly liquid cowpat) but she is tough as old boots, bustled along behind me throughout the trip and has continued to do so on many others, noisily indestructible, the growing layers of dirt picked up on various continents only adding gravitas and texture.

Fond farewells to Ginger Mohamed – we would see Banker Mohamed again in Cairo – and everyone piled on board to see us safely into the First Class compartment of our slightly grubby blue and cream train. Tourists were only allowed to travel in First Class for security reasons and we weren't allowed to wander during the journey. Security guards with Uzis poorly concealed under overlarge jackets patrolled the corridors. I settled in to watch the world through the streaky windows. We were off!

From my notebook: On the train from Alexandria to Cairo – it's late afternoon and the light is absolutely beautiful. The water is mirror glass still with reflections of the sky and we've seen several little pontoon ferries with rope to pull yourself

across the water. Cattle egrets are flying white against the crops; water buffalo, cattle, people fishing, sitting cross-legged patiently on the banks of the canal, washing hung out to dry absolutely everywhere. A great flock of egrets takes to the sky. It looks as if they are building a bridge there… donkey carts… oxen being used for ploughing in some of the fields, donkeys laden with alfafa trotting along beside some of the fields, working. Bananas, small groups of banana fields. Every now and again, dotted between the fields, there's a small tomb and dotted between them are the satellite masts. The houses, however ramshackle they look, always seem to have satellites. They are as ubiquitous as the mobile phones. Great long stretch of the river here planted with cabbages. Every square inch that can be cultivated is cultivated.

Now we are passing lots of pigeon lofts, forests of small Timbuktu-style towers perched on the rooftops, strange futuristic turrets full of holes and prickly with perches. Pigeon is a great delicacy in Egypt. I even saw one on a police station.

Most of the houses around here look half-built. Mohamed said this is because outside appearances are not important. The houses are completely finished off inside, but they don't want to bother to spend money on the outside. The outside is left as bare brick and the top is not finished off so that they can add another apartment when they have the money. They will finish one apartment, move into that, then build the next one up. The houses should be finished off as and when people buy them and move in, but there is nothing to compel people to finish off the buildings, so the whole country looks permanently half-built. Behind this ratty façade, everything is wired up to the mains and plumbed in, with washing machines, and it's all lived in. It's an extraordinary sight...

The original line from Alex to Cairo was 131 miles (210 km) long. The Khedive's engineer of choice was Robert Stephenson, son of George Stephenson, the designer of the very first locomotive, the Rocket, and the world's first public railway, from Stockton to Darlington in England.

Stephenson had first been attracted to Egypt by the potential of the Suez Canal, making two trips out to the country in the late 1840s and 1850 to walk the possible routes, always keeping an eye out for rail connections as he went. The French won the race to build the canal but the British got the railway. Just as

Stephenson was about to board ship in Alexandria to return home the second time, he was summoned to see the Pasha and investigations began in earnest about how to build the line. As his young associate, Henry Swinburne, wrote in his diary:

> Left Cairo at ¼ past 9 mounted on pack horses with saddles more uncouth than those of the camels themselves of which we had still 3 for the baggage, tent, etc. Our proper course lies along the Shoubra road to the Barrage where it crosses to the West Side of the Rosetta Branch & down by the skirts of the Libian Hills to Lake Mareotis. The most probable line for a railway between Alexandria and Cairo of which scheme there is some talk among the English party here now.[23]

The journey took around ten and a half weeks, followed by much further debate before everyone was finally in agreement. Stephenson's contract was worth £56,000 although the cost of the build was obviously much higher, estimated at £840,000 or £6,000 per mile. Much to Stephenson's concern, the Egyptians insisted on controlling the costs of labour and supplies themselves, allowing them to use the ancient *corvée* system of unpaid workers. Stephenson's detailed plans stated an initial requirement for fifteen to twenty thousand men, with more needed as work progressed. British engineers would be responsible for training local Egyptian staff to maintain and operate the system. Responsibility for training the drivers was given to Chief Mechanical Engineer Seifry, his time charged at £100 per trainee driver.

The whole project would be divided into Northern and Southern Divisions, each run by a Resident Engineer, both reporting to Stephenson's deputy, Michael Borthwick. Henry Swinburne, offered first choice, took the Cairene section, while H.J. Rouse was appointed to the Alexandrian end of the line. Each RE would have a European staff consisting of a Chief Assistant with two assistants, an Accountant, a storekeeper, and three clerks, plus a native dragoman (interpreter) and as many native assistants as required. Each Division would be further sub-divided into Districts (10 in total) covering about 12 miles of rail, each under the control of a European Inspector and Foreman "to superintend more particularly the work requiring skilled labour such as Bridges, Culverts and permanent way." Stephenson also negotiated an exclusive five-year deal to supply all locomotives

and other equipment, a huge contract for his Newcastle and Darlington works. The first six Stephenson 2–4–0 locomotives were shipped in 1852–3.

Nineteenth century Egypt was very much a slave-owning and trading nation, part of a tradition embedded into its culture for thousands of years. The Mamluks themselves rose as slaves within the Ottoman court. Trading both black slaves, mainly from modern Sudan and Ethiopia and white slaves from the Caucasus (a practice eventually stopped by European pressure in 1856), the biggest slave market was the Wakalat-al-Gallaba in central Cairo. Most of those traded were women. Any Egyptian who could afford it would own slaves, most of whom worked in the home as domestic help. It is said that slaves preferred their lives to those of the fellaheen and thought carefully if offered their freedom. Those who were manumitted and went on to become property owners also became slave owners. Slavery was eventually abolished in 1877 after direct British rule.

Stephenson, for all his expertise, did make mistakes. He was extremely dubious about running tracks along the line of the canals and the final route was only settled after the insistence of the French that it should link the main towns along the way. He also badly underestimated the volume of traffic, assuring the government that there was no need to lay double track; in fact, it became necessary within a few years. Possibly his greatest error, with hindsight, was the recommendation that, instead of building a bridge at Kafr El Zaiyat, a project that would be complex, expensive and take several years to complete, the train should be carried across the Nile on an 80ft pontoon steam ferry. This seemed to be a perfectly workable solution until 1858 when Crown Prince Ahmed's special train fell off the ferry, drowning the prince. Work hastily began on a 500m swing bridge to replace the ferry.

The bridges, including the great steel swing bridge at Benha, at that stage the largest ever constructed, were designed by James Wilson, prefabricated in London by Messrs Grissell and erected in situ under the supervision of another Londoner, Edward Price. The price for Benha Bridge had been agreed at £133,000 but, on arrival and close inspection, it was discovered that the force of the river's flood waters had severely undermined the area to be used for the footings, making it considerably more difficult to secure it. At the end of the project, there was much discussion with the Khedive's office before an additional £12,000 was eventually awarded to the constructors, one of a number of issues to do with overruns and costs that helped fray relations between Stephenson and the Egyptian authorities.

There were also inevitably problems and delays with a construction project equivalent to the mobilisation of a medium-sized army. The Egyptian authorities were in charge of the accommodation, food and equipment for the workforce of

conscripted fellahin. They seem to have been short-changed on them all. Swinburne's diaries give a small glimpse of how difficult life was for the untrained workers. On 10th January, 1853, he was sent 600 men to work on the Dalgamouth Canal Bridge near Kafr El-Zaiyat. His diary for that day states they were "neither provided with fass [a native tool similar to a mattock] nor bucket and bolted after a few days (surely the Divan might provide the poor devils with the tools when they find the labour gratis)." On 4th May, 1853, he noted that "the men who are here have not been paid for the 2 months" while on the 8th May, he wrote of having to reprimand the Nazir (foreman) for "cuffing the men instead of showing them how to work the slopes of the side cutting." A later anonymous report for the British government stated:

> Much of the earthwork in Egypt is effected by the naked hands of the labourer. About the work on which he may be employed he transports materials in small baskets, or in single clods or stones, as the case may be, on his head. The author once saw a man painting ironwork with his hands, the Government compelling him to paint without finding him brushes.[24]

Life, of course, was considerably easier for the British engineers, who were based in Cairo and Alexandria and equipped with Indian Army officers' tents while working in the field. Nevertheless, it was a rugged existence, working in the extreme conditions of the Egyptian heat, with few home comforts, and it took its toll. Many of them suffered regular bouts of illness, fever and dysentery and on 30th May, 1855, Swinburne wrote of an outbreak of the dreaded cholera. The last entry in his diary came three days later, reporting two men dead and a further twenty cases. On 6th June, in a separate notebook, he recorded "Unaccountably attacked with Diarrhoea before I had been 14 hours in Alexandria." He was dead within days.

Disease and delay notwithstanding, the engineering army triumphed and the railway came into full service by the end of 1857, bringing the journey time from Alexandria to Cairo down to the promised and unimaginably luxurious six hours. Initially planned to run only twice a week, services soon became more frequent, hand signals were replaced by mechanised systems and by 1859, there was so much traffic, the line was being doubled. They'd even had time, at royal

request, to build a separate 12-mile (19 km) spur line to connect up the Khedive's palace. Stephenson returned to England.

There is no official record of his reaction to the Khedive's decision, in 1856, to use a French team and route to continue on from Cairo to Suez. However, it is notable that once the terms of the initial contract for the supply of locomotives and rolling stock were complete, no further trains were ever supplied by the company to Egypt. Moreover, in 1857, a very detailed briefing paper *Railways in Egypt; Communications with India* went into circulation. Officially and deliberately unattributed, the author is thought to be Frederick Ayrton, but he obviously had highly detailed specialist access from someone with a very specific point of view, stinging opinions of the Egyptian system of government – and a real beef about the Suez railway. In the conclusion, designed as advice for the Pasha, he begs:

> Every piastre spent upon the further prosecution of the present line is so much money literally thrown away. The obstinate continuation of its prosecution will subject thousands of unfortunate fellows to unnecessary misery and not a few to a desert grave… Waste of money and human life will not be all; the present line, if ever completed will put back for years the efficient organization of the overland transit and of other traffic…[25]

As it turned out, the pamphleteer was quite correct: the Suez line that piqued him so badly was a short-lived and sickly affair that only survived a few years, abandoned shortly after the opening of the canal in favour of Stephenson's preferred route. However Stephenson never got the satisfaction of being proved right as he died, at the age of only 56, on the 12th October, 1859, and was buried in Westminster Abbey. The British did, however, continue to build railways for the Egyptians, with HJ Rouse stepping up to take over as Chief Engineer.

Cairo. The darkness was gathering as we descended from our rather shabby First Class compartment. Waving away the gathering porters, we headed out straight outside onto Ramses Square, Patty rumbling protestingly behind me. The station is officially known at Ramses Station after a huge statue of Ramses II that was placed

here in 1955. However, few have ever used the name and in 2006 the statue was moved again, to Giza, as the heavy pollution was playing havoc with its ancient stone. Now tarmac, buses coughing noxious diesel fumes and patient lines of yellow taxis have replaced the donkeys and carriages. I can't honestly say it's an improvement.

There'd be time enough to explore next day. We piled into the nearest taxi. For the moment, we would have to make do with a century-old description and a rather round-about taxi ride to our hotel. Journalist GW Steevens described his arrival in 1898 in graphic detail:

> Grand Cairo! And Grand Cairo, even after such towns as Port Said and Suez, is a bitter disappointment…
>
> Out of your rather shabby firstclass carriage, you alight in the gathering darkness at a rather shabby station of the Continental type. There is the usual fight for your body between hotels, the usual fight for your baggage among porters. Then you are out into a broad square, crowded with carriages, donkeys, and people, and carpeted with two inches of mud. The other side of the square seems to be a dishevelled railway siding; its centre a stopping place for electric trolleycars. Then, before you know where you are, you have driven through a couple of narrow streets and you are at Shepheard's Hotel.
>
> Inside Shepheard's Hotel you will find just the Bel Alp in winter quarters. All the people who live in their boxes and grand hotels, who know all lands but no languages, who have been everywhere and done nothing, looked at everything and seen nothing, read everything and know nothing – who spoil the globe by trotting on it.[26]

Surprisingly little had changed although we would not be heading for the Belle Epoque splendour of Shepheards (no longer the old building but what had once been its shabbier, but infinitely more entertaining little brother). We had no sooner set off than the driver started his patter.

"Welcome to Cairo. This is your first visit, I think? You will be wanting to see the pyramids and the National Museum. Oh, there is so much to see here. You will find it most interesting. You will need a driver. Someone who speaks good English and knows how to drive in Cairo traffic. Everyone knows me, just ask for me. My name is Shazly." He droned on and on, scarcely pausing for breath, never stopping

long enough for me to assure him that I had in fact been to the city several times before. “There is much traffic, as you can see and it is not easy…”

He glanced in the rear view mirror occasionally to check that we were still listening, giving me brief glimpses of a lined face with wire-rimmed glasses, wispy grey hair and tobacco-stained teeth. As we hit the dual carriageway and he started threading his way through the traffic with a showman’s panache, I became increasingly certain that we were doing a grand and entirely unnecessary tour of the city, the first-timer’s joyride instead of the easy few blocks it should have been to our hotel. I didn’t mind too much – I could point out some of the highlights quietly to Mark and call a halt if the meter ran totally out of control. A few hundred yards on and we timed the next traffic jam perfectly for a birds’ eye view across the swirling walls and towers of the gigantic Cairo Citadel, the formidable stone heart of the ancient city, to the minarets of the Al Azhar Mosque. On the far side of the road lay the flickering firelights of Cairo’s City of the Dead, where tens of thousands of slum dwellers live amongst more than a million tombs in the 700-year-old el-Arafa necropolis.

If Alexandria’s soul was Greek, Cairo’s is unequivocally Arab and Islamic. There may have been some sort of settlement here since the days when the pharaohs chose the Giza plateau as their eternal resting place. There may have been Coptic Christian communities here since the first century AD; the Arabs may have conquered Egypt in 641AD and built their first capital, Fustat, just west of modern Cairo, the following year; but modern Cairo really began its life with the arrival of Fatimid General Jawhar at the head of a 100,000-strong army in 969. Four years later, he had built the foundations of a glorious new royal city, al-Qahira, the Victorious, and prepared to welcome his master, the Fatimid imam-caliph, al-Muizz. This was to be the new base for a Shia conquest of the known world. At its heart were three great institutions, the formidably defensive Citadel, the imposing al-Azhar Mosque and Islamic University, and a library of more than 100,000 books, open to all, with over 18,000 manuscripts on ancient civilisations. While the intended global domination never materialised and Egypt eventually ended up as part of the Ottoman empire, the influence of the university cannot be denied.

Founded in 970 AD, Al Azhar is one of the world’s oldest universities and one of the world’s foremost centres for Arabic literature and Islamic studies. For over a thousand years, generations of students have flocked to Cairo to study here; the ideas

of its teachers have helped to shape the Islamic world. The structure of the school and the lessons remained remarkably unchanged over the centuries, only succumbing eventually to the seismic intellectual upheavals of European colonial intervention and revolution. Secular subjects were finally added only in 1961, when its doors were also opened to women. In 1898, British traveller, Constance Fenimore Woolson, described in detail her visit to the university:

> The outfit of a well-provided student at El Azhar consists of a rug, a low desk like a small portfolio-easel, a Koran, a slate, an inkstand, and an earthen dish… All the pupils bow as they study, with a motion like that of the bowing porcelain mandarins. The custom is attributed to the necessity for bending the head whenever the name of Allah is encountered; as the first text-book is always the Koran, children have found it easier to bow at regular intervals with an even motion than to watch for numerous repetitions of the name. The habit thus formed in childhood remains…[27]

Shazly (who we came to remember fondly as Speedway) was still talking as we left the Citadel behind and headed down towards the Nile. The river looked magnificent with the lights of the party boats reflected in its shining black waters. We'd end up unexpectedly on one of them the next evening, courtesy of Banker Mohamed, watching a traditional tabour dancer swirling his multi-coloured neon-lit skirts at breathtaking speeds, a very spectacular, secular modern interpretation of the wild dancing of the Whirling Dervishes, so different from the stately rotating of Rumi's Turkish devotees. Ahead, we had a just a glimpse of Imbaba Bridge which we had crossed earlier on our way in on the train. Built in 1924 by the Belgian firm, Baume-Marpent, to replace the 1891 rail bridge, this solidly utilitarian steel-framed crossing is, astoundingly, still the only railway bridge in the whole city, the one connection between the delta and southern Egypt.

Speedway finally turned off and plunged into the chaos that is the city centre, heading through a dusty square surrounded by hotels and office buildings.

"This is Tahrir Square. This is home to the Egyptian Museum. Tutankhamun," he announced. I recognised it now. I had stayed here on my first trip many years before, but then it had been a building site, as they excavated a home for Cairo's new metro. Of course, by the following year, Tahrir Square was to become a household name for very different reasons, images of protests and tear gas attacks beamed across

the world as Mubarak's government was brought to its knees and Egypt changed forever.

Finally, through the square, several more twists and turns, past advertising hoardings and fast-food shops that smelled of roasting lamb and toasting flatbreads – oh, I was so ready for dinner – and we reached the wooden double doors of the Windsor Hotel. This creaky historic townhouse, all wood panelling, old photos and potted palms, with a squeaky wooden lift, oozed atmosphere. It would be home for the next three nights. Speedway had delivered us safely and timed his imaginative use of the taxi meter to arrive just before we reached the point of bankruptcy: it was like watching an artist at work.

Late that night, sitting on my creaky single bed, maps, guide and history books spread across the white candlewick coverlet as I pored over my homework, I was to discover quite what a roundabout route we had taken. We were only a few blocks from Cairo Station, so close we could probably have walked.

Observations on the Opening of the Suez Canal

By Mr Thomas Cook

Although I had long advertised my intension of conducting a tourist party to the opening of the Suez Canal, it was not till a few days prior to my actual departure from London that I could very satisfactorily announce any travelling arrangements… After much anxiety as to route and travelling arrangements, I selected the Levant Line of the Austrian Lloyds Company and brought my confiding friends and patrons by way of Italy, Venice, and Trieste, and from the latter port we sailed in the "America" with a full complement of about seventy first-class passengers, for a special trip to Suez and back, to extend over twenty days… On the fifth day out, we got sight of Egypt, and in the evening of that day, cast anchor within sight of the lights of Port Said, leaving behind us the lights of the British Mediterranean fleet of seven men-of-war. Early the following morning we sailed into the harbor of Port Said and took our position amongst about 70 steamers, men-of-war, and other ships of various nations, to which afterwards 20 were added, or thereabouts. The "America" had scarcely dropped her anchor ere it was announced that the Emperor of Austria was following us, a fact soon verified by hundreds of guns both in and out of the harbour…

The serious business of the inauguration of the Canal commenced [the next day], in the three kiosques erected for the occasion. It was my good fortune to get a position in the centre of the triangle of the kiosques, where I could easily observe every motion of the royal, noble and dignified assembly that occupied the central erection; whilst on my right was the Mahomedan stand, and on my left that of the Catholic Church, to both of which inaugural duties were assigned. The Mahomedan official read a paper, which no one could hear; but the Latins were gorgeously and powerfully represented by an array of richly attired priests… The only cheer was evoked by the name of Monsieur Lesseps, who bore his honours with marvelous modesty and gentleness.

At night an immense assemblade responded to an invitation of the Viceroy to a soirée and ball in his Royal Highness's yacht… Port Said was a-blaze with gas, oil, and candles at night; and many of the ships, to their mast heads, were covered with fantastically arranged lights and coloured fires.

On Wednesday morning, the 17th Nov., the great test of the Canal was to be commenced, and at 8.30a.m., the "Aigle" steamed out of the harbour, other ships following at intervals of ten to fifteen minutes, until forty vessels were afloat…

Published in *The Tourist Help-Book for Egypt-Palestine &c., &c.*
By Rev. Jabez Burns, DD, LLD
With tourist arrangements by Thomas Cook
Published by Cook's Tourist Office (2nd ed., 1872)

The Suez Canal was officially opened 17th November 1869. It was owned by the *Compagnie universelle du canal maritime de Suez* (Suez Canal Company), an international consortium with a mandate to operate it for 99 years. The Egyptian Government was a significant shareholder. The British did not buy many shares at the first offering but were quick to snap up the Egyptian stakeholding when the debt-ridden Ismail Pasha was forced to sell his 44 percent stake for £4 million in 1875, establishing Britain's financial control of Egypt, along with the French, through the *Caisse de la Dette* (Debt Commission). In 1882, the British gained de facto control of the Canal Zone when they helped Khedive Tewfiq put down the Urabi revolution against his rule and took over the administration of the whole country in his name.

In 1888, the Canal was declared a neutral zone by the Convention of Constantinople; the firmly entrenched British were appointed to run it – and ensure its neutrality. After that, the British and Turks fought over it ferociously during World War One; it proved vital to the British war effort during World War Two; and Nasser's nationalisation of the Canal in 1956 led to the Suez Crisis and war with Israel. In 2015, President Sisi, hoping for a landmark project to cement an unpopular presidency, poured huge amounts of money and labour into vastly increasing the size of the canal, allowing more and bigger ships to pass through.

Chapter Three – Cairo to Aswan

One cannot find the comforts of an English breakfast at Cairo.

John Carne, *Letters from the East*, 1830

Built in 1869 as part of the celebrations surrounding the opening of the Suez Canal, the Khedivial Opera House crowned sophisticated downtown Cairo. Designed by Italian architects, Avoscani and Rossi, its planned opening night production was delayed and instead, it opened with a performance of Verdi's *Rigoletto*. Two years later, in 1871, *Aida* was premiered here with much fanfare and instant worldwide acclaim. As thanks for the commission, Verdi also wrote the Egyptians a new national anthem. The opera house burned down a century later, on 28th October 1871. The Japanese gifted a new one to the city. It opened on Gezira Island in 1988.

Bacon may have been in short supply, but breakfast there was aplenty, served in the Barrel Bar, which looked as if it hadn't been redecorated since World War II. All polished wood, shiny brass and slightly lumpy seats, made from carved-up barrels, the extraordinary Windsor Hotel began life in 1901 as the Khedive's royal bathhouse before becoming an annexe of the original Shepheard's Hotel, just across Opera Square. According to the Schindler lift company, its manually operated wooden lift is one of the oldest in the world – we spent quite a bit of time riding up and down in it, just for fun. The annexe was commandeered during both world wars as the British Officers' Club. It's highly probable that Lawrence Durrell had hung out here at some point although he spent most of his drinking time at the Anglo-Egyptian Union, former home of the Sirdar (Commander-in-Chief of the Egyptian Army), behind the hotel. It's just possible too that the other famous Lawrence, Lawrence of Arabia, also drank here decades before, during World War I. In David Lean's magnificent film, there's a gripping episode when Lawrence arrives back in town, in Arab dress, his young Bedouin guide in tow, and demands a drink, only to have it refused. If it wasn't here, at the Officers' Club, it would have been around the corner at the Savoy Hotel, then British Army HQ, where Lawrence had been given an office. I desperately wanted it to have been here; I desperately wanted it to have happened. I'd fallen in love with the movie, Peter O'Toole and TE Lawrence (in that order) at a very early age and I was just as thrilled at the idea that I might be sitting on the bar stools of the two historic Lawrences as I had been when I took the first sip of my first ice cold drink in Alex.

In one corner of the bar, a family huddled round a man so small and ancient that he had to have been in residence long before the British officers arrived. They

greeted us warmly and invited us to join them. The old man introduced himself as William Doss. I was right; they had been there, almost forever. The Officers' Club had become a hotel after the British left and the family, from Upper Egypt, had bought it in 1962, after their cotton business was nationalised by Nasser. His children and grandchildren were all involved in running the hotel. Unlike his name and his speech, which both sounded pure Anglo-Saxon, he was, in fact, Egyptian through and through.

"My mother liked the name. You know the Emperor of Germany at that time was called Willem or something like that …"

"Wilhelm?"

"Yes, that's right. It is the same as William, I believe. I was born in 1915, during the First World War."

"So you were called after the Kaiser?" The name spoke volumes about the Doss family at the time. Britain's relationship with Egypt had always been peculiar, with Britain running the country nominally as a "Veiled Protectorate" on behalf of the Ottomans. This came to an abrupt halt when Britain and Turkey ended up on opposing sides during World War I, leaving Egyptian loyalties split, and Cairo supposedly a neutral city under British control. The British shamelessly used Egypt as a supply depot for the Middle East campaign, conscripted one and a half million Egyptian soldiers and stripped the country of supplies. Many Egyptian nationalists worked against British interests in search of independence.

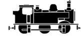
A sizeable British army of occupation remained between the wars and, with the outbreak of World War II, things rapidly reverted to the same peculiar stand-off as in the previous war, with Britain and Germany battling ferociously across a country which, in theory, was itself officially taking no part in the war. While a furious campaign raged across the desert, Cairo remained cocooned against the worst rigours of the fighting, an isolated party town which continued to thrive and connive. Nationalists plotted against the British, politicians plotted against each other and the city became a haven for refugees from across the Balkans. At one stage, it was home to the kings of Egypt, Greece and Yugoslavia who remained at the centre of a social whirl made only more giddy by the presence of the British HQ with its thousands of eligible young officers, including such prizes as the Prime Minister's son, Randolph Churchill. The "Fishing Fleet" of the old Indian colonial service was soon replaced by the bright young girls of the women's auxiliary services, keen to do their bit and bag

themselves a husband. There were few of the shortages felt at home. Actress Vivien Leigh, touring with a concert party, wrote home to her mother on 1st September, 1943: "the war is non-existent in Egypt and to see huge tables spread with every sort of deliciousness, and bowls of cream is extraordinary." [28] Nor was there any shortage of chroniclers – refugees from southern Europe included eminent writers such as Lawrence Durrell and Olivia Manning, whose *Levant Trilogy* inadequately disguises many of the key social players in wartime Cairo. Others such as Evelyn Waugh and Peter Fleming came in with the army or special services, and others still, such as travel writer Alan Moorehead, were amongst the many journalists based here. Durrell, Bernard Spender and Robin Fedden, a conscientious objector working as an ambulance driver, founded a literary magazine, *Personal Landscape*, while the headmaster of Gezira Preparatory School, Keith Bullen, started the Salamander Society, which served poetry and pink gin and later went on to publish several volumes of poetry by serving soldiers in the North Africa campaign, starting with the 1943 *Middle East Anthology of Poetry from the Forces*. Lower down the social ladder, troops from across the Commonwealth and, eventually, America, flooded into the city, exhausted from their time in the desert and ready to let off steam. The Egyptians were intrigued to see ordinary western working men. Bars, brothels and VD clinics sprang up to cater for them and a lucrative trade in guiding took them round the sites and up the Pyramids to scratch their names at the top.

I asked what William and his family had felt about having the British around.

"Of course, we were in Upper Egypt. There was no fighting there and we knew little of these things. We didn't like the occupation, but the British people, we liked them." I wasn't sure whether William was being polite but as he talked on, about his first visit to England, in 1935, staying at Mrs Cavendish's bed and breakfast in London, of many subsequent visits and of close links with Reading University, I realized that he genuinely held the British in high regard. His daughter, Marileez, joined in.

"A few years ago, there was a reunion for the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II. Many people came back, from England, Australia, New Zealand – from all over the place. They all stayed here and they came into the bar and sat on the same stools and told stories, just as they had when they were here before. It was most interesting."



The station was actually just on the other side of the Citadel; one of its gates, the Bab-el-Hadid or Iron Gate, had actually had to be demolished to make way for it. In fact, the station was popularly known as the Bab-el-Hadid for decades. In 1956, during the Suez War, songwriter Salah Gahin used the name in his fervently patriotic *Troop Train* song:

O eleven o'clock train
garlanded with roses
…
roses smelling of battles
bringing victory on the borders
roses of the spring of freedom
…
thousands, thousands, thousands,
In Bab el-Hadid Square
…
[And it ends]
O eleven o'clock train
You whose whistles are trills of joy. [29]

The station also stars in Youssef Chahine's astounding 1958 film noir, *Bab-el-Hadid* (*Cairo Station*), a darkly complex tale of murder, madness, street traders and unionisation which so scandalised the authorities that it was banned in Egypt for twenty years.

We hadn't really had a proper chance to explore the station in all its glory when we arrived in Cairo so, breakfast over, we headed back there for the full guided tour. Originally built in 1893 by British architect, Edwin Patsy, in the neo-Mamluk style, it was vast and imposing, although largely covered in scaffolding and tarpaulins. It was, we were told, at the beginning of a major facelift which would restore it to its original glory. I went online later to see how the wonderful tiles and great ceremonial doors had been cleaned up only to find myself staring at pages of outraged letters. According to Khaled Fahmy, Chair of History at the American University in Cairo:

> The so-called renovations are nothing but an eye sore and amount to an architectural crime as well as a violation of Law 144/2006 concerning the conservation of architectural heritage…
>
> Throughout the station they [the contractors] erected pharaonic-style plastic hollow columns that support a fake ceiling adorned with glittery golden designs.
>
> As a result, the original neo-Mamluk style has effectively been replaced with a style that is ostensibly pharaonic but which actually seems closer to that of Las Vegas casinos or Abu Dhabi glass malls. [30]

Looking at the images on Google, I could only agree and hope that the original mosaics had survived underneath the plastic bling. The new version was certainly eye-catching, but the station as we saw it, as tired and graceful as Alexandria, had a thousand captivating stories to tell. My mind drifted back to an English lesson I had given shortly before I left home. My student, a young Saudi woman, had had to look at a set of five pictures of landmark buildings, describe them to me, describe the differences between each and tell me what she thought was the purpose of each. She thought the railway station, a particularly ornate Victorian affair, was a temple. I could see her point; it was extremely confusing.

"Why," she asked, "do they build railway stations like temples?" It was a good question and one I couldn't answer at the time. Standing in Cairo Station, listening to the cacophony of Arabic announcements, train whistles and engines bouncing off the intricate cavernous roof, I finally understood. Yes, it was about the power of empire, but more than that, the Victorians had strewn the world with magnificent temples to the power of steam, to the brave new mechanical forces that were reinventing the world.

What would it have been like to be around the day the railway arrived for the first time, a clanking, snorting metallic monster that flew across the country at unimaginable speed? Back in Britain, when George Stephenson first invented the Rocket in 1830, 21-year-old actress Fanny Kemble was given a preview (she is thought to have been the first woman ever to ride on a train). Afterwards, she wrote to a friend: "You can't imagine how strange it seemed to be journeying on thus, without any visible cause of progress other than the magical machine, with its flying white

breath and rhythmical, unvarying pace…"[31] People wondered whether they would be able to breathe at such breakneck speeds, or whether the pressure of the air would make them lose their sight. This was in England, which had already had a hundred years to get used to the strange bellowing machines of the Industrial Revolution. For much of Africa, the railway was the first herald of new technology, trumpeting the arrival of the industrial age. How strangely awe-inspiring these magnificent beasts must have seemed. Magic machines deserved palatial surroundings, with just a touch of mysticism – and from King's Cross in London to Bab-el-Hadid in Cairo, Victorian and Edwardian architects went to town, creating elaborate fantasies worthy of this greatest of inventions.

In 1930, Cairo was chosen to host the 1933 International Railway Congress, a huge event with 700 delegates. It also happened to be the 80th anniversary of the creation of the railways. To mark this honour, along with a commemorative book and postage stamps, a railway museum was opened in Cairo Station in 1932. It was the first of its kind in the world. We made quite a party as we trooped through the anonymous little side door, under a tarpaulin, into a musty, hidden Aladdin's cave of priceless railway memorabilia. Banker Mohamed had rejoined us, even suaver now he was back in the capital, and two women were added to the party, the museum director, Hakmet, and a guide, Nahed. Partway round, Shadia, the lady from the tourist office on the station, also joined in, curious to see what we were up to. Mark rapidly collected an admiring audience for his explanation on the inner workings of the steam engine beside a locomotive cut down so you could see its innards. Watching him, I could hear the words of the fabulous Engineer Abdelrazek from Alexandria:

"As a specialist, as an engineer, there is a big, big difference between the steam engine and a diesel engine. The steam engine, you know, I studied it. I am fond of steam, the generation, generating motion. You can speak to it, you can communicate with it, you can feel when it is hot, when it suffers. Like human being. With a diesel engine, you cannot communicate. This is my theory." A true romantic, he was deeply envious of our British steam railways and of Mark's status as a hobby steam engine driver.

"We should keep it. Keep it running. We have tracks which could run steam trains. I was about six years old. I was born in 1951. I had to go with my father from Alex to Aboukir. It was completely desert this place and I saw steam engines at that time, steam locos running on that line. So it is not history, something which you have

in your memory." I had to agree, looking at these powerful machines standing silent on blocks was like looking at a stuffed lion with glass eyes. You needed to hear them shout and smell the soot and steam, but that was simply not possible and I had spent years living with Mark's passion for boilers. I wandered off instead to inspect the extraordinary 1930s scale models of Egypt's stations and bridges; the perfect model railway layouts, complete with white picket fences and grazing sheep; the trays of 1920s ticket stubs and glass cases filled with clippers, each with distinctive marks for different routes. There were paintings, maps and photos, letters between the Khedive and Robert Stephenson. In pride of place, in the centre of the hall, was the private all-in-one 2-2-4WT locomotive saloon built by the Robert Stephenson and Company factory for Khedive Said in 1862, a regal masterpiece of inlaid wood and gleaming brass. I climbed aboard and lounged languidly on the cushions, waving to the imaginary crowd gazing in awe at this machine of beauty. I wanted to wear a floaty dress and a big hat and take this train out for a run along the Nile (but preferably without being murdered). Art Deco Egyptian State Railway posters, in French and English, which adorned the walls and stairs, trumpeting the glory days of the Overland Route, only served to heighten my sense of retreat into the Belle Epoque, particularly when I spotted the familiar name of Thomas Cook on one of them.

On 5 July, 1841, Baptist minister and publisher, Thomas Cook, hired a train to take a group of temperance campaigners to a rally in Loughborough in England, eleven miles from their Leicester home, with tickets and food provided. This journey is generally considered to be the world's first official package tour. From these humble beginnings, he rapidly built a global empire and the opportunities offered by the vast traffic across Egypt were far too tempting to ignore. By the 1860s, the company was heavily involved in ferrying passengers across Europe on the Overland Route and within a few years it was running sightseeing excursions to all Egypt's major sights by train and steamer. As tourism grew, so did tourism publishing. In addition to their detailed brochures and guidebooks, Thomas Cook produced some of the world's earliest dedicated travel magazines, the news-heavy *Traveller's Gazette* and the more extravagant *Excursionist*, keeping a record of railway construction across the world and offering gloriously purple descriptions of sightseeing trips to the Pyramids and the Victoria Falls amongst many others. It was a tradition of which I was a part, having cut my editorial teeth creating two series of guidebooks for Thomas Cook in the nineties and noughties.

A few years later, while writing this chapter, I discovered that the museum has been stripped out as part of the station's renovations. A small group of enthusiasts were trying to preserve the locomotives, rolling stock and as many of the exhibits as they could rescue at a small railway yard near the station, but they confirmed that many of the priceless books, papers and photos in the collection were simply dumped.[32] Wonderfully, the museum was refurbished and reopened in March 2016. Thomas Cook has not been so lucky. Its publishing arm didn't survive the double whammy of the 2008 financial crash and the arrival of the internet and on 1st July 2013, Thomas Cook announced its closure. On 23rd September 2019, the main Thomas Cook company collapsed and ceased trading after 178 years in business, although thankfully the archives were saved. It was truly the sad end of an era.

We had to get special permission to take the day train south to Aswan. Tourists all took the heavily guarded overnight Wagons-Lits service which we would take back to Cairo in a couple of days, but we wanted to see something of Egypt on our way, however comfy the beds on board might be. We felt conspicuously white, the only obvious foreigners boarding the train and we were well inspected by all our fellow passengers. Our luggage was stowed around us; picnic lunches (a chicken leg, hard-boiled egg, cheese sandwiches, an orange and several bottles of water from the hotel) tucked into the rack above our heads, as Banker Mohamed assured himself that we were safely in our seats. If he could have strapped us in, tucked a blanket around us and read us a bedtime story, I think he would have done so. At last, eventually certain that we and all our possessions were where we were meant to be, tickets and passports clutched in hot sticky little hands, he felt brave enough to sign off duty. One more enthusiastic farewell and in a swirl of aftershave and Dolce and Gabbana, he was gone. A couple of minutes later, so were we. As we pulled out slowly through the Cairene suburbs, a rhythmic thud began in the small of my back, soon identified as the bored kicking of toddler feet.

As trains go, this was not one of the most atmospheric I have ever been on, but our carriage (First Class, of course, nothing else permitted), decked out in tired

turquoise, was perfectly adequate, adequately dull and all a wee bit grubby. Every seat was taken, some double-stacked with children sitting on their parents' laps, most filled by businessmen in dark suits with thin briefcases and thick newspapers. There was little conversation or movement around the carriage, although the kicker did come on an exploratory wander to meet his victim. I must have passed muster as, from then on, at random intervals, a small dark head with bright, button-black eyes would pop, beaming, over the top of the chair and the drumming would cease for a few blessed minutes. When I stood to stretch my legs, I saw the harassed young parents had two other children, one a babe in arms, also sharing the two seats with them. The mother smiled at me apologetically. I felt so much more fortunate than her in the space and relative calm of my own journey and so mean for having been grumpy, I worked harder to entertain her son next time he appeared around the side of the armrest. It passed the time.

From my notebook: The train is pulling away from Ramses Station very, very quietly – apart from the child in the seat behind me – being waved at by the women on the platform… It's astonishing to think that there have been trains running along here for nearly 150 years. Obviously the trains are very different now. We're doing this in extraordinary luxury by Egyptian standards, even by English standards. It's a wide-bodied train and in First Class we have only three seats wide, with plenty of legroom and headrests. We have air-conditioned comfort, and we have sunshades. Down in Third Class, it's an extremely different prospect with people crammed onto slatted wooden benches in extreme discomfort and heat but, for us, a little bit of money spent has gone a long way. And it is only a little bit of money – we've spent the princely sum of US$28 each to go the whole way from Cairo to Aswan which is, I believe, around 800 km (498 miles), a twelve-hour journey. I can't imagine what we would spend for an equivalent journey in Britain, if there was one long enough. There is already a £1000 train fare back home.

Everything in Egypt tends to look slightly tattier than it really is just because there is this fine layer of sandy dust everywhere. It's really not their fault that the Sahara just gets everywhere and it's impossible to keep things clean. I feel as if I've been coated by a thin layer of grit for the last two weeks. My biggest problem is keeping the camera neat and shiny…

From the train you pass the backs of houses and glimpse lives that are

normally hidden from view. Sometimes they're not particularly pretty views – the balconies, the laundry, a banana tree growing on a tiny patch of land – Mark's getting very excited by the train yards on his left – and beyond that, some very expensive tower hotel buildings. Cairo's an odd mix of extreme wealth and extreme poverty…

Having thought there was no food on board, breakfast has just arrived: Mark is very happy. A slightly odd breakfast which seems to consist of rolls, mango juice, crisps, some sort of sweet cake, olives, feta cheese and baklava – but what the hell, it's food, there are lots of happy people, and we're certainly not going to starve during our twelve-hour sojourn. With the hotel picnic basket as well, so we could actually eat the whole way to Aswan ...

Rattling along now, it's mid-afternoon. We still haven't reached Luxor and we are due into Aswan at eight o'clock. At this rate, we're going to be lucky to make it by midnight. The journey has been fascinating, watching out of the windows, the shifting pattern of the fields. I haven't been able to identify a lot of the crops, but every inch is heavily cultivated with a network of canals, some as big as rivers to tiny irrigation channels, all with water pumped from the Nile. The one frustration is that the Nile is just far enough away from the train that we can see a line of trees in the distance but only once, at a point off to our left, have we seen a brief glimpse of the river itself.

For several hours, the train ran alongside something large enough to be a river, but obviously manmade. We named it Niletta. Only later did I discover it was the 350 km (218 mile) long Ibrahimiya Canal, the world's largest artificial canal (China's Grand Canal connects a series of lakes and rivers). First cut in 1863, it was massively enlarged in 1898 when the railway was built, the earth removed from the canal simply tipped over to form the railway embankment. Today, traditional shadoufs long gone, it's part of a complex system of thousands of kilometres of canals, drains ditches, pumps and barrages that provide irrigation and hydro-electric power. Egypt continues to expand the area under irrigation, negotiating hard for every drop of Nile water with those countries upstream, such as Ethiopia and Sudan, who have also started major dam building and irrigation schemes.

They're cutting the sugar cane at the moment and there was an old railway loco and line sitting in the middle of a field abandoned since the days when they used to have private railways running into the cane fields when these were plantations. Now it's all small scale farming, a lot of onions, alfalfa, cane, maize. I haven't seen cotton growing but I've seen bales picked and ready to go off to market lying on the sidings. As far as the railways are concerned, we've stopped at a lot of small country stations, a few bigger towns, seen a couple of very big sleeper yards, and a great many rural halts, although we haven't stopped at all of them. This calls itself an express; there are slower trains. It's hard to imagine how much slower it could go but it's an

entertaining way to spend the day and I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

Khedive Ismail took to the railways with enormous enthusiasm, authorising the building of a rail network far in advance of many in Europe at the time. By 1914, the country had an astonishing 2,600 km (1,616 miles) of tracks stretching south to Aswan, east and west along the coast towards Libya, Port Said and Somalia. Added to these were a number of private narrow gauge lines built by plantation and factory owners in the Delta to help shift millions of tons of freight. By 1920, 30,548,469 passengers a year were travelling on Africa's busiest network – and one that outstripped many European countries in its breadth and sophistication.

Although the train south as far as Asyut was completed in the first wave of building, the line to Aswan was eventually built only in 1898 as part of Kitchener's Desert Railway, as he headed south to fight a war in the Sudan. Before that, the concentration had been on east-west trade and on linking up areas that were not served by existing waterways. It took longer, but those who wished to come south to Aswan simply sailed, by steamer, on board one of the elegant *dahabiyehs* or houseboats that plied the river for the rich, or on board a traditional lateen-sailed *felucca*, the local river sailing boats whose designs hadn't changed for several thousand years.

As we eventually chugged our way south from Luxor in the fading late afternoon light, I remembered my first trip to Egypt many years before. I had spent several days sailing from Aswan to Luxor on a felucca, sleeping top to tail on deck on freezing January nights, huddled under a tarpaulin, staring up at the biggest skies I had ever seen, filled with a billion billion stars stretching to infinity. I remembered scrambling ashore for communal pee breaks, losing all inhibitions as the women discovered very rapidly that even the seemingly most deserted field had an instant population of curious small boys and the only way to get any privacy was via a wall of other women. I remembered that by day three, desperate to feel clean, I banished my fears and swam in the freezing Nile – hoping that the water was far too cold for bilharzia snails to survive. I remembered evenings eating unidentified river fish stew cooked by our Nubian boat crew over a bonfire on the beach as we swapped musical traditions. They'd taken against Vaughan Williams to such an extent on the first morning that the cabin boy was dispatched home to get a radio to counteract classical music with Egyptian pop. But we discovered in the evenings that Nubian

songs are very repetitive and came into our own with Ten Green Bottles and the Conga. They say that if you drink the waters of the Nile, you will always return. I have, I did – and many years later took a tiny, muddy sip from the river's source, thousands of miles upstream in Rwanda's Nyungwe National Park.

All Said Pasha's new lines offered Egyptians a new-found mobility which also fuelled massive social changes, by no means all of them for the better. The *Egyptian Government Railways Half-Yearly Report* for late 1883 makes for grim reading. The stark numbers it contains are fleshed out in the February 1884 issue of the *British Medical Journal* which took up the story of Egypt's cholera outbreak.

> An epidemic of true cholera, such as is prevalent in India, broke out suddenly at Damietta, on June 22nd, 1883…The disease spread rapidly from town to town, following the tracks of communication, more markedly, however, by river and railway…The different routes followed by this epidemic clearly prove that the germ of the disease, whatever the nature of it may be, is not carried by the wind as a living agent…This militates against the lines of communication, and especially the railway, which transfers infected persons and things in a remarkably short space of time from one district to another.[33]

The report refers back to a previous outbreak in 1865, when, left unchecked, the disease rampaged along the lines from Alexandria to Cairo, Port Said and Suez, killing over 60,000. Lesson learned, on this occasion, the Railways supervising doctor, Dr Grant Bey, went to work, instituting *cordons sanitaires*, issuing disinfectant to all the railway workers and the epidemic was contained with relatively little loss of life. By the 1930s, the railways were running their own 70-bed hospital in Cairo, complete with operating theatres, and staff had access to doctors, outpatients facilities, dental treatment and free medicines; a forerunner of a national health system was up and running for the transport family.

The massive workforce put together to build and run the railways also created a revolution in the living conditions of many of the fellaheen, as they and their families moved in a single generation from remote rural villages to large, industrialised urban communities, with a hierarchical workforce, usually led by European and Turkish bosses. With this urbanisation, there swiftly followed education, unionisation and nationalism.

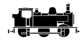
Matters came to a head soon after World War One during the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, when Egypt, as payback for their military service, demanded full independence; the nationalist Wafd Party leaders were, instead, arrested and deported. The transport workers were amongst the first to come out in support of action as the protests started, with tram and bus strikes in Cairo followed by strikes in the locomotive sheds in Abu Ghatis and Bulaq. There were reports of workers being intimidated to ensure they didn't break the picket line but the transport strike spread across the country and the railway network ground to a halt. Daily protests crossed class divisions with students, shopkeepers and civil servants marching together. As increasingly violent demonstrations met implacable military opposition from the British, the situation turned ugly and by July 1919, over 800 Egyptians were dead and 1,600 injured. Eventually, a British Commission of Enquiry, headed by Lord Milner, recognised that holding on to Egypt was going to be far more trouble than it was worth. On 22 February, 1922, the Egyptian government issued a unilateral declaration of independence. Egypt became an (almost) sovereign state although Britain hung on, even then, to control of foreign and defence policy and the Suez Canal.

As a result, in 1924, the railway systems of Egypt and Sudan were split into two separate organisations, and Egyptian State Railways got its first Egyptian Director of Railways, Abd el-Hamid Suleiman. He rapidly began a training programme to move other Egyptians up the ranks into key positions and Arabic took over as the official language of the service.

Control of the railways remained in Egyptian – and British – hands throughout World War II, with only one notable military involvement in the action, a final showdown between Rommel and Montgomery over a previously unheard-of railway halt about 100 km (6o miles) west of Alexandria called el-Alamein. The railways were, however, crucial to the war effort and nearly doubled their carrying capacity, moving troops, freight and armaments to the front, with many of the lines being converted to diesel for the first time. New lines were again built along the heavily contested Mediterranean coast, but the line south remained little changed.

Since the war, the 1952 revolution, which saw General Nasser finally throw out the King and the British and form a republic, beginning a long period of military rule in Egypt, also saw the complete nationalisation of the railways and the beginning of electricification. Work has continued on and off, with the new tram system for Cairo, replacement lines and now, after the Arab Spring, Engineer Abdelrazek's

promised new high-speed line to Aswan in the pipeline, along with other planned high-speed lines along the Mediterranean. With each new political jolt in Egypt comes a new phase of development for its railways – for good or ill, they are seen as prestige projects, a way of adding value to the country.



The heavens were a deep, clear blue and the sun was stoking its fires as it arced upwards, promising another perfect winter day yet Aswan was all but empty of tourists. The cruise ships were lined up along the banks, mothballed at the height of the season. Our hotel, on one of the islands, was built for several hundred. No more than a couple of dozen of us rattled around the cavernous dining room, waiters hungry for work watching every time we chewed, ready to rush in, adjust a napkin or fill an already full cup of tea. It was a long way from the bustle of tourists, the first time I had been here, in the 1980s, and from its past, as ancient Syene, a crucial garrison town and trading depot set near the unnavigable First Cataract, the Tropic of Cancer and the Temple of Philae, revered as one of the burial places of the god, Osiris.

Since the days of Cleopatra, this was where the Egyptian courts had come for their winter holidays, and where the government still sets up shop during the cooler months. Yet Aswan has none of the swagger of Alexandria or Cairo – or even ancient Luxor – this has always been a resort town, complete with hills, lush garden islands and serenaded by the sound of the Nile cascading round the black granite boulders of the First Cataract. The city is big, with a population of over one and a half million, but it still has a quiet town atmosphere, a place of blue and green amidst the endless sea of yellow sand, somewhere to breathe, pootle about on boats and do as little as possible. This is also Nubia, where the Arab world begins to meet black Africa, with people from the Sudan both trading and traded freely in the local souk – it was claimed by some that Sudanese slaves were still being traded here as late as the 1920s. Meantime, incredulous European tourists were fascinated by what Florence Nightingale termed “the troops of South Sea savages” in their skimpy clothing. Flaubert too felt the call of the wild here, saying “This is no longer Egypt; it is negro, African, savage – as wild as the other was formal.”[34] Any hint of savagery has gone, had it ever existed, and the only people likely to be partially clad these days are

unthinking Western tourists, but there is a difference here in the easy laughter, in the spontaneous love of song and dance of the Nubians. I begin to feel that I am, at last, in Africa. Now, as then, Aswan is almost everyone's favourite place in Egypt.

The vast High Dam was not the first to be built here. A smaller dam, for irrigation purposes, was completed by the British in 1902. While not as controversial as its successor, it too had its moments although the sluices were designed to let through the silt that swept downstream each year with the annual floods to fertilise the Nile Valley and Delta. From the archaeologists' point of view, its most heinous crime was that each year, during the inundation, the temple of Philae, which stood on an island near the First Cataract, was nearly submerged, doing untold damage to the delicate sandstone carving of one of the most magnificent relics of ancient Egypt. With the building of the High Dam, the temple of Philae, like Abu Simbel, far to the south, was carefully carved up into about 40,000 pieces by UNESCO and bodily moved and rebuilt, lock, stock and barrel, on nearby Agilkia Island, safely restored and out of reach of the rising waters of the giant reservoir. It remains the jewel in Aswan's tourist crown, with most visitors paying homage both by day and at night; the *son et lumière* show is made all the more atmospheric by the moonlight glittering across the waters of the lake on the boat trip to and from the island.

We too made the pilgrimage, giving Mark his first brief taste of a *felucca* trip en route and joining a tour group to wander round slowly, exploring the temples to Isis and Hathor and reading the story of Osiris in the hieroglyphics. A couple of hours in, at nearly midday, we were standing under a now blazing sun in the courtyard of Hathor's temple, when I heard a plaintive voice beside me "Me..el…" and turned just in time to see Mark turn white and collapse. Luckily he was close enough to the wall to slide down it as he passed out because, while I managed to break his fall, he's far too tall for me to have caught him. He was only out for a few seconds (although he still swears it felt like hours), came round and threw up spectacularly over my shoes and the temple courtyard. The combination of Egyptian food and sunshine had done for him. I blamed myself. While I am a seasoned traveller, he had rarely been outside the UK, had little immunity to foreign bugs and didn't realise the tricks of dealing with desert weather. It didn't feel particularly hot to me, but I am used to the heat and always carry a water bottle; Mark hadn't thought to do so. I should have checked and made him drink. Although it was still winter and we were standing on an island in a giant river, Aswan is renowned as one of the hottest and driest places on the planet;

it's said to be brilliant for dealing with arthritis and asthma but the water is quite literally sucked from your body as you move around. It all caused something of a stir but luckily, no harm was done and an hour in the shade and a bottle of Coke revived Mark sufficiently to keep going long enough to head over towards the Aswan High Dam, al-Sad al-Aali.

We leaned against the dam wall and stared down at the vast bank of sand and concrete and heavy machinery below. There's nothing pretty about the High Dam, but it is genuinely awe-inspiring. After the previous attempts to dam the river, in the eleventh century and the 1902 Low Dam, this giant project eventually got underway in the 1950s. Even then, it was massively controversial, with huge environmental debates about its effects, while western dithering over funding it led directly to the Suez Crisis when Nasser decided to nationalise the Canal and pay for the dam that way instead. Officially opened on 21st July, 1970, it is 3,830m (12,570 ft) long, 111m (364 ft) high, 980m (3,220 ft) wide at the base, 40m (130 ft) wide at the top. It's all very dictatorial, the love-child of the Egyptian and Soviet military machines who eventually conceived it and built it together, much to the dismay of the Western powers, sealing their friendship with a lotus flower statue that looks more like an upturned rawl plug. It's sledgehammer engineering designed to tame and contain a force of nature. Below us, the great turbine halls were churning out electricity to power a nation. They seemed, from up here, like little more than dusty old tin trunks. Behind us, Lake Nasser stretched through the desert across the Sudanese border to Wadi Halfa, 550 km (340 miles) to the south, an inland sea that is slowly filling up with silt since the dam wall has blocked the annual inundations that carried it downstream to spread it across the Nile delta.[35]

I had driven down to the border on a previous trip, to visit Abu Simbel, the greatest of the twenty-two ancient monuments rescued from the rising waters. Preserving the archaeology was a costlier and more contentious affair at the time than rehousing around 120,000 Egyptians and Nubians displaced by the lake, most of whom have ended up eking out a living in soulless new towns outside Aswan and Wadi Halfa that look like engineering work camps. The social issues have never been fully addressed and many Nubians are still fighting for justice. As Nubian blogger, Yahia Zaied, wrote: "Always remember that Nubia is not only music and dance. Nubia is a community that is suffering; a civilization and history that are being lost; and a language and human heritage that will disappear."[36]

We drove across the desert to the border. Up before dawn, we watched the sun rise over the shifting dunes as we drove, eating dates and nuts and oranges bought in the bazaar the day before for breakfast, spitting pips out of the windows and licking sticky fingers with sugary tongues to try and get them clean. We watched mirages shimmer across the tarmac as the heat swelled, and just when we thought the emptiness was complete, a camel train appeared over the horizon, threading its way north from Omdurman. Arriving at the border with Sudan – two oil drums with a log across them and one very bored guard – we turned left and drove on across the nothingness until we reached the lake and there before us sat Rameses II, great Ozymandius, stone-faced on his artificial mountain beside his manmade sea. Most tourists flew in and out and missed the vast arid emptiness of the open road. Now, few tourists go at all. It was a day I will never forget.

Mark was looking at the lake thoughtfully.

"You know, I could be rich, if it wasn't for Nasser," he said.

"Really?" I replied, astonished.

"Yes, part of our family, the Peels, had big cotton interests in Egypt. They got nationalised by Nasser in the 1950s. They lost millions. I remembered it when William was talking." I'd never heard this particular bit of family history but the name rang a bell in the deep recesses of my mind. There was a pause while I dragged the information forward.

"I think I've read something about them," I said, "Cecil Beaton went to dinner with Mrs Nora Peel, wife of cotton magnate, Edward Peel, during the war. He was rude about their furniture."

> Fashionable photographer and, later Oscar-winning costume designer, Cecil Beaton, spent his war years as an official war photographer. Invited to dinner at 'The Bungalow' in Alexandria, by Mrs Nora Peel, wife of cotton magnate, Edward Peel, he described her as having a girl's figure… and Duchess of Windsor jewellery. Her house enormous, white and just wrong… badly proportioned furniture and curtains – a huge table with some hideous lots of silver on it… [37]

"My father used to talk about Uncle Teddy – must be the same ones. That's brilliant!" replied Mark. There was another pause. "Cecil Beaton? Was he the one who made movies?"

"No, that was Cecil B. de Mille. Lots of them about." I was about to explain more, remind him that I too had Egyptian connections and start pontificating generally when Mark suddenly turned white and started galloping back towards the car park.

"I need to be back at the hotel. Now!"

That really was it for the day. Later on, in the afternoon, while Mark slept off the after-effects of his encounter with the desert sun, I went back to thinking about his revelation. I shouldn't have been surprised. Put anyone British into any former colonial country and they will almost inevitably have some sort of connection – family, friend or both. Many say that as a nation we are obsessed with the glory days of the empire. I'm not sure it is that. We are fascinated by history and family, generally and our history is that of the world. We love to research it, preserve it and pickle it – after all, this is the country that also created the National Trust and the Women's Institute!

As for me, my father was born in Egypt in 1931, in Moascar, near Port Said, where my grandfather, then a test pilot with the Royal Air Force, had been stationed at the time. Dad had left when he was only three months old, but both Mark and I had other African links. His father had done National Service in the Kenyan Police during the Mau Mau years. My formidable Great-Aunt Kathleen had nursed in Somalia and South Africa and set up a hospital in Cape Town. But my biggest link of all was my own childhood in Zimbabwe. At the age of four, I had been scooped up from the depths of one of the coldest and bleakest British winters on record and dropped into a hyper-coloured wonderland of sunshine and flowers. It had taken about a week for the shoes to come off and for me to turn into a true child of the colonial era, the last generation of privilege and, of course, in what was then Rhodesia, of racial divide and white supremacy. I had been in and out of Africa all my life, as a child, a teenager and as a working travel writer but this top to toe adventure would be, for me, a way to try and make sense of my very complicated relationship with the continent – and its relationship with me. For now, however, I could sit on the terrace and watch the sails of the feluccas on the Nile as just occasionally, far away, behind the call of the muezzin, came the hollow minor hoot of the African train.

"Hey," came a sleepy voice from the room behind me, "do you think William knew Uncle Teddy?"

Page left free for map of Sudan – Dr Driver still working on it.

Chapter Four – Khartoum

If a dog bites you and you don't bite him back, it will say that you have no teeth.

Sudanese Proverb

There are some places in the world that just seem more foreign than others. To me, Sudan always seemed to be one of those dangerous, sandy-coloured blanks on the map with a warning writ large across it 'Thar be dragons' – places that epitomise the exotic unknown, such as Uzbekistan, Outer Mongolia and Timbuktu. For much of my life, it has been a secretive and closed society with next to no tourism industry and in more recent years, a President wanted for war crimes and a devastating history of civil war. The only images on our screens were of death and disaster. Yet my first introduction to the country had come long ago, and there and then I had vowed to visit one day.

It was 1967 and, as an eight-year-old child, I was on my first ever long-haul flight, a BOAC VC10, between Johannesburg and London. Flying high across the Sahara Desert at dawn, my mother shook us awake to look out of the window and far below us, in a sea of yellow, was the glittering Y of the confluence of the Nile. Too high to see the city, she kept my sister and me entertained as we wriggled in our seats with stories of Sinbad, Aladdin and Egyptian gods. Not that many years later, I remember going to the drive-in to see Charlton Heston trying out his English accent as General Gordon in *Khartoum* the movie, dying heroically and jingoistically on the banks of the Nile, while Laurence Olivier, in brown grease paint and a turban as the "mad" Mahdi, waved a bloody sword in terrifying rebellion. My knowledge of the city was therefore, it's fair to say, patchy and dubious, but in my overactive imagination, it was simmering with legend and romance. The prospect of going to Khartoum made me feel like Livingstone, Burton and Speke, about to step off the edge of the known world. I knew it was ridiculous, that the city had five-star hotels and skyscrapers, but the eight- year-old child inside was fizzing with anticipation, overlaid with a large dollop of fear.

Getting there was proving to be somewhat problematic however. The one thing I did know is that Sudan doesn't like journalists and my passport had an American journalist's i-visa indelibly proclaiming me as the enemy. The first task was to get a second, clean passport. The passport office was helpful and sorted it all out for me, at some considerable expense. The man on the desk tapped the side of his nose in a knowing fashion as he handed the packet to me. In vain did I protest that I wasn't a spy, but that just made him all the more convinced. On inspecting the contents of the plain brown envelope, I discovered that instead of simply adding an extra passport, the authorities had actually cancelled the old one (containing my still valid – and expensive – US i-visa) and issued two new ones. I spent some time imagining the conversation I was going to have with Homeland Security next time I went into the States...

"This is my passport. And here's my visa."

"Why was the corner cut off?"

"The British authorities cut it up when they gave me two passports."

"Why?"

"I needed a passport without an i-visa."

"Why?"
"To go to Sudan."

"What other countries have you visited recently?"

"Egypt, Morocco, Kenya, Turkey, Palestine…"

"Would you come this way, Madam?"

All in all, it wasn't something I was looking forward to.

Next, armed with my pristine passport, came the quest for the Sudanese visa, at which point I discovered that we needed letters of invitation. We knew no one in the country, there is no tourist office and while there was a lone tour operator taking in guided tours, I would not be able to work if on a tour. The solution came out of the blue in the most unexpected of circumstances.

Every year, the British Guild of Travel Writers, the professional association for travel writers in the UK, has a black-tie awards dinner at the Savoy Hotel in London. It's a very glamorous evening, traditionally held in early November, the night before the opening of World Travel Market, one of the world's largest travel trade shows. I was Chair that year and was seated next to Linda Battersby of Action Water, recipient of that year's charity raffle. Between jack-in-the-box forays up to the stage to make speeches and present awards, we talked about my plans. I happened to mention the difficulties I was facing getting into Sudan.

"Oh," she said, "that's easy. You need George. George knows everyone and can arrange anything." She scribbled an email address on a scrap of paper. It turned out to be one of the most valuable moments of my entire journey.

George Pagoulatos and his brothers, Thanasis and Mike, own the Acropole Hotel, one of the oldest in Khartoum and sufficiently famous to merit its own Wikipedia entry. Opened in 1952, it has been the home and base camp for most journalists, NGOs and archaeologists who pass through Khartoum ever since. As I was eventually to discover, it isn't the most glamorous building in the city, but it may well be the most efficient, spending its money on essentials such as superfast broadband rather than soft furnishings. George himself is quite possibly the world's finest fixer. By the time I left the city, I was a little bit in love and a lot in awe of him.

In reply to my first email, sent on a wet and windy November morning in London, came the calm and reassuring words that were to become the catchphrase of my time in Sudan "I will arrange." Shortly afterwards, a letter of invitation arrived by email. First hurdle cleared.

The visa form stated clearly that it could take up to two months and you shouldn't book your flight until you get your visa. As we wanted to travel in February – and get reasonably priced tickets – this was obviously a non-starter. We were going to have to book and cross our fingers. The plan was for me to fly out first and for Mark, who had limited leave, to join me a couple of weeks later to do the notoriously rough train trip north, via Wadi Halfa to the Lake Nasser ferry and

on to Egypt. A trip to the embassy, a huge amount of money paid to Trailfinders for flights, then we settled down for a nervous wait with periodic phone calls to check on non-existent progress.

Meantime, it was Christmas. Oxford Street was steadily filling up and the bus journey from my flat into the city centre was getting steadily more gridlocked. As I crawled beneath twinkling lights, sponsored by Cameron Mackintosh and Disney, passing ever more spectacular snowflake-festooned display windows, I had plenty of time to dream – and to make lists.

My own Christmas list was probably the most specific I have ever written. Knowing that I was going to be spending much of the year in hot climates, on pretty uncomfortable trains, with only intermittent access to things like electricity, I had not only made a detailed list of what I needed to take with me but had trawled the shops and online specialists and written down exact makes, model numbers and sizes. There wouldn't be many surprises but I was hoping that my family were going to kit me out with a sheet sleeping bag (silk –lighter, easier to carry and doesn't crease; it came in a glorious peacock green); daypack (lightweight but incredibly durable, specially designed for women, with a separate laptop compartment); a Tilley hat (the one tough enough to be eaten by an elephant); oodles of spare batteries for camera and sound recorder; and a wind-up torch that needed no batteries at all. I had already been given guidebooks to the countries I didn't know by Bradt Guides – one of the many perks of having friends in the trade.

My visa finally arrived less than a week before I was due to fly. Huge sigh of relief! There was still no sign of Mark's, however. I had to go, trusting that he would be able to follow. One last stop to my local bank to take out £2000 in cash; I was going beyond the reach of credit cards and ATMs. I was incredibly nervous about carrying it around with me but the cashier laughed. I was on Edgware Road, London home of the Arab shoppers.

"Many of my customers take twice this amount for a morning's shopping in Knightsbridge," he said. I wandered home to triple-check my moneybelt feeling a good deal safer but definitely deflated.

First impressions of Khartoum – how yellow it was and how quiet. The whole dusty city, the stale mustard colour of Sahara sand, was eerily quiet. Most Islamic and African cities I had ever been in, from Accra to Amman, pump out the decibels at all hours of the day and night; the call to prayer, writhing and competing, blasting from mosque to mosque, honking traffic jams, ghetto blasters screeching the local top 10. Khartoum lived at a whisper, voices calm and measured, never raised; traffic ordered, all in uniform white, cars painted to reflect the burning sun, not personality; eyes carefully not watching too closely. I had been there nearly a week before I heard even one rather apologetic, muffled muezzin.

The city, as I was to discover, is huge, effectively three cities in one, wrapped around the glittering Y-shape of the Nile I had seen from the air, all those years before. On the west bank is Omdurman, the Arab city mainly built by the Mahdi, home to the bazaar and the world's largest camel market. Between the arms of the Y lies Khartoum North (Bahri), the modern city, an upstart of towering apartment and business blocks. Mid-stream, forming the junction of the two foaming rivers, Tuti Island is a haven of green, of villages and fields, fighting to stop the encroachment of concrete.

Khartoum, on the east bank, is the colonial city, its heart laid out on a Union Flag grid by Lord Kitchener following the retaking of the city in 1898. Here are the Presidential Palace, the Parliament, the national museums, the offices of government, the grandest of the hotels. Photographing most of them is forbidden. Photographing anything to do with the government or the military is forbidden. In fact, as I discovered on my very first morning, photographing anything at all was forbidden without a special permit. Even being a tourist was forbidden without registration. Luckily George was at hand and while I wandered round close to the hotel, without camera, his staff quickly and efficiently retrieved two more permits for me. They were handed over with a strict warning to keep them on me at all times and not to wave my camera around too obviously as anyone with a camera was assumed to be a spy. Finally, though, I was free to explore.

First stop, Khartoum Station to see if I could track down the railway authorities. The old station in the town centre was derelict, a sad little yard of rusty rails and dusty weeds, the long low brick buildings with their bright blue painted skirts and shady verandah totally abandoned, like something from a Wild West ghost town. Bahri Station, in Khartoum North, was not much better. At the entrance, huge signs proclaimed the Sudanese Railway Corporation Arrival and Departure Terminals while inside, the cavernous concrete structure, completed in 1998, was decorated by a slightly crooked sign declaring "YOU ARE WELCOME" in English and Arabic and a couple of rather splendid if chipped 1930s style posters of trains. But of actual trains themselves, there were none. A solitary cleaner dozed on a sea of plastic chairs, next to his bucket, beside a highly polished stone floor large enough to be a skating rink. It was not a promising start. I took a photo of the welcome sign, waved to the cleaner, who roused himself sufficiently to wave back, and headed back to the hotel.

George, once again, came to the rescue and next morning I sallied forth, complete with the address of the Sudanese Railway Authorities offices, which was, of course, nowhere near any station. I was greeted with surprise, a great deal of confusion and courtesy, and shown straight in to see Azim el Rasheed, the charming young PR man in Khartoum, who seemed to regard my visit as a delightful break in routine. As soon as I mentioned the concept of writing however, his brow furrowed.

"I am terribly sorry, but do you have permission from the Ministry of Information?" Try as I might, I couldn't get him to budge. This was no mere job's worth moment; talking to a writer without official permission was not going to happen. I asked if I might come back.

"Of course, if you have the paper. Please come back and I will be happy to help." But how to get the paper? I went back to the hotel and explained it all to George. Even he seemed slightly more fazed, just for a moment, by the idea of an illegal writer – but he was, of course, close friends with the person in charge of foreign press! Now I just had to persuade her not to arrest me and to give me the precious permission or I would be going nowhere.

George's friend proved charming as I explained, as humbly as possible, about the book I was planning to write, fingers firmly crossed. As suspicious as Sudan is about journalists, they are very used to historians and my book was full of history. Moreover, I came with impeccable credentials – yet another piece of paper and by this time I had realized the Sudanese love of letters of authority – a letter of recommendation from the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, dripping with initials and titles. Famous as he is around the world for so many reasons, Churchill had a strong connection with Sudan, beginning his career as both an officer and correspondent during Kitchener's campaign and the Battle of Omdurman in 1896-8 and writing what is still probably the definitive account of the campaign, *The River War*. On Churchill's death in 1965, as a national memorial, a scholarship fund was put together to allow British, Australian and New Zealand citizens from all walks of life to travel abroad to pursue work-related projects which should be of benefit both to the recipient and to the country. Around 150 of these Churchill Fellowships are now handed out each year changing lives, creating an astounding range of research and networking – truly a lasting legacy for a renaissance man. The only reason that I was now standing in Khartoum rather than in Oxford Street, still dreaming about it, was I had been the lucky recipient of one of that year's awards – offering me the funds to cover my flights, visas and a basic stipend for living expenses and travel. I was undoubtedly on an imperial journey, following Churchill across Africa, trying to frame events through a century of hindsight, on my own life-changing opportunity. This, luckily, appeared to be a valid reason for trying to circumnavigate the system and after only a light rap over the knuckles and three glasses of tea, I emerged blinking, carefully clutching what I foolishly thought would be my last permit of the trip.

By the next afternoon, I was back in Azim's office and with the magic paper, his worries vanished. We talked railways. I explained that I was planning to go up to Atbara, the railways headquarters town in a couple of days' time and asked if he could arrange appointments for me to look around.

"But you will of course take the train?" he asked.

"Not this time," I replied. "I wish to go to Meroe and see some of the other historic sights as well, so I am planning to hire a car and driver for three days to

get to places in the desert. Next week, my husband is joining me from England," I crossed my fingers as I said this, "and we plan to take the train up to Wadi Halfa then take the ferry across Lake Nasser to Egypt. I wanted to do the journey with him as I believe the train is quite difficult."

"You will travel in one of our new sleeping cars," declared Azim expansively. "They are very comfortable. You will like it very much." I was enormously cheered by this and cross-questioned him further, unable to believe my luck and we parted on the best of terms. It was time to head up country.

"You will need a permit," said George. Of course I would! How silly of me to think that I might be allowed to leave the city limits without a separate piece of paper. Off went the hotel staff with my passport and the ever-growing sheaf of permissions. Meantime George blew a huge hole in my travel budget, lining me up with a four-by-four and driver for three days; I gulped, signed and handed over a large stack of cash from my money belt, peeling off notes like some dodgy seventies' car dealer. However, I couldn't do it alone and this was a once in a lifetime opportunity.

Next morning, waiting for me beside the broken pavement, was my own shiny white four-by-four with Hassan at the wheel and the air-conditioning blazing. This was not going to be an eco-friendly, hippy-traveller, live-like-a-local, get-to-understand-the-people trip. I was cocooned in a gleaming bubble of privilege which I almost succeeded in justifying to myself on safety grounds. Of the many countries I have visited as a single female traveller, this was undoubtedly the one in which I was least comfortable taking risks with my security, particularly at a time when the terrorism threat was beginning to increase significantly and there had recently been high profile arrests and kidnappings of western women. As we drove through the city, caught in rush hour traffic jams filled with other gleaming white four-by-fours, many of which appeared to be driven by chauffeurs, I began to realize that I was living like a local – just one of the Haves. Sudan, like so many countries, is and always has been a divided society in which the monied

and powerful live off the fat of the land, while in times of trouble, those at the bottom all too literally starve.

At that moment, in February 2010, the country stood at the edge of a precipice, a few months ahead of the referendum that would, inevitably, end up splitting the country in two and creating the independent country of South Sudan. Briefly however, the whole giant edifice was imperfectly held together in a fractious ceasefire and the Darfur tragedy was, for a few short months, not lead story on the nightly news.

Driving north, we fall abruptly off the cliffscape of the city tower blocks into desert scrubland, the fine, hot ochre dust powdering the sheen from my impeccable vehicle and coating the inside of my mouth, within the first few miles. The world seems uninhabited and uninhabitable, desperate, all life camouflaged by the unending rocky sand. Only the road anchors me, the guiding charcoal ribbon of newly laid tarmac, snaking across the shimmering horizon. Yet slowly, as my eye tunes in, I begin to see low mud-built villages rising organically from the sand between the thorn bushes. I see the dusty four-by-fours parked in the shade of the mud-brick houses, see the phone masts and satellite dishes in every village, see the man on a camel with a mobile phone tucked between his turban and his beard. These people of the desert are choosing to mix tradition and modernity.

Some miles to our west is the more meandering line of the Nile. As it leaves Khartoum, it still has 1,857 miles (2,988 km) to travel to the Mediterranean, but already it is a major force, a lifeline for millions and a playground for the few. We stop for a drink at the Sixth Cataract, a popular picnic spot amongst the Sudanese middle-class, and, like everyone else there that baking day, take out a sky-blue boat with shady canopy to revel in the greenery, the birdlife in the reedbeds and the cool river breeze. The sound of the infinitely precious water playing over the rocks adds to the sense of pure indulgence in this desiccated land.

We turn off the main road to explore the Meroitic temples at Musawwarat el-Sufra and Naqa, bumping across vast tracts of featureless scrub desert. Every so often, Hassan turns to the left or right. I can see nothing that would guide him. Eventually, I give up and ask how he knows where to turn. He grins.

“I am following the road.”

“But the road looks exactly like the not road.”

He nods. “Yes, it is difficult. I have learned the way.” At the next crossroads I ask him to stop the car and I get out to inspect it closely. There are marginally more faint, ancient tyre tracks and marginally fewer scrubby weeds growing on the bit that is meant to be road, but that is all. Another thought strikes me.

“Do any foreigners drive themselves?” The grin reappears.

“Some, yes. There are people who live in Khartoum who like to come up here on their own.”

“And how many of them get lost?”

“Oh, many of them!”

“And are they all found again?”

“Not all.” We drive on in silence.

The Sixth Cataract forms the southern boundary of Nubia, a once independent kingdom that stretched right up to modern Aswan and was known in the Bible as the Land of Cush. Some 240 km (150 miles) north of Khartoum, we reach Meroe, its ancient capital. A rusty sign beside a sprawling barbed wire fence says, in English and in Arabic:

MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT & TOURISM

NATIONAL CORP FOR ANTIQUITIES AND MUSEUMS

ROYAL CITY

The English comes first and I feel sure that the sign has not been changed since the British left in 1956. The only people around are a group of children playing on a statue of a curly-haired ram. Behind them a couple of black-haired goats are grazing off a thorn bush. They cluster round to watch me. I watch where I

put my feet. The ground is littered by pottery – it seems as if the vast archaeological site has never been excavated.

From nowhere, an elderly man falls into step beside me.

“Salaam Aleikum”

“Aleikum, Salaam” We exchange greetings courteously. There is a pause. He continues in English.

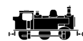
“What is your job?” No one ever asks where you are from in Sudan. That’s a tourist question and there are no tourists. Every foreigner here is here with a purpose – oil worker, NGO or archeologist.

“I’m a historian. I’m writing a book.” He nods thoughtfully and there is another pause.

“Do you have a PhD?” Somewhat taken aback, I choke back a laugh and confess gravely that I do not.

“A Master’s?” No again. By this stage, I am feeling definitely inferior and there’s a distinct gleam in his eye as he lands the killer blow.

“I know many people with PhDs. I know Dr Derek Welsby of the British Museum. Do you know him?” And once again, I fall painfully short and have been found out. As I write this however, I am halfway through my PhD, have just ordered a book by Dr Welsby and maybe one day, I’ll be able to go back to Meroe with my head held high and answer “yes”.



The railway tracks run past the wire fence of the Royal City, two forlorn lines of steel disappearing into the lonely distance, sleepers buried beneath drifting sand. Sudan’s Military Railroad was an extraordinary feat of engineering, created as part of Kitchener’s campaign to reconquer the Sudan from the Mahdists in 1896-8. It wasn’t the first time trains had been used in war, but the British had learned from their brief part in Crimea and had sent observers to study their

effectiveness in the American Civil War. Now, the British army used the desert war to devastating effect to test the full lethal power of their new technologies. It was a war fought as part of the Great Game, the Scramble for Africa, but fought, as much as for any other reason, out of piqued pride, for revenge.

Standing there, between the Meroitic and British Empires, bookends of recorded history, I became fully aware of what I had always known in theory, that to understand this railway, like the one far to the north between Alexandria and Cairo, I needed to look back years before the first sleepers were laid. Africa's involvement with empire had begun long before the arrival of the British redcoats, and life was infinitely more complicated and confused than a bunch of white people marching, guns blazing, over some sort of blank social canvas and repainting it to their own design. Of course they had marched in, guns blazing, but the canvas was far from blank. Since the days of the Pharaohs, layer upon layer of invasion had built up over the millennia as the ancient Egyptians were followed by the Ptolemaic Greeks and Romans, the Arabs, and the Ottomans, each adding cultural complexities from Coptic Christianity to Islam, systems of international trade and taxation, hierarchies of kingship and empire that superimposed themselves on often ferocious local tribal loyalties.

Twining through every aspect of society throughout the ages was the notion of slavery. Sudan's southern forests were plundered for timber, ivory and slaves, each treated interchangeably as a commodity. Nubian and Dinka slaves were traded north to fight as gladiators in Rome and attend Cleopatra as she dazzled her way to power and riches in Alexandria. The Ottomans built their armies from slaves, the fanatical devoted Janissaries becoming powerful enough to challenge the Sultans themselves, while the Mamluks in Egypt rose from slavery to rule a kingdom, slaves who had slaves. This wasn't a slavery like that of the American plantations but much of the culture of the Sudan was built on constant warfare and plunder by competing tribes, the losers sold into servitude, the men to fight as soldiers and the women and children to be trafficked into homes as concubines, domestic servants and even, sometimes, wives. There was even a thriving blackmarket in slaves, with slaves being enticed to run away or stolen then sold on. Prices in the Omdurman market during the Mahdist period varied from fifty to seven hundred Omla Gedida dollars (the local currency of the time), depending on

the age, quality, looks and race of the girl or woman (whether she was useful as a surya or concubine); the men all belonged to the Khalifa for use in the army and the fields. It was a centuries-old patchwork of rapidly shifting loyalties, built on bloodshed and booty.

By the time the British became involved, the Ottomans nominally controlled Egypt, who had colonised Sudan, while the slave-owning Islamic Arab peoples in northern Sudan both had their own tribal hierarchies and targetted the polytheistic black tribes of the south, referring to their hated Egyptian overlords as "Turkiyya" (Turks). Both the Ottoman and Egyptian leaderships were weak, corrupt and inefficient and the whole complicated edifice was tottering; it didn't take much of a push for it to collapse into chaos. Churchill put it very succinctly: "Never was there such a house of cards as the Egyptian dominion in the Soudan. The marvel is that it stood so long, not that it fell so soon."[38]

To any commentators who understood something of the situation, the war started, much as the Arab Spring was to do in 2011, as a bid for freedom from oppressive rulers. In what became a world-changing interview with WT Stead of *The Pall Mall Gazette*, General Charles Gordon, who played such a pivotal and tragic role in events in Sudan, said:

> No one who has been in a Turkish province … will need to be told why the people of the Soudan have risen in revolt against the Khedive… I am convinced that it is an entire mistake to regard the Mahdi as in any sense a religious leader: he personifies popular discontent. All the Soudanese are potential Mahdis.... The movement is not religious, but an outbreak of despair. [39]

Then, as now, religion became a convenient and terrifying rallying cry, masking so many other issues. Just as Egypt struggled to rid itself of the Turkish yoke, Sudan yearned to be free of Egypt. Nevertheless, it is true to say that the battle for Sudan did become the first great showdown between Islam and Christianity of the modern era, its repercussions still sending shockwaves round the world today.

> Round the walls of the house numbers of women and girls stand or sit… and as the trade is looked upon as a perfectly natural and lawful business, those put up for sale are carefully examined from head to foot, without the least restriction, just as if they were animals. The mouth is opened to see if the teeth are in good condition. The upper part of the body and the back are laid bare; and the arms carefully looked at. They are then told to take a few steps backward or forward in order that their movements and gait may be examined. A series of questions are put to them to test their knowledge of Arabic. In fact, they have to submit to any examination the intending purchaser may wish to make…the whole matter is treated by the slaves without the smallest concern. They consider it perfectly natural, and have no notion of being treated otherwise. Only occasionally one can see by the expression of a woman or girl that she feels this close scrutiny … Amongst the various "secret defects" which oblige the dealer to reduce his price are snoring, bad qualities of character, such as thieving, and many others; but when at last the sale has been finally arranged, the paper is drawn out and signed, the money paid, and the slave becomes the property of her new master.[40]

London's newspapers such as the *Pall Mall Gazette*, ever fond of sensation and a hero, ended up distilling the tragedy in Sudan down to a sort of showdown at the OK Corral between two men, the wild savage "Mad Mahdi" and the great Christian hero, single-handedly holding back the tide of barbarism, General "Chinese" Gordon. According to Churchill, always a firm believer in the superiority and civilizing influence of the British:

> …they resembled each other in many respects. Both were earnest and enthusiastic men of keen sympathies and passionate emotions. Both were powerfully swayed by religious fervour. Both exerted great personal influence on all who came into contact with them. Both were reformers. The Arab was an African reproduction of the Englishman; the Englishman a superior and civilized development of the Arab. In the end, they fought to the death, but for an important part of their lives their influence on the fortunes of the Soudan was exerted in the same direction. [41]

Gordon, a heroic figure in Victorian Britain long before he set foot in Africa, was one of the key reasons that the dominoes started to tumble. Charles George Gordon (1833–1885) first made his name during the Crimean War but gained his nickname "Chinese" Gordon by putting down the so-called Taiping Revolt in China in 1860. In 1873, he was hired out to Khedive Ismail of Egypt and

became Sirdar, Commander-in-Chief of the Egyptian Army, before being sent to Sudan, first as Governor of the southern Equatoria province, then to Khartoum as Governor-General of the Sudan from 1877-79, his officers drawn from across Europe and from Egypt itself. Unkinder times might label him a mercenary, but he was utterly incorruptible, duty-driven and deeply influenced by the Anti-Slavery Society. His effect on the Sudan was profound, shutting down the legal traffic in slavery by 1877. This decimated the finances of the Sudanese slavers, a position exacerbated by his increased efficiency in tackling non-payment of taxes and the local traditions of booty and present exchange which the British viewed as rampant corruption. Frustration and anger with the hated Egyptians soared amongst the slave-owning classes while the non-Muslim black tribes worshipped their new defender as a hero. The shutdown of trafficking was by no means perfect however. The trade continued within the country and it is estimated that as many as 25,000 slaves a year were still being sent north a decade later. The dividing line between slavery and servitude also often seemed remarkably thin. In 1897, when preparing to accompany Kitchener south, there is a real element of shock in reading British newspaper columnist GW Steevens' casual report of hiring his staff in Wadi Halfa: "I bought two horses and two nigger boys – one to look after the horses and one to look after me. One of them I bought through Cook, as one takes a railway-ticket..."[42]

Yet even as Gordon struggled to introduce Christian virtue and bureaucracy, Sudan's disaffected Islamists were finding their own hero in Mohammed Ahmed, a charismatic preacher who had been born in 1844 in Dongola province in northern Sudan, and spent his early years studying with the Samaniyya Sufi ascetic teacher, Sheikh Muhammad Sharif Nur al-Dai'im. After a falling out with his teacher, he moved to Aba Island on the White Nile where he began to gain a reputation as a holy man and a charismatic speaker attracting thousands of followers. By 29 June 1881, he felt sufficiently powerful to proclaim himself the Mahdi, the messianic redeemer of Islam who would rule before the arrival of the Prophet Isa (Jesus) on the Day of Judgement. There are many prophecies regarding the arrival of the Mahdi and several claimants to the title; the length of his rule varies according to the text from five to nineteen years. However, they all proclaim him as a powerful figure. In the *Muntakab al Adhhar*, Umm

Salana, one of the wives of the Prophet Mohammed, is quoted as saying "When the Mahdi appears, Allah will cause such power of vision and hearing to be manifested in believers that the Mahdi will call to the whole world from where he is, with no postman involved, and they will hear and even see him."[43]

The fact that he was good-looking and smelled wonderful probably also helped his cause. Rudolf Slatin, the Austrian governor of Darfur who spent twelve years in captivity and came to know both the Mahdi and the Khalifa well, gives this description of Mohammed Ahmed:

> …he was a tall, broad-shouldered man of light-brown colour, and powerfully built; he had a large head and sparkling black eyes; he wore a black beard, and had the usual three slits on each cheek; his nose and mouth were well shaped, and he had the habit of always smiling, showing his white teeth and exposing the V-shaped aperture between the two front ones which is always considered a sign of good luck in the Sudan, and is known as "falja." This was one of the principal causes which made the Mahdi so popular with the fair sex, by whom he was dubbed "Abu falja" (the man with the separated teeth). He wore a short quilted jibba, beautifully washed, and perfumed with sandal-wood, musk, and attar of roses; this perfume was celebrated amongst his disciples as Rihet el Mahdi (the odour of the Mahdi), and was supposed to equal, if not surpass, that of the dwellers in Paradise.[44]

The Mahdi espoused his own brand of fundamentalist Islam that forbade all drinking, dancing and music, replaced the duty of Hajj or pilgrimage with a duty of jihad or holy war, of almsgiving with taxation and instituted a strict segregation of women. To assist in his endeavours, he appointed four Khalifas, the chief of whom, Abdullah-ibn-Muhammad, effectively became his commander-in-chief and, eventually, his successor. Their soldiers were known to Europeans as Dervishes, after the whirling Sufi trance dance, a term disliked by the Mahdi, who chose instead to call his army the Ansar (the Helpers) after the people of Medina who helped the Prophet Mohammed on his flight from Mecca. Slatin was scathing in his condemnation of both the Mahdi and the Khalifa, claiming that as their success and power grew, the personal life of austerity was swapped for sybaritic hedonism behind closed doors.

> Dressed only in a jibba and sirual (drawers), with a belt of gus, or straw, round his waist, and wearing a Mecca takia (skull-cap), round which was bound a muslin turban, he stood with all humility before his followers, preaching of love to God and the cause, and of the necessity of renouncing the vanities of this world. But once in his house it was quite another matter; here he lived in a state of grandeur and luxury, and became a slave to those passions for food and women to which the Sudanese are so addicted. Should any women, young girls, and slaves be captured, they were brought before him, and all the prettiest and the best found a home in his harem; whilst the maid-servants, who were versed in all the arts of the most approved Sudan cooking, were relegated to his kitchen.[45]

This did not seem to douse the religious fervour of the masses however. The Mahdist state was eventually crushed but the Ansar Movement lived on and its views have trickled down through history into the beliefs and actions of various violent fundamentalist Islamist sects today.

Meantime, Egypt's enterprising and westward-looking Ismail Pasha was spending his way into oblivion, his fortunes and those of his country hostage to British and French bankers and an increasing number of key government appointments held by Europeans. Their attempts to impose austerity and a European civil service put them in direct conflict with the Turco-Circassian aristocracy who controlled much of the parliament and army. In 1879, the by-now bankrupt Ismail made one last ill-judged attempt to stand up to the Europeans, only to find himself swiftly deposed and replaced by his son, Tewfik, as a puppet king. Later that same year, factions of the Egyptian Army mutinied, led by Colonel Ahmed Urabi, a brilliant young officer from a peasant family who became one of the founders of the Egyptian Nationalist Party. The mutiny ended with Urabi being appointed to the Cabinet, in a position to influence the Khedive, much to the dismay of the British who feared that he may renege both on the national debt and their rights over the Suez Canal. In June 1882, when anti-foreign riots broke out, the weak-willed Khedive Tewfik, fearful for his position, was persuaded to ask the Ottoman Sultan for assistance against Urabi. The British Navy had their excuse and moved in, ostensibly to offer short-term protection to the Khedive and the foreign community; they stayed until 1954. The Egyptian Army was left in tatters, unable to resist opposition.

Amongst the various technological developments of the Sudanese Wars was the first use of khaki uniforms outside India. The word 'khaki' is the Punjabi word for "dust" and the use of the drab-coloured fabric began when Indian Army soldiers began dying their white uniforms with tea in the 1840s, following the development of the modern rifle. The concept was brought to Sudan by General Wolseley and the last battle in redcoats is widely believed to be the battle of Ginnis in Sudan in 1885.

In 1883, with the Mahdi gaining ever more ground, a hasty, ill-prepared and badly supported Egyptian army expedition, headed by Lieutenant-General William Hicks headed south to relieve the city of El Obeid. The resulting battle was a catastrophe; virtually the entire army of some 8,000 and around 2,000 camp followers were massacred. Only about 300 lived to tell the tale. Gordon had returned to Europe in 1880, deeply disheartened by his lack of success in the Sudan, disapproving of the Egyptian court and suffering from a nervous breakdown. Lionised by the British public, behind closed doors, those who knew him well regarded him as dangerously unstable, a heavy drinker with capricious moods, depressive tendencies which some say amounted to a death wish, and extreme and somewhat peculiar religious views. In Khartoum, Michael Asher suggests that "while the Mahdi was in some ways a soldier masquerading as a mystic, Gordon was in a sense a mystic masquerading as a soldier."[46]

Nevertheless, the British public and press were baying for revenge for the death of Hicks Pasha and the shame of defeat. Only one man could save the day – their blue-eyed swashbuckling hero, the brave warrior who waded fearlessly into battle armed with nothing more than a rattan cane. Although the politicians were filled with huge misgivings, in 1884, Gordon was sent back to Khartoum with strict instructions to evacuate the 20,000-odd Europeans and Turco-Egyptian troops living there safely and leave the Sudan to the Mahdi. Supporters say that he was abandoned by the British and had no choice in what he did next, detractors that he deliberately flouted orders and chose to remain and take a death-defying stand. The reality is bound up in a web of conflicting claims, counter-commands and half-truths. The tragic result was inevitable. Gordon, believing himself to be beloved in the Sudan and deeply under-estimating both the military and religious power of the Mahdi, tried to bargain, while fatally also showing loyal Sudanese supporters proof that the British were preparing to pull out. Knowing that they were to be abandoned was the signal needed for many to transfer across to the Mahdist cause. By mid-April, 1884, Khartoum was effectively encircled. That

summer, Lord Wolseley was appointed to lead the Gordon Relief Column; his idea was to launch a two-pronged attack, one down the Nile using light boats and canoes, the other across the desert. He would draw the fittest and best-trained men he could find from battalions across the army for the purpose. It was the first use of special forces in history, and among his staff was a keen young Arabist, Herbert Kitchener. The year ticked on as they made their preparations with the Mahdi tracking their every move.

It was January before the expedition finally headed south, only to find itself fighting a ferocious and bloody battle at Abu Klea where the Arab forces famously broke the British square before the tide was painfully turned by the British artillery. The British were winning but every step was hard fought and painfully slow. By now, the Mahdi had taken up residence in Omdurman, just across the river, the siege of Khartoum had bitten hard and the people were starving. The two men exchanged letters with offers of surrender terms. With news of the Relief Expedition's approach, the Mahdi made his move.

> On the ramparts of the beleaguered capital of the Libyan Desert, as on some vast world-pedestal, General Gordon has demonstrated before all men the might that lies in the arm of a single Englishman who has faith in his country and his God. In him were incarnate the characteristics of the heroes of our national story. The chivalry of Arthur, of the Table Round, the indomitable valour and saintly life of the Great Alfred, and the religious convictions of Oliver the Protector - all were united in that slight form, now, alas! laid low in death, upon which, with ever increasing fascination, the eyes of the world have so long been fixed. The inspiration of his great example, now consecrated by his death, will not be lost upon the nation which, alas! too late, poured forth its millions into the desert sands in order to fulfil the duty to whose supreme claims he has sacrificed his life… [47]

Early on the morning of the 26 January, the Ansar army crossed the river, finding gaps in Khartoum's defenses thanks to a deserter. It was carnage as they swathed their way through the town in an orgy of murder and rape; many of the Egyptians chose to kill their women and children then commit suicide rather than fall into Dervish hands. Nushi Pasha's official report, compiled from eyewitness accounts, states that "They killed everyone they met, attacked the inhabitants in their houses and slaughtered them and ransacked everywhere."[48] By the time the Relief Expedition arrived, they were met by nothing but rotting corpses. They made their reckoning of the dead and left; it was fourteen years until the British and Egyptians were ready to return with Kitchener at the helm.

No one actually knows how Gordon died, but we are told that when hearing the news of the battle, he was in his dressing gown. He went downstairs, dressed in full uniform and went out onto the front steps of the governor's palace. One account says that he asked for the Mahdi and was run through by a servant; another more likely story has him fighting to the last, shot and finally speared in a running battle. Meantime, back in the Mahdist camp, Slatin was waiting impatiently for news:

> I could see plainly they were coming towards me. In front, marched three Black soldiers; one named Shatta, formerly belonging to Ahmed Bey Dafalla's slave body-guard, carried in his hands a bloody cloth in which something was wrapped up, and behind him followed a crowd of people weeping. The slaves had now approached my tent, and stood before me with insulting gestures; Shatta undid the cloth and showed me the head of General Gordon! The blood rushed to my head, and my heart seemed to stop beating; but, with a tremendous effort of self-control, I gazed silently at this ghastly spectacle. His blue eyes were half-opened; the mouth was perfectly natural; the hair of his head, and his short whiskers, were almost quite white.
>
> "Is not this the head of your uncle the unbeliever?" said Shatta, holding the head up before me.
>
> "What of it?" said I, quietly.
>
> "A brave soldier who fell at his post; happy is he to have fallen; his sufferings are over." [49]

Fuzzy-Wuzzy

We've fought with many men acrost the seas,
An' some of 'em was brave an' some was not:
The Paythan an' the Zulu an' Burmese;
But the Fuzzy was the finest o' the lot.
We never got a ha'porth's change of 'im:
'E squatted in the scrub an' 'ocked our 'orses,
'E cut our sentries up at Sua*kim*,
An' 'e played the cat an' banjo with our forces.

So 'ere's *to* you, Fuzzy-Wuzzy, at your 'ome in the Soudan;
You're a pore benighted 'eathen but a first-class fightin' man;
We gives you your certificate, an' if you want it signed
We'll come an' 'ave a romp with you whenever you're inclined.

We took our chanst among the Khyber 'ills,
The Boers knocked us silly at a mile,
The Burman give us Irriwaddy chills,
An' a Zulu *impi* dished us up in style:
But all we ever got from such as they
Was pop to what the Fuzzy made us swaller;
We 'eld our bloomin' own, the papers say,
But man for man the Fuzzy knocked us 'oller.

Then 'ere's *to* you, Fuzzy-Wuzzy, an' the missis and the kid;
Our orders was to break you, an' of course we went an' did.
We sloshed you with Martinis, an' it wasn't 'ardly fair;
But for all the odds agin' you, Fuzzy-Wuz, you broke the square.

'E 'asn't got no papers of 'is own,
'E 'asn't got no medals nor rewards,
So we must certify the skill 'e's shown
In usin' of 'is long two-'anded swords:
When 'e's 'oppin' in an' out among the bush
With 'is coffin-'eaded shield an' shovel-spear,
An 'appy day with Fuzzy on the rush

Will last an 'ealthy Tommy for a year.

So 'ere's *to* you, Fuzzy-Wuzzy, an' your friends which are no more,
If we 'adn't lost some messmates we would 'elp you to deplore;
But give an' take's the gospel, an' we'll call the bargain fair,
For if you 'ave lost more than us, you crumpled up the square!

'E rushes at the smoke when we let drive,
An', before we know, 'e's 'ackin' at our 'ead;
'E's all 'ot sand an' ginger when alive,
An' 'e's generally shammin' when 'e's dead.
'E's a daisy, 'e's a ducky, 'e's a lamb!
'E's a injia-rubber idiot on the spree,
'E's the on'y thing that doesn't give a damn
For a Regiment o' British Infantree!

So 'ere's *to* you, Fuzzy-Wuzzy, at your 'ome in the Soudan;
You're a pore benighted 'eathen but a first-class fightin' man;
An' 'ere's *to* you, Fuzzy-Wuzzy, with your 'ayrick 'ead of 'air -
You big black boundin' beggar - for you broke a British square!

Rudyard Kipling, first published *Scots Observer*, 15 March, 1890.

The ‘fuzzy-wuzzies’ were the cattle-owning Baggara, the chief supporters of the Mahdi from Kordofan and Darfur in western Sudan, and the Beja, from the Red Sea coast, known for their wild, shaggy hair and as ferocious warriors who won huge respect from the British Tommies who had to face them in battle. This poem, which mixes racism and respect and can seem shocking to a modern audience, was a sensational hit with the British public, if not with all critics of the day.

Chapter Five – Atbara to Khartoum

I am Atbara
The colour of iron in flame…
Untitled poem by Al-Hajj ‘Abd al-Rahman, poet, railway worker and trade union leader, 1968[50]

Dawn. I sit on a camp chair in front of my tent and nurse a cup of tea as I watch the rising sun puddle the sand with hints of rose and apricot. The steam mingles with the slightest of dews that will burn off within minutes. For now, the desert is fresh and new. The landscape is piled up in triangles; the weathered dunes, the hard lacy Meccano of the electric pylons and on a distant ridge, mirroring the two, the softly broken pyramids of Meroe, the tombs of the kings and queens of Cush. The Italian Camp is a wonderful luxury, but is also about the only place to stay. I imagine Kitchener and his army camped up here, or somewhere very similar, having a brew beside their tents, nerves jangling, pre-dawn. My life is far more comfortable than theirs but, pylons aside, the view is little changed.

An hour later, I am at the ticket office, waiting to pay to visit the pyramids. The car park is huge but the only car in it is mine. A table is laid out hopefully with souvenirs – beads, heavy brass candlesticks, old colonial coins and bullet casings, two rusty swords, some plastic models of the pyramids saying Made in China underneath, and a strange little triangular harp tied together with rough rope. A man with a gleaming white turban and a bristling handlebar moustache gives me a demonstration of how to play the harp then follows as I am ushered towards the ticket office, a small wooden hut sporting a gaudy red label saying “Defacing Ancient Monuments is Strictly Forbidden – Antiquities Ordinance 1905”. Inside, an old lady in glasses presides over a plastic-covered table on which stand a giant blue urn, a cash box and a book of tickets. She smiles but doesn’t speak. Mr Handlebar chats sociably as she carefully thumbs through the book and stamps my ticket. We get the bit about jobs and marriages out of the way quickly.

“Do you have children?” he asks.

"No," I reply. "I have never been blessed. But I have nieces and nephews."

"I have eight," he boasts, squaring his shoulders with pride. I laugh.

"No wonder I have none – you have enough for all of us. There are none left for me!"

"Do you want one?"

I splutter slightly, not quite sure what is coming next and wary of how to answer.

"When your husband comes, come back here and choose and I will give you one. We have many."

"I really don't think I can take home one of your children."

"Why not? Madonna did."

He was right. I was silenced. To this day, I have no idea whether he was throwing out a serious suggestion or amusing himself at the expense of the foreign female. I didn't push it, just in case.

A dozen gaudily-carapaced camels knelt patiently on the sand just beyond the entrance hut waiting to transport the hordes of tourists up the short steep sand dunes to the pyramids. It would have been just as fast to walk and, truth be told, probably more comfortable. As I approached, I remembered back to an earlier encounter in northern Kenya when I was taken camel trekking by a Samburu warrior, who noticeably chose to walk himself. My saddle, on that occasion, was a thin foam mattress tied on with rope, and I could feel every bone in the camel's spine. Each step felt like the action of a serrated saw. After about three hours, now in fairly excruciating pain, I asked my guide how long it took to get used to it.

"About five days," he replied.

"And how long are your camping safaris?" I asked.

"Five days!" he replied, and nearly bent double as he howled with laughter.

A dozen camels and camel owners were looking expectant and I was the horde, so I felt honour-bound to be a dutiful tourist. They went carefully along the line to choose the best one for me and half a dozen pairs of willing hands hauled me on board. A swoop forward, a lurch backwards and we were up and off. All dozen came too for the walk, my very own camel caravan through the dunes.

The Meroitic pyramids are far smaller than those in Egypt but what they lack in size they make up for in number, with a couple of hundred in three groups, scattered across the low hills near the Royal City. All of them were robbed many centuries before the earliest archaeologists arrived, but they too added to the site's woes, digging over-enthusiastically and leaving huge spoil heaps to clutter things up. Others made over-precise attempts at reconstruction, creating alarming razor-sharp pyramids that would look more in place cast in steel on one of Madonna's bras. Yet they couldn't destroy everything and for all this, the site is mesmerising, an undulating, shifting landscape of geometric pattern that plays endlessly with the changing light. Close in and the stonework reveals the chisel marks of ancient masons and lines of hieroglyphs; we forget that the Nile culture didn't stop conveniently at the Egyptian border. Sudan is filled with priceless ancient treasures, many of them forgotten or unknown, all too many unexcavated.

I reluctantly tear myself away and head down the hill, past the line of camels, now back to their patient waiting. A two-man French camera team is arriving – no one here is just a tourist. We nod to each other but do not speak.

Back at the car, I find my front seat has been usurped by a strange man in khaki with a dark green knitted beany hat. He is smoking. He makes no acknowledgement of my existence but Hassan hops out as he sees me coming and leads me away from the car to talk in hushed tones.

"I am very sorry, he is a policeman. He needs to get to Atbara and it is the custom here to give the police a lift if they ask. I cannot refuse." I grit my teeth, annoyed not so much by the principle but by his rudeness and his cigarette. I am paying for his transport, I am a visitor in his country, but I am female so I am

invisible to him. I put away my notebook and camera, fuming silently and determined to make him acknowledge my existence. We leave the Frenchmen's gleaming white four-by-four in solitary possession of the car park and the pyramids and turn north, the road running straight and true, guided by two bright shining lines of steel, towards Atbara, Sudan's railway capital, and far beyond that, north across the desert to Wadi Halfa and the Egyptian border.

The atmosphere in the car has changed, quite literally. It is slowly filling up with smoke. I open the window to let some of it out but that stops the air-conditioning working and an unseen hand in the front seat has an override; the window simply glides back up. Beany Man has found a local music station and he and Hassan have settled into sporadic guttural discussion in Arabic. Every now and then, I think of a question just to try and provoke a response. I get a hurried reply from Hassan and nothing from Beany Man who has still not even looked at me. Suddenly he holds up a hand and the car slams to a halt.

Beside the road are two old men with donkeys laden with firewood. Beany Man wants to go shopping. I have no idea whether the old men had intended the firewood for themselves, but this negotiation was only ever going to end one way. They are also incredibly photogenic so in spite of being in the presence of the police, I get out my camera and start taking pictures. No one seems to mind so I move round to include Beany Man – and finally get an acknowledgement. I assume it will be to shut me down but I have a quick brainwave, gesture to his head and say "nice hat" with my best being-nice-to-policemen smile. Vanity overpowers all. While the old men load their wood into the boot of the car, he simply can't resist drawing himself up to his full height, puffing out his chest and posing for his portrait. Game, set and match to me. A stupidly small victory and one that he never knew about, but take your victories where you can.

Over the years there were numerous skirmishes between the Egyptian Army and the Ansar but, on the whole, the British were content to leave the Mahdists alone and concentrate on tightening their grip on the far bigger trading

prize of Egypt. The Mahdi himself had died, probably of typhus, in 1885, only six months after the death of Gordon, leaving his newly formed territories to be consolidated by the most powerful of his Khalifas (seconds-in-command). Abdullah ibn Muhammed became an autocratic dictator with imperial ambitions of his own. From his capital in Omdurman, he set about subduing the renegade tribes, gradually bending the whole of Sudan to his will through a potent blend of payments, punishments and religious devotion. The new state lived in a ferment of perpetual internal and external warfare, as he demanded ever higher taxes and a plentiful supply of new slave soldiers. Within a few years, fields began to be neglected, harvests were failing, herds were slaughtered and much of the country began to suffer terribly from famine.

Several things began to focus British minds back on the Sudan. The dramatic escape of Major-General Rudolf Slatin in 1895, after ten years of imprisonment by the Khalifa, brought a valuable source of information which showed how fractured and dysfunctional the Mahdist state was becoming. The Khalifa tried and failed to extend his influence into Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) and up into Egypt. Perhaps more importantly, the French began to show an interest in the Sudan – and that, to the ultra-competitive British, was simply not to be countenanced. The final trigger for action however was offering a helping hand to a fellow would-be colonialist. The Italians were trying to launch their own territorial ambitions in Abyssinia, with disastrous results.

On the 1st March, 1896, some 18,000 Italian troops were slaughtered at the Battle of Adowa, one of the worst defeats ever suffered by a European power on African soil. The Italian ambassador asked British Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, to keep the Dervish army busy while the shredded remnants of the Italian population at Kassala regrouped. Had it not been for these far more pragmatic political concerns, the politicians would happily have left Gordon unavenged. As it was, the ostensible reasons for the revived Sudan campaign became the long-awaited revenge for the death of Gordon and the regaining of British military pride and honour. These patriotic rallying cries whipped up emotional and financial support for the campaign at home and instilled steel into the hearts of the British Tommies who were to face one of the most backbreaking and hard-fought campaigns in history.

Sir Herbert Horatio Kitchener (later Lord Kitchener of Khartoum) was a man more admired than liked, a perfectionist driven by ambition. Daily Mail journalist GW Steevens, who travelled with him in the Sudan, paints an astonishingly inhuman portrait of the man who later came to be the public face of World War One recruitment posters:

> His precision is so inhumanly unerring, he is more like a machine than a man. You feel that he ought to be patented and shown with pride at the Paris International Exhibition. British Empire: Exhibit No. 1., hors concours, the Sudan Machine…
>
> For Anglo-Egypt he is the Mahdi, the expected; the man who has sifted experience and corrected error; who has worked at small things and waited for great; marble to sit still and fire to smite; steadfast, cold and inflexible; the man who has cut out his human heart and made himself a machine to retake Khartum.[51]

A fluent Arabist who had spent much of his working life in the Middle East, Kitchener worked his way up through the ranks and was perhaps an obvious choice to become Sirdar (Commander-in-Chief) of the Egyptian Army in 1892 as the British administration struggled to rebuild it. Having taken part in the ill-fated Wolseley campaign, he blamed much of its failure, and the whole loss of the Sudan, on poor organisation and communications and set to with a vengeance to ensure that modernity became the watchword of the day.

Early on the morning of 13th March, 1896, Kitchener was woken to a telegram from London ordering him to advance on Dongola in Sudan; the Egyptian cabinet approved the decision later that morning. The reconquest was a reality. The Egyptian Army had been completely overhauled and was a very different affair from that which had left Sudan eleven years before: a nominally volunteer force, reasonably well-paid, proud, well-disciplined and trained. Most of the officers were Egyptians, led by a handful of British imports, seconded via the Foreign Office on two-year tours of duty. However young and green, these British officers automatically received the rank of Bimbashi (Major) and were never required to serve under an Egyptian officer. They seemed to regard their mere presence as a talismanic way of rallying and steadying the native troops. As one officer says of his troops in bestselling novelist, GA Henty's

wonderfully derring-do book for boys, *With Kitchener in the Soudan, A Story of Atbara and Omdurman* (1903):

> They are splendid fellows – they love fighting for fighting's sake. It is in their opinion the only worthy occupation for a man, and they have shown themselves worthy to fight by the side of our men. They have a perfect confidence in us, and would, I believe, go anywhere we led them. They say themselves, 'We are never afraid – just like English'.[52]

The New Egyptian Army also contained six Sudanese battalions. There are very few accounts of the campaign by black or Egyptian soldiers, most of whom were unable to write; those that do exist survive only within Western newspapers, or within military records, stories told to and written down by British journalists or army administrators. The Sudanese had been fighting for the Egyptians as slave-soldiers as far back as the times of the pharaohs and there were officially Sudanese battalions in the forces of Mohammed Ali Pasha in the 1820s and 30s. Sudanese troops fought in the Crimea and were even sent to Mexico to help out Napoleon III in 1863. Most of those who made up the new battalions were former slave-soldiers and seasoned campaigners and unlike the British and Egyptians, they volunteered for life. Some confusion about their actual status remains throughout the nineteenth century as those who came from slave families frequently identified as slaves even if they had their freedom, often taking names such as al-Abd, denoting their former status. What is more shocking, from a modern standpoint, is the suggestion that, according to unpublished military correspondence and recruitment questionnaires, the British began following the Turkish practice of branding their Sudanese recruits.[53] Under the British, no soldier was formally a slave since they were well paid, housed, and Sudanese troops were allowed to marry, but in terms of freedom, life was not so different from the old days. Their motives for fighting are harder to read and loyalty often seems to have been given to whichever side was in charge at the time or offered the better benefits. However, this was a war which occasionally pitted brother against brother or even father and there are extraordinary tales of joyous reunions in the aftermath of battle. There are also stories of revenge against former slave masters, of the rescue of mothers and sisters held captive and of family members found amongst the dead on the battlefield.

The soldiers themselves were in great demand from both sides in the conflict. Many of the Khalifa's finest fighting men had been trained by the old Egyptian army and as the new army was formed, he became so nervous of losing his troops that he issued an edict forbidding any black man over the age of seven from leaving the country. According to *The Times* correspondent, EF Knight:

> ...a great number of the men in the Sudanese battalions were deserters from the Khalifa's army. Indeed our friends the Kababish received a reward of ten dollars for every Sudanese deserter they smuggled across the border to us. The battalions were also full of escaped black slaves. The Khalifa, alarmed by this wholesale desertion to the enemy of his best fighting men, took rigorous measures to prevent the blacks from going north. If a black now escapes, all the property of his owner is confiscated by the Khalifa. So now we get few deserters, though these poor kourbash-driven soldiers, hearing from their relatives in the Egyptian service how excellently they are treated, are but too anxious to change their flag.[54]

Many of the British commentators go into some detail comparing the relative merits of British, Egyptian and Sudanese fighting men. EF Knight claims that while the Egyptian fellah possesses "passive courage" and is "naturally devoid of military enthusiasm" he is "cool and steady under fire". The black Sudanese troops, on the other hand, he describes as showing "high courage", but being "somewhat clumsy" and unable "to endure fatigue so well". On the plus side, he considers they are better shots than the Egyptians and very jolly![55]

Steevens, who is generally more measured in his approach, points out that "There is also a certain proportion of black captains and subalterns among the Sudanese: they are keen, work well with the British, and, of course, are utterly fearless; but, as a rule, lack of education keeps them out of the higher grades."[56]

The modern pragmatist, determined to make best use of all the new technology available to him, Kitchener realized that however good his troops, success would depend on communications, supply and speed. From the beginning, according to Lieutenant-Colonel EWC Sandes, who wrote the Royal Engineers' official history of the Sudanese campaigns "the Dongola Expedition, and the Omdurman Campaign which followed it, consisted of the building of railways with attendant military operations rather than of military operations with attendant railway construction."[57]

First attempts to extend the railway south into Sudan had begun as far back as the 1860s. However, while railway construction continued rapidly in Egypt, the extension of the line south into Sudan was beset with problems from the start, not least of which was the lack of labour; Sudan had no system of enforced *corvée* such as had been used in Egypt. As Governor of Sudan, Gordon resented having to foot the bill and wanted to replace the railway by a series of cheaper tramways round the cataracts. In 1874, he simply cancelled the project, relying instead on a fleet of Nile steamers, their parts supplied by camel train. In 1884-6, during Wolseley's disastrous Dongola Expedition for the relief of Khartoum, the line was hastily extended southwards towards Kerma, 327 km south of Wadi Halfa, near the Third Cataract. Major DA Scott was placed in charge of the work, with 350 Indian permanent way workers brought in to provide labour. However the short-lived line proved of little use and it lay neglected for eleven years. By 1896, the system had become dangerous and virtually unusable, its rusty piles of spares freely pillaged by local villagers and the Ansar alike. Winston Churchill offers a vivid description of the British return to Akasha station, which was to become the jumping off point for the reconstruction of Sudan's railways:

> The huts of the mud village were crumbling back into the desert sand. The old British fort and a number of storehouses—relics of the Gordon Relief Expedition—were in ruins. The railway from Sarras had been pulled to pieces. Most of the sleepers had disappeared, but the rails lay scattered along the track. All was deserted: yet one grim object proclaimed the Dervish occupation. Beyond the old station and near the river a single rail had been fixed nearly upright in the ground. From one of the holes for the fishplate bolts there dangled a rotten cord, and on the sand beneath this improvised yet apparently effective gallows lay a human skull and bones, quite white and beautifully polished by the action of sun and wind.[58]

Kitchener's first orders were to restart work on restoring these long-abandoned links bridging the Nile cataracts in northern Sudan. Undeterred by the fact that everyone he consulted said it was impossible, most adding that it was lunatic and dangerous, he then embarked on an even more ambitious engineering feat.

South of Wadi Halfa, the Nile takes a huge 600-mile curve to the west, massively increasing the journey time, length of and danger to the supply chain.

Kitchener now decided that in order to save time and distance, he would move the railway away from the river and build a line straight across the desert, cutting out the loop and saving a 360-mile journey. It made sense on paper but it was an astonishing plan. The logistics of moving the army of men and machines across one of the most hostile geographical environments on the planet, mapping the terrain, building the line at high speed, provisioning the workers and the trains, under conditions of war, was the stuff of nightmares. The prospect of death from drought, starvation, fever or attack was never more than a day or two away. And that was before factoring in a largely untrained and uneducated workforce, speaking a multitude of languages. The Sudan Military Railway was not an elegant piece of engineering and didn't last long before it needed relaying, but its creation is probably one of the most extraordinary stories in the history of the railways.

As a project, it wasn't cheap and the already bankrupt Egyptian Government, faced by an immediate bill of half a million Egyptian pounds, had to go cap in hand to the *Caisse de Dête*, the collection of international bankers who oversaw half the country's spending, to allocate the money from the country's reserve fund. The French, in particular, saw the opportunity to put the boot in and refuse the payment. Only a last minute intervention by the British government first guaranteed then gifted the money to the Egyptians along with an additional E£300,000. This was, in every way, effectively a British campaign, and if it became an ideal opportunity to undercut French influence at the court of the Egyptian Khedive, that was a bonus.

Alongside the fighting battalions, under the command of Lieutenant-General Hunter, Kitchener now deployed the Egyptian Army Railway Battalion, consisting of 33 staff officers, two quartermasters and 2,882 noncommissioned officers and men. Expertise was supplied by the Royal Engineers. As the local Sudanese were, by and large, reluctant to engage in heavy manual labour, most of the unskilled labour force was imported from Egypt (Sai'idis) or recruited from amongst captured Mahdist soldiers.

There was also much discussion about which gauge to use. The Egyptian system had been built on the broad, 4ft 8½ in gauge while the Uganda Railway to the south was being constructed on the Indian Railways-favoured metre gauge. By this time, Cecil Rhodes, far to the south in the Cape Colony, had conceived his grand scheme of a railway linking Africa from Cape Town to Cairo, a concept of which Kitchener was keenly aware. He had met Rhodes a few weeks earlier when the

millionaire had stopped off in Cairo on his way south to buy donkeys for use in his South African gold mines. Rhodes had begun building using the 3ft 6 in gauge which Kitchener favoured in order to make his new line compatible. The clincher was undoubtedly however the fact that the Relief Expedition's abandoned line and spares at Wadi Halfa (including five locomotives and 60 wagons) was also, conveniently, 3ft 6in. Kitchener won the day, however much it displeased the Khedive and however difficult it made connections between Egypt and Sudan.

Action was swift. By the end of March, 1896, less than a month after Kitchener had been given his orders, Wadi Halfa was transformed into a bustling forward command post, the calm precision of the tented military hospital a sharp contrast to the fiery, clanging ironworks of the railway construction yards. GW Steevens described his first impressions of the town:

> Halfa clangs from morning till night with rails lassoed and drawn up a sloping pair of their fellows by many convicts on to trucks; it thuds with sleepers and boxes of bully-beef dumped on to the shore. As you come home from dinner you stumble over strange rails, and sudden engine-lamps flash in your face, and warning whistles scream in your ears. As you lie at night you hear the plug-plug of the goods engine, nearer and nearer, till it sounds as if it must be walking in at your tent door. From the shops of Halfa the untamed Sudan is being tamed at last. It is the new system, the modern system —mind and mechanics beating muscle and shovel-head spear.[59]

On the 9th April, 1896, according to Reginald Hills' history of *Sudan Transport*:

> the first printed Sudan Railways timetable that has survived was issued at Wadi Halfa providing for a service of two trains a day in each direction between Wadi Halfa and Moghrat (the soldiers' way of spelling Murrat) Wells, a distance of 62 kilometres, timed to be traversed in 4½ hours, at a speed of slightly under 14 kilometres an hour.[60]

Kitchener had a habit of collecting around him a tight-knit group of cheerful, good-looking, unmarried young subalterns who became known collectively as "Kitchener's Band of Boys". This was one of a number of clues that has led many historians to claim that the military man of steel was, like so many of Britain's other empire-building heroes of the day, such as Gordon, Rhodes and Baden-Powell, a

highly repressed homosexual. There is no definitive evidence of any physical relationships however and either way, the "boys" were chosen as much for their efficiency as their beauty.

On the 5th May, Kitchener announced the promotion of one of them, Bimbashi Percy Girouard of the Royal Engineers as the new Director of Railways. Edouard Percy Cranwill Girouard ("Gerry") was born in Montreal, the child of a prominent Canadian Catholic family. His father was both a Member of Parliament and a Supreme Court judge. He trained at the Royal Military College in Kingston, Canada, then gained railway experience as a surveyor on the Canadian Pacific Railway before moving to England to join the Royal Engineers. He was only 29 when he was put in charge of creating the Sirdar's dangerously impossible railway, a task which first involved finding a route across the waterless desert, gleaning what little information he could from the local Ababda Arabs and using sketch maps that were produced on the ground for part of the route by several young Royal Engineers. He soon proved both to be an adept problem solver and no respecter of rank or Kitchener's fearsome reputation. Kitchener, failing once again to consult any experts, ordered half a dozen locomotives that were far too light and wholly unsuited for the work. Girouard not only told Kitchener a few home truths but persuaded Cecil Rhodes to allow him to divert several far more suitable 70- and 80-ton engines (which fortunately happened to be of the correct gauge) which had been on their way to South Africa, before heading off to England to do his own shopping.

The work camps shifted up the line with the railhead, complete with the workers and a growing ragtag army of camp followers and traders who kept the workers occupied in their off-duty hours. The train was beginning to gather a community to itself, forging a town, albeit a nomadic one for the present. On the 24th May, journalist EF Knight described his arrival at the railhead camp near Ambigol Wells:

> Though this camp is ever moving on as the railway progresses, it has an orderly and permanent appearance. There are here a number of tents and huts occupied by the young engineer officers and the men of the railway battalion engaged in the construction of the line, a congregation, too, of little shelters where dwell native camp-followers, black, brown, and yellow, all of whom must have put forward some reasonable pretext for being here, for water is scarce at Moghrat. That used for drinking purposes is mostly brought up by the train,

and this is no place for idle mouths. Enterprising Greeks have, of course, found their way here, and their little stores and canteens ever accompany the shifting camps.[61]

Track was laid down at astonishing rate, sometimes over a mile a day. On one memorable day, during the last push, the tracklaying team achieved an astonishing 5,200 yards. The train acted as its own mule, carrying not only the workmen but all the rails, tracks and other engineering equipment needed to lay down each new section. Lieutenant Manifold gave a vivid description of the process in a letter written from the railhead at the end of June, 1896:

We lay anything from a quarter of a mile to one and a half miles a day, depending on the number of trains of material that arrive. The general idea of the work is that a trainload comes up and goes to the end of the line, as far as is safe. A gang of men unload sleepers, walk out in front, and throw them down roughly in place on the bank. Another gang carry rails, and throw them down roughly in place on the sleepers. This is an amusing sight. The rail gangs are Sudanese pensioners, mostly old men, and they abuse each other all the time for not taking fair shares; and generally, after they have dropped the rail, they have to be separated by a spare gang from a sort of Donnybrook! Next come a gang of men with fishplates, which join the rails together. Then a man with a piece of chalk, marking the positions of the sleepers on the rail—a soft job. After him, a few men moving the sleepers correctly under the chalk marks. Then come 12 ' work- shops,' each consisting of five men—two with crowbars as levers, two with hammers, and one with a gauge to measure the correct width between the rails. The crowbar-men lever the sleeper up, sitting on the end of the bar. After a man has sat on a crowbar for four months he wears out his breeches, so you can tell a crowbar- man at a glance as generally he has no breeches left. The hammer-men knock in the spikes, and then the hardest worked man of the lot, who carries the gauge, measures to see if they have done right. You can always tell a gauge-man: his clothes are so good. The line is now laid, but it looks rather inebriated, and so a real *Osta,* or plate-layer, comes along with a party who move the whole thing sideways, one way or the other, until it is fairly straight. Then, as about 50 yards or so are finished, the material train moves over the line. Behind the train come the remainder of the men, and a huge lever, with two men to sit on it, which is used to level the rails. Then about 20 men with shovels, who throw on the ballast; and another 20 with beaters, who pack it well into the sleepers. Finally there comes another *Osta,* who finishes up the straightening. It all goes like clockwork, and Pritchard

and I have only to ride up and down and shout '*Shogloo,'* or 'get on,' and vary it by separating the old Sudanese when they have dropped a rail.[62]

Onto the trains were also crammed all the food, fuel and water to support both men and machines, as well as supplies, munitions and armaments for the fighting forces. Throughout the building process, the logistical nightmare became ever more complex as the fragile line stretched further across the desert. While noting the extraordinary difference made by the arrival of the railway, acknowledging that "the Khalifa was conquered on the railway", Winston Churchill talked in detail about the difficulties faced by the supply line, writing: "The carrying capacity of the line was strictly limited. The worn-out engines frequently broke down. On many occasions only three were in working order, and the other five undergoing 'heavy repairs' which might secure them another short span of usefulness."[63] The railway's efficiency was also dogged at first by the lack of skilled staff both in building the permanent way and in operating the trains. Another of Kitchener's "boys", Bimbashi Longfield recalls in his autobiography:

It is difficult to convey an adequate impression of what a congested station in the Sudan was like on a hot night in June during the expedition. Every siding was filled with trucks. There were no signals. The Egyptian N.C.Os, who were acting as shunters, were liable at any moment to give the wrong signal, and the engine-drivers might easily misinterpret the correct one. A pointsman might turn over his lever at a wrong moment, and the driver of one engine might act on the signal intended for his fellow. A move too far in the wrong direction would derail the trucks over the end of the siding into deep sand, or would split and cripple the siding points. All the probabilities had to be foreseen. The space between the sidings was deep sand, cumbered with piles of stores and equipment. It was pitch dark, and the thermometer stood at anything over 100 degrees. In these nightmare conditions, the detrainment of troops, the shunting of trains and the clearing of the station were carried out.[64]

On other occasions, the crews were faced by a virulent outbreak of cholera, which killed hundreds of workers and incapacitated many more before it was eventually brought under control, while violent electric storms and flash floods destroyed miles of newly laid line. Even the effects of drifting desert sand covering the line slowed traffic dramatically. All the while, Ansar scouting parties lurked

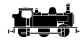
within a few miles, skirmishes were frequent and threat of war never far away. Several times, work had to stop while the soldiers shouldered their rifles and marched ahead to clear towns of enemy troops, fighting big set-piece battles before returning to their picks and shovels. Should the supply line be cut, the troops at the railhead had sufficient water to last for three days at most. Life was made slightly easier by the happy discovery of water and the creation of wells at two points along the 386 km (240 mile) route but the margins for error were tiny, the price was survival and the demands were huge. By the time of the Battle of Omdurman in September 1898, 37 tons of stores were needed at the front line every day. Back in Cairo, much of the provisioning was contracted out to the efficiently ubiquitous Thomas Cook & Son, experts in expeditions whether for tourism or conquest. A telegraph and telephone system, supervised by Manifold, tracked the railway south and stations were set up along the route which had to be manned, fortified and provisioned. Churchill again described the process:

> As the line grew longer, native officers and non-commissioned officers from the active and reserve lists of the Egyptian Army were appointed station-masters. Intelligent non-commissioned officers and men were converted into shunters, guards, and pointsmen. Traffic was controlled by telephone. To work the telephone, men were discovered who could read and write—very often who could read and write only their own names, and even that with such difficulty that they usually preferred a seal. They developed into clerks by a simple process of selection. To improve their education, and to train a staff in the office work of a railway, two schools were instituted at Halfa. In these establishments, which were formed by the shade of two palm-trees, twenty pupils received the beginnings of knowledge. The simplicity of the instruction was aided by the zeal of the students, and learning grew beneath the palm-trees more quickly perhaps than in the magnificent schools of civilisation.[65]

This was the pragmatic beginning of the process of education which led, in later decades, to the explosion of literary and poetic talent amongst the railway workers of northern Sudan.

The railway rejoined the Nile at Abu Hamed on 31st October, 1897 but work continued on the line, past the cataracts for the next few months. On 3rd July, 1898, the railway finally reached the mouth of the Atbara River and the nomadic railhead camp found a permanent home. Here, a now heavily fortified camp became the

southern terminus until the Mahdi was overthrown at the Battle of Omdurman and it was finally safe to proceed south and take the railway along the river to Khartoum. Even then, Atbara was to prove no mere temporary halt. Today it is a shadow of the place it was at the height of its glory but in the 1970s, as Headquarters of the Sudan Railways Corporation, that camp had grown into a town of over 70,000 people.



Atbara is a railway town, its wide dusty streets and low colonial buildings scattered between criss-crossed shunting yards and workshops. Just to underline the point, an old locomotive stands forever still, welded into concrete, on the roundabout at the entrance of the town. I take out my camera but Hassan stops me instantly.

"No photos."

"But I have a permit."

"No. No pictures of trains." I had been so pleased to get my photo permit that I hadn't stopped to read the small print. As we gently shuddered across the corrugations on the dirt road, I now did so. It allowed me to take pictures of sights of tourist interest, but nothing of any military, government or strategic significance. Personally, I think trains are of great tourist interest but no, they are considered to be strategic. As a railway town, so is the whole of Atbara. The only train I'd seen so far was wearing concrete boots but even that would require special permission. As would bridges, which, I was later to discover, neatly cut out the one good viewpoint of the confluence of the Blue and White Niles in Khartoum.

Even before the railways, Atbara was a transport junction. Standing at the confluence of the Atbara and Nile rivers, there was a small settlement, al-Dakhla, thought to be centred on a rest station for travellers heading east towards the Red Sea at Port Sudan. It grew up, extraordinarily, to become a hotbed of political radicalism, one of Africa's great centres of communism and unionisation – an outcome which surely would have shocked to the core both the fanatically religious Mahdists and Kitchener, the man who was ultimately to be responsible for founding the town, when it sprang into life as the southern railhead of the Desert Railway. With the reconquest of the northern territories, it became the Headquarters of the Egyptian Army Railway Battalion. From 1905 onwards, after the addition of lines south to Khartoum and east

to Port Sudan it rapidly grew to become the country's most important railway junction, headquarters of the Sudan Railways and home, not only to its administration but to all its engineering workshops, training divisions and other complex corporate machinery. Where a small and somewhat dusty village had once existed, a carefully planned town sprang to life, not always with the agreement of the original residents of al-Dakhla who found themselves at the wrong end of compulsory purchase agreements, losing much of their prime agricultural land along the riverfront.

The population, from the start, was extremely multi-national, including British, Egyptians, Greeks, Maltese, Poles, Albanians, Syrians, Ethiopians, Indians and Sudanese. Many of the Sudanese employed, at least in the early years, were former Mahdist slaves or runaway slaves from nearby areas for whom some British officers provided manumission papers if they managed to reach the camp safely. By the time of the 1955 census, Atbara's population was 36,298, although there were probably many more unregistered. By the 1960s, it was over 66,000. During the early years, under military control, by far the largest number of foreign workers was Egyptian. Egypt's 1924 uprising spread as far as Atbara however, with rioting soldiers of the Egyptian Army Railway Battalion causing serious damage to the engineering yards, an act suppressed only with the help of the 9th Sudanese Battalion. Within a month, the Army Battalion was shipped north, Sudan Railways was reborn as a civil rather than military institution and work began on the Sudanisation of jobs at virtually every level – also a pragmatically economic decision, as the Sudanese workers were considerably cheaper.

The town's streets, jobs and even social life were highly structured. As the railways grew in sophistication, the company created up to 200 different employment grades, each with its own salary scale. At the bottom came the unskilled labourers. Artisans could earn five times as much while admin staff could earn between two and four times the amount of the artisans. Foreigners were given additional expat and housing allowances, so were considerably more expensive to employ. In 1937 the growing town was replanned to reflect this hierarchy with houses in four grades (based on plot size and building materials, from brick and concrete First-Class houses on 400m plots to mud-brick Fourth-Class on 200m plots). The beer brewers and prostitutes were each given their own areas while the British Quarter remained off-limits to all Sudanese other than servants. Surrounding the Railway Cantonment,

informal settlements sprang up as traders moved in to offer services from supplying food to repairing bicycles.

As the town grew, some of the local peoples began to be attracted by the possibilities of wealth, with people recruiting from their own homes and villages, ensuring that newcomers would not only find a friendly welcome, somewhere to live, and help with training. As time went on, children and relatives would also join their fathers on the job. As the Sudanese took over more roles, ethnic clusters began to emerge, with, for instance, the Rubatab from the Abu Hamad area working in the permanent way while the Shaiqiyya gravitated to the workshops, traffic department and railway police and the Nubians took charge of the catering. To plug the skills gap while they were trained, Thomas Cook in Cairo were asked to supply various foreign artisans. They obligingly sent south forty workers, mainly from Eastern and Central Europe, many of whom were Communists and brought with them their ideology. By the 1930s, the first labour organisations were in existence in the town, along with the Hammer and Sickle Society.

During the early years of World War II, with the Italians in Libya and Ethiopia and Britain's North Africa campaign against Rommel hugely reliant on rail transport, Atbara, with its crucial railway workshops, unexpectedly became a key target. The Italians launched three air attacks on the town and two on Khartoum, in July, August and September, 1940. In spite of dropping a total of over 100 bombs, they caused relatively little damage. The only casualties were one policeman in Atbara and three children in Khartoum. However, the people were terrified and outraged, demanding protection, particularly as thousands of local soldiers and railway workers had joined the forces on the front line.

Every railway worker had to agree to an extensive railways rule book which codified life outside work as well as within working hours. With little to do in the area, social clubs became the mainstay of entertainment. These were encouraged as they helped to create the close-knit sense of community that has become a trademark of all railway towns. Every society had to be properly incorporated and approved by the authorities but these too were strictly delineated by nationality and seniority, from the Atbara Club, Atbara Sports Club and Atbara Golf Club (for the British and senior railway management) to the Egyptian Club, various social and sporting clubs. Some simply provided entertainment, offering places to gather and drink, football or basketball matches or cycle races. Others were grassroots mutual aid and cooperative societies, village associations and religious organisations. These included Malja' al-qirish (The Piastre Society), set up in 1931, which helped the poor, orphans, the homeless and elderly; the Kuri People Society, established in 1934 by natives of five Kuri villages to help people arriving in town and assist them with

remitting money back home, an important part of the familial duties of most railway workers and the Coptic Orthodox Benevolent Society, which opened in 1912, and ran a Bible society, Coptic school, Christian girls' school and Sunday school as well as offering a variety of social services including a blood bank. This was by no means the only club to offer education; the al-Watan Sports Club, which began life as the al-Dakhla football team, also offered adult education for both men and women. Various clubs also put on art exhibitions, plays and poetry readings while the town became renowned for its music, from jazz bands to the marching band of the Railway Police. The railway itself even played a part publishing a house journal, known initially as *The Atbarabian*, changing its name from 1937 to the *Sudan Railways Bulletin*, which actively encouraged workers to submit pieces of creative writing. The al-Watan Sports Club also became involved in another activity which spread rapidly amongst the various societies, organizing political lectures and anti-colonialist rallies. Atbara's thriving education and creative network ensured that there was a thriving local intelligentsia with excellent writing and presentation skills, ready to lead any rebellion, and clubs and societies from the Graduates' Congress to the Old Boys of Technical School Club became a perfect vehicle for union and political organisation.

The labour organisation became far more active after the war as returning soldiers came home to deteriorating working and housing conditions and rampant inflation. In June 1946, the members of the Old Boys of Technical School Club founded the Workers Affairs Association, the workers' first serious attempt to unionise. It later became the Sudan Railway Workers' Union. The reluctance of both the company and the British authorities first to recognise any union, then to allow them any real say both in their own constitutions or the working conditions of the workers, led over successive years to a series of strikes and arrests with many activists and organisers serving short prison terms. These generally came from three overlapping and frequently competing ideologies: nationalists, Communists and those wishing to push for the creation of an Islamic state. Their differences of opinion ensured that while the railway workers always managed to make their voices heard, the authorities, both British and later autocracies, were able to divide and rule. Ultimately, this led not only to the demise of the labour movement but of Atbara as a railway town and the Sudan Railways Corporation itself.

In 1981, the SWRU presented a petition to the government concerning better conditions for the local schools and hospitals which was dismissed out of hand. When they then threatened a strike, thirty members of the Union committee were sacked. Union members promptly walked out, refusing to return until the men were reinstated and their demands were met. Negotiations rapidly broke down and the Islamist President Nimieri chose the moment to break the back of union power. On 17th June, he made a speech, condemning the union leaders as Communists and declaring that the age of rail transport was over. The corporation had become a drain on the economy and road transport was the way of the future. Far from meeting the workers' demands, he declared his intention of decentralising the Sudan Railway Corporation, breaking up the workers' power base in Atbara and giving them 24 hours to return to work before they were turned out of their workers' housing. The workers had no choice but to cave in and within months, both Sudan Railways and Atbara had become ghosts of their former selves.

At the cavernous Railway Headquarters, the only visible people were a couple of women, slowly sweeping leaves. They showed no interest in me, even when I tried to ask for help, barely looking up as they turned away in search of one more stray leaf to add to their tiny pile. I wandered the echoing corridors for some time before I found someone who could direct me to an actual working railway employee, but eventually found myself ushered into the vast office of Sami Babiker, Head of PR for Sudan Railways. He was a small man behind a giant desk. High overhead, a small flock of fans flapped, lazily stirring the tepid air. This is where the party was – or perhaps they were all gathered because I was a rare object of interest. At least a dozen people clustered in to sit and drink tea at the low shiny coffee table, proudly festooned with a bulging vase of slightly dusty plastic flowers in bright shades of red, orange and pink. As we sipped, I explained what I was doing. They were delighted, proud of their town and their heritage and eager to tell its story. Beside me on the sofa was an engineer with a bushy moustache. He came, he told me, from an old Atbara family. His father, his two uncles, his grandfather, his great-uncle were all railway workers and here he was, a railway worker as well. As he spoke, heads all around us nodded in agreement. Male and female, it was the same for them all.

"But why did you not come by train? We have wonderful new sleeping cars! You need to try them," asked Sami. I had a sudden sense of déja vu and explained about Mark's arrival.

"It's fine, because next week, my husband and I are going to take the train to Wadi Halfa, then get the ferry to Egypt. I am really looking forward to trying the new sleeping cars then." The room went silent.

"But we have no trains to Wadi Halfa," said Sami.

"Yes, you do," I protested. "I was in your office in Khartoum just two days ago and Azim was telling me about them – that's how I knew about the sleeping cars."

"No, you don't understand," Sami looked distraught, "the passenger service was cancelled a month ago. Now there is a good road, no one wants to travel by train." There was a frantic sound of scrabbling as half a dozen men dived into the pockets of their robes for mobile phones and started dialling. The first one to get through handed his phone to me. Azim was on the line.

"Hi," I started cautiously, "do you remember, I was in your office the other day and you told me about the lovely new trains to Wadi Halfa?"

"Yes, I remember," he replied.

"Well, I am now in Atbara with Sami Babiker and he tells me that there are no trains to Wadi Halfa. They were all cancelled a month ago."

"Yes, that is quite correct," Azim agreed enthusiastically.

"Well, why didn't you tell me?"

"I did not want to disappoint you," came the reply.

My elaborate plans were in ruins. No train meant no overland journey up to Egypt. I tried to reconcile myself to the fact that I was writing about railway history. I had been dreading the discomfort of what had promised to be the most gruelling leg of the whole journey but perversely, it was also the one which promised the most. It would take me sometime before I stopped minding missing out on this grand adventure. Now I needed to rethink absolutely everything. I still didn't know whether Mark was even going to make it out to join me. He was due to fly in three days and his visa had still not come through. My mind was a kaleidoscope of a thousand fractured possibilities.

Seeing my obvious disappointment, Sami drew on centuries of Arabic and British tradition and did the only logical thing – produced more tea. We went back to sipping

and mulling. Meanwhile, he tried his best pulled out all the stops to make the rest of my day in Atbara worthwhile, magically producing a photographic permission slip and an elderly wisp of a guide for a tour of the railway museum and the station. As we said our goodbyes, I could see life at the far end of the corridor. A tight knit group of half a dozen Chinese businessmen in startlingly white shirts with matching clipboards were engaged in earnest conversation. I asked Sami about them.

"Oh yes, the Chinese are our friends. We do much business with them. They are helping us with the railways and they have just finished building the new dam at Merowe. There are many Chinese in Sudan." There were? These were the first I had seen.

Back out on the empty streets, I asked Hassan about the Chinese and the dam.

"Merowe High Dam is new. It's very big. They are going to build many more, up to six, I think, so we can irrigate the whole of the north. It will also give us much electricity." I looked it up later, astounded that this had not been a bigger story. The dam was huge, 9 km (5.6 miles long) and up to 67m (220 ft) high, creating a lake 174 km (108 miles) long. At the time work had started, it had been China's single biggest overseas investment. This one dam alone could contain up to a fifth of the Nile's entire flow. I couldn't imagine that the Egyptians would be happy if the Nile water that was their lifeblood was potentially about to be siphoned off upstream.

> The use of Nile Waters is governed by the Nile Waters Treaty, negotiated by the British in 1959, which allocated 18 percent to Sudan and 82 percent to Egypt. None of the other countries along the Nile – Burundi, Rwanda, Kenya, Tanzania and Ethiopia – receive any allocation. With discussions over the building of the dams in northern Sudan stirring up the status quo, the other countries have started to demand a renegotiation, with Ethiopia, in particular, planning its own Chinese-funded hydro-electric and irrigation schemes in the upper reaches of the Blue Nile.

There were, Hassan agreed, many Chinese in Sudan, "but they are out on worksites and when they come into the city, they have their own hotels and restaurants. They don't mix with anyone else."

There were quantities of Chinese box cars at Atbara Station, an extraordinary throwback that reminded me of the English seafront circa 1930 – all sky blue with primrose yellow gingerbread trim. It was kept in tiptop shape by stationmaster, Babish, who had studied in England and proudly showed me around. It didn't take long. There was a sign that came from South Africa and only one huge locomotive which came from India, patiently waiting to go somewhere – anywhere. While the few men gathered in front of it so I could take their photos, a Starburst of women in

citrus-coloured veils swept invisible leaves off the rails. We could have done with them in England.

Last stop of the day was the tiny Sudan Railways museum where the highlight of the collection were the ceremonial Queen Victoria Gates, built in London in 1902, which once graced the old Khartoum Railway Station. They are identical in design to the gates to India's houses of parliament, the Rashtrapati Bhavan, and to a set at Buckingham Palace. Now, they stood enclosed by a fence, leading nowhere.

Back at the Hotel Acropole in Khartoum, the breakfast room was filling up with archaeologists of all nations. It was the end of the digging season and the various crews, from half a dozen European and American universities, were gathering from their excavations at points along the Nile Valley, swapping notes, poring over maps and site plans. Most, they told me, were running a series of rescue digs, desperate to research an area of the Nile Valley potentially as big and as rich as Pharaonic Egypt and much of it virtually untouched academically, before the proposed dams were built and the remains were destroyed forever. Time and the weather were against them. The digging season was limited to a few short months of the Sudanese "winter", the searing heat through the rest of the year making it virtually impossible. Only a couple of teams were still in the field; one of them, I was delighted to discover, was headed by Dr Derek Welsby of the British Museum, who was excavating nothing less than Kitchener's Dongola Railway.

Outside, Hassan was waiting for me. It was time for us to finish the story, across the river in Omdurman, but we would make one stop en route, at the Blue Nile Sailing Club, where I was greeted and shown around by the charming Hannan, on behalf of The Melik Society. After the fall of Khartoum, the Khalifa captured most of Gordon's fleet of river steamers and, with the aid of former army engineers, managed to cannibalise sufficient parts to keep many of them in action for the next eleven years. As part of the final push south from Atbara to Khartoum, Kitchener collected his own flotilla together at Dongola, reinforcing and armouring any old paddle steamers he could get his hands on and ordering a small fleet of shallow draft gunboats from England which arrived by train in kit form, to be reassembled on the banks of the Nile, under the supervision of Major WS "Monkey" Gordon (a nephew

of the General). The first three, built in Wivenhoe, Essex by Forests, were the *Zaphir* (Victorious), the *Fateh* (Conqueror) and *Nasir* (Majestic); the next three heavily armoured, twin-screw gunboats, the *Melik,* the *Sheik*, and the *Sultan* were built by John I Thornycroft and Yarrows on the Thames. Most of the engineers were civilians but Royal Naval officers were sent out to strengthen the British officer corps, while Royal Marines and the Egyptian army took control of the on-board artillery which included 12½ and 12 pounders, 4-inch howitzers and Maxim machine guns. The *Melik*, used as Kitchener's flagship, even had search lights and was the first warship in the world with a film camera, brought on board by *Illustrated London News* correspondent, Frederick Villiers. Sadly it broke down before it produced any usable footage.

Today only two of the old ships remain. After many years of service, the *Melik* was retired in 1926 and leased to the sailing club, doing her duty as their clubhouse for many years. She eventually ran aground during particularly high floods in 1987, washed up into the grounds of the sailing club, where she now stands safely in sand, looking rather worse for wear. The Sailing Club and the National Museum are in fullest agreement over the need to preserve her, but have spent years squabbling over where she should live and who has ownership rights and there's little money anyway. Meantime the proud warrior is now not much more than a shed, filled with old garden furniture, draped in bougainvillea, her deck rotting and windows broken. Across the other side of the river, the *Bourdein*, a paddle steamer originally built for Sir Samuel Baker in 1871, was used by Hicks Pasha in his tragically disastrous campaign and during the siege of Khartoum, then salvaged by Mahdist troops to become part of the Ansar "navy". Eventually abandoned, in 2012 she was reassembled and moved to a new home next to the Mahdist's mud fortifications along the riverbank, with hopes for full restoration.

Walking along the mud wall made me realise how very unequal the eventual battle was to become, once modern technology turned its full might on these flimsy defences. It was not completely one-sided. Every report talks of the astonishing military prowess and immense courage of the Sudanese, and the Mahdists were by no means without resources. They had their own captured navy and many thousands of Martini-Henry rifles; the Khalifa even had a small telegraph system

> Whatever happens, we have got
> The Maxim gun, and they have not.
>
> *The Modern Traveller*, Hilaire Belloc, 1898

operating within Khartoum and Omdurman. However Kitchener arrived mob-handed, not only with a huge army, heavy artillery and a new high explosive, Lyddite, but Gatling and the Maxim guns. Invented by an American-British inventor, Hiram Stevens Maxim in 1883, the Maxim could fire around 550 rounds per minute. Tested for him by HM Stanley during the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition in Africa in 1886, it was first used by colonial troops in the 1893-4 Matabele Wars in Rhodesia, then, to devastating effect, in 1898, at the Battle of Omdurman. Nothing could have prepared the Ansar for the sheer terror of facing machine guns.

The British army eventually arrived on 1st September, 1898. That day was spent getting ready. The British mounted a naval attack on the town's fortifications, also deliberately targetting the Mahdi's tomb. The 23-year-old Winston Churchill, doing double duty as both a lieutenant in the 21st Lancers and as war correspondent for the *Morning Post* (something that did not endear him to Kitchener) described the moment:

> The howitzer battery was now landed, and at 1.30 began to bombard the Mahdi's Tomb. This part of the proceedings was plainly visible to us, waiting and watching on the ridge, and its interest even distracted attention from the Dervish army. The dome of the tomb rose tall and prominent above the mud houses of the city. A lyddite shell burst over it—a great flash, a white ball of smoke, and, after a pause, the dull thud of the distant explosion. Another followed. At the third shot, instead of the white smoke, there was a prodigious cloud of red dust, in which the whole tomb disappeared. When this cleared away we saw that, instead of being pointed, it was now flat-topped. Other shells continued to strike it with like effect, some breaking holes in the dome, others smashing off the cupolas, all enveloping it in dust.[66]

Determined to finish the job, Kitchener later exhumed the Mahdi's bones and threw them into the Nile. Major Gordon, given command of the *Melik* during the battle and now entrusted with the job of disposing of the bones, kept the skull and made a present of it to Kitchener in a box, with suggestions from the "band of boys" that it might make a fine drinking cup or inkwell. Kitchener instead suggested sending it to the College of Surgeons' museum. The British officers' blasphemous treatment of the mosque and the Mahdi's remains has ensured Kitchener's name is still reviled to this day by Sudanese Muslims and even drew complaint from Queen Victoria. In his letter of apology to the Queen, a year later, he assured her that the skull had been reburied in a Muslim cemetery.[68]

> When questioned yesterday about the treatment of the MAHDI'S tomb, Mr. BRODRICK made no attempt to conceal the fact that the body was taken from the grave and thrown into the Nile. One would have thought it a difficult thing to make this admission, but Mr. BRODRICK apparently considered that no apologies were necessary. "The SIRDAR thought that superstitious reverence for the MAHDI'S memory" might cause trouble in the future and that "exceptional measures" were therefore necessary. These things are done by savages, but they hardly form a suitable beginning for the lessons in civilisation which we are to teach the Soudanese. Indeed, it may be doubted whether, after all that has been said about our civilising mission, public opinion in this country has yet been educated up to calm acquiescence in such a measure.[67]

From the Mahdists' point of view, they chose to meet the British away from the city. In spite of its name, the Battle of Omdurman, the definitive last throw of the dice for control of the Sudan, was actually fought on open ground at Kerreri, 11 km (6.8 miles) north of the city itself. Kitchener had four British brigades (8,200 men) and 17,600 Egyptian and Sudanese troops under his command. He also, crucially, had artillery (including 40 Maxim guns), gunboats, camels and cavalry. Facing them were around 50–60,000 Mahdist troops who had an estimated 15,000 rifles and 3,000 horse, while the rest were equipped with long swords, spears and battle axes. Many were from the Baggara tribes, the "fuzzy-wuzzies" of Kipling's poem, feared as ferocious warriors. Throughout the day of the 1st, the line drew further towards the British encampment. Churchill watched their advance:

> Suddenly the whole black line which seemed to be zeriba began to move. It was made of men, not bushes. Behind it other immense masses and lines of men appeared over the crest; and while we watched, amazed by the wonder of the sight, the whole face of the slope became black with swarming savages. Four miles from end to end, and, as it seemed, in five

> great divisions, this mighty army advanced—swiftly. The whole side of the hill seemed to move. Between the masses horsemen galloped continually; before them many patrols dotted the plain; above them waved hundreds of banners, and the sun, glinting on many thousand hostile spear-points, spread a sparkling cloud.[69]

The main battle, on the morning of 2nd September, was a bloodbath, with around 11,000 Mahdist troops estimated to have been killed, 13,000 wounded and 5,000 injured, although no one will ever know accurate figures. Kitchener was later accused of leaving many of the injured to die on the battlefield and killing large numbers of key Mahdist supporters in cold blood as he looted Omdurman, although he was cleared by a parliamentary enquiry. By contrast, the casualties on the British side included 48 dead and 434 wounded. It was also notable for two significant events. It was the first use of hollow point bullets, nicknamed Dum-Dums after the factory which made them, renowned for their vicious stopping power; and it was the scene of Britain's last great "romantic" cavalry charge. Kitchener, anxious to try and ensure that Dervish troops would not escape from the city, sent a British light cavalry unit, the 21st Lancers, ahead. Rather than the relatively small force they were expecting, they came upon over 2500 Ansar troops, gathered as they fell back towards the city. Perhaps due to Churchill's journalistic efforts, the resulting cavalry charge became famous, with three of the British soldiers receiving Victoria Crosses. GW Steevens, as always, took a more measured view saying "The populace has glorified the charge of the 21st for its indisputable heroism; the War Office will hardly be able to condemn it for its equally indisputable folly." On the main battlefield, Steevens was overcome not only by the sheer number of Dervish dead but the level of courage faced by their troops, writing:

> The honour of the fight must still go with the men who died. Our men were perfect, but the Dervishes were superb—beyond perfection. It was their largest, best, and bravest army that ever fought against us for Mahdism, and it died worthily of the huge empire that Mahdism won and kept so long. Their riflemen, mangled by every kind of death and torment that man can devise, clung round the black flag and the green, emptying their poor, rotten, home-made cartridges dauntlessly.[70]

On the subject of the Khalifa's strategy, he is less kind, calling it a "masterpiece of imbecility". Churchill is more admiring, calling his plan "complex and ingenious" although "based on an extraordinary miscalculation of the power of modern weapons". In choosing to meet on the open field, the Khalifa's hopelessly heroic last stand was doomed to disaster. Had he chosen to fight through the crowded narrow streets of the town, the end result might have, eventually, been the same but Britain would have paid a heavy price. As it was, the Khalifa and his entourage managed to escape south, leaving the starving populace to loot the stores, welcome in the new rulers and the prospect of fresh supplies. It was a further year before British forces finally dealt with the last pockets of resistance.

No battle scars mar the rebuilt Mahdi's Tomb today, its high mud walls repaired, and a new silver dome gleaming proudly. Above it, the Mahdi's battered red, green and black flag flutters against the midday sun. It's all I can see. An infidel, I am not allowed even into the compound of the tomb. Next door, I am greeted effusively at the entrance to the Khalifa's house, now a pristine museum. The tour is thorough, fascinating and even-handed. Here, the whole story is laid out, with props, from the robe, cap and slippers worn by the eccentric "Chinese" Gordon to a Gatling gun used in the battle, the Khalifa's battle standard and photos and biographies of key players such as the great Mahdist general, Osman Abu Bakr Digna. A plaque in the wall marks the spot where *Times* and *New York Herald* correspondent Hubert Howard was killed by "friendly fire" late in the afternoon of 2nd September, the only journalist to lose his life although three others were injured during the battle.

Back in my hotel room that evening, I watched the news on CNN as heavily armed American troops battled with the Taliban across Helmand province in Afghanistan. An American news reporter in a flak jacket and helmet was detailing the heavy loss of life and giving a shopping list of the technical firepower used in the engagement. Kitchener would have approved. Khaki had turned to camouflage, Gatling guns to Uzis, AK47s and drones, but over a century after the massacre at Omdurman the same entrenched clash of beliefs was still raining down destruction. Nothing seemed to change as we all went round in circles and refused to learn from history's terrible mistakes. The phone rang. It was Mark.

"Guess what," he crowed. "They've finally approved my visa. I'm on the plane to Khartoum tomorrow. We can do the train trip."

"Guess what," I replied. "There is no train…"

The railway eventually made it as far as Khartoum by the end of 1899. Percy Girouard had been annexed to become the Egyptian Director of Railways, tasked with sorting out the crucial but troubled Luxor to Aswan line. The extension of the line south from Atbara, which also involved bridging the Atbara River, was overseen by another Royal Engineer, Lieutenant GB Macauley.

Passenger trains between Khartoum and Wadi Halfa started running again shortly after my visit to Sudan. The Sudan Railways Corporation website now shows Chinese-led plans for fourteen new lines, including the rebuilding of the Khartoum–Wadi Halfa line to cope with the heavier freight traffic generated after the building of the Merowe Dam.

PART II

THE SWAHILI COAST

Fig 5 Racheal, my companion on the Tazara Railway. © Steph Driver

Page kept for map of Kenya – Dr Driver is still working on this.

Chapter Six – The Lunatic Line

"What it will cost no words can express
What is its object no brain can suppose
Where it will start from no one can guess
Where it is going to nobody knows
What is the use of it none can conjecture
What is its object there's none can define …
It clearly is nought but a lunatic line."

Henry Labouchère, *Truth* Magazine, London, 30th July 1896

31 May 2017. Outside Mombasa's gleaming new Miritini Terminus, the crowds were cheering wildly. I was watching the live feed on Facebook from my desk in rainy England and wishing I was there. Madaraka is a Swahili word for freedom and Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta– whose first name also means "freedom" – was taking the new Chinese-built Madaraka Express between Nairobi and Mombasa to mark its official launch, eighteen months ahead of schedule. He spoke passionately of the railway amidst the national jubilation and press razzmatazz, while Kenya Broadcasting Corporation commentators fed me a ceaseless string of facts and statistics as they struggled to fill the hours of airtime. The new line includes 472.25 km (301 miles) of track, 79 bridges, two major stations, seven intermediate stations and 23 passing stations. It doesn't follow the exact route of the old line, shaving some miles off the journey. In doing so, it bypasses a number of settlements and towns – some may well end up as ghosts, once thriving streets left to rot, timber and corrugated iron creaking in the wind as people pack and move with the railway. Transport built this land; transport keeps it alive.

Passenger trains will be able to run at an almost unimaginable (for Africa) 120 kmph (75 mph) on this new high-speed line while freight will follow at a slightly more leisurely 80 kmph (50 mph). Journey times will be slashed, we were assured by the increasingly desperate presenters, from over fourteen (often 24) to four and a half hours. The new line would usher in an era of prosperity and promise for trade – for everyone other than those who dealt in road haulage. The prospects for East Africa's lorry drivers, on the other hand,

were looking rather grim. The new train would, they were announcing rather gleefully, be putting thousands of them out of work as freight shifted back to the rails.

The project had cost US$3.8 billion, of which 90% was funded by the Chinese, who also managed it and provided the expertise. There would be a grace period on the loan before the 40-year payback begins but a second loan was already being agreed to progress the railway further to Kisumu and the Ugandan border.

The new line is also known as the SGR or Standard Gauge Railway, after its 1,435mm (4ft 8½in) track width, unlike the previous line, the famed Lunatic Line, which was metre gauge (3 ft 3 $^{3}/_{8}$ in). It took only three and a half years to build, with 25,000 Kenyans employed in its construction. The Chinese would remain in control of the railway for the first five years, supplying the technical running expertise and training Kenyan staff.

Each of the stations takes its design from its surroundings. Miritini Terminus, Mombasa, is designed to resemble the waves and ripples of the Indian Ocean's water while the platforms and tracks represent the shore. Nairobi Syomikau Terminus, which will also house the maintenance workshops, takes its inspiration from two locomotives approaching each other, the striped Miasenyi station from the zebra's hide, Emali from the Unity symbol, the closed fist – and so on. However, with the main termini outside the cities, passengers in both Nairobi and Mombasa still have to change onto local feeder services to get into the city centre.

As the railway runs across Tsavo National Park, a series of nine viaducts, each 70m long and seven metres high, has been built in to allow the safe migration of animals across the line. There remained nevertheless some concern as to how long it will take the animals to learn their new routes; so far, the elephants are continuing to use their ancestral paths.

Alongside Facebook, I scrolled through the Twitter feed, where comments were openly displaying the country's pride in their biggest infrastructure project in over a century.

"Today is a historic day as we board #**MadarakaExpress**. We are Nation proud of our achievement and focus on transformation. God Bless Kenya. @PresidentKE

"This is actually a wonderful product for a wonderful people" @PodooPaul

"Kenya's new Standard Gauge Railway drivers. All are women. I think this a good thing." @waithash

"Failure is an orphan, success has many fathers. We are humbled today to be associated with the latter. #**MadarakaExpress** @WilliamsRuto

Yet between the congratulations, the squabbles, corruption and unease caused by its arrival were also laid bare. Was this grandiose project as lunatic as its predecessor?

"100 Years ago Indians built the rail for us. 100 years later the Chinese build a new rail for us. The African story so far. #**SGRLaunch** @dunia

"The Chinese propose an idea, they fund it, send there workers here, take back home their money, then manage the projects! #**SGRLaunch** @ItsMutai

"#**SGRLaunch** SGR Staff Doing Their Chinese Homework.

China Has A New Province In Kenya @dinho_mohamed

"Today we celebrate the launch of the Standard Graft Railway. #**SGRLaunch** @AstronautKE

"Is this true 'Anyone found to have vandalized SGR will be hanged?'.Uhuru Kenyatta's remarks #MadarakaExpress #SGRLaunch @JohnBosco_Juma [71]

Even as the country celebrated, critics claimed that workmanship was shoddy, the line thrown together in haste at inflated prices that have left the country crippled by debt. More importantly, they pointed out the overwhelming Chinese influence not only on the line itself, bedecked in the red and gold of the

Chinese flag and sporting a statue of Chairman Mao in Nairobi station, but the stranglehold China now has on Kenya's economy and trade routes. And this is something that will only increase with the extension of the line, the creation of a new line in the north of the country and new deepwater ports – all Chinese funded and operated.

My mind flipped back to 2010 and my visit to the Mombasa office of the Kenya Railways Corporation. As we sat in the slightly faded white-walled office, desk piled high with blueprints, the late afternoon breeze rustling the papers through the open windows and stirring the steam on the inevitable and welcome cup of tea, a small, rather anxious-looking engineer named Solomon Ouna carefully laid a single scruffy sheet of paper in front of me, adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses and began to explain. On it was a simple map, a spider's web of lines. It was my first introduction to the greatest rail project on the African continent since the 19th century.

Gathering enthusiasm as he got into his stride, he showed me how the existing railways would be replaced with modern high-speed lines which would then link up with new tracks stretching north to Juba in South Sudan and Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, lines inland through Rwanda and Burundi and across to Kisangani in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The missing link connecting Kenya and Tanzania would be put in place, while new deepwater ports in Lamu and Djibouti would be connected by train with west Africa, allowing freighters to transship and avoid the long haul around the Cape sea route. He was beaming with pride by the time he reached the final flourish. It was breathtaking in its scale, cost and ambition. I couldn't begin to imagine the number of zeros involved in the cost or how the debts would be paid off. Yet now, 117 years to the day since the official opening of the first Nairobi to Mombasa railway, the Madaraka Express was, neatly and symbolically, providing the first link in the chain.

I had to admit that it was much needed if Kenya – and the whole of East Africa – is ever to develop. The sheer speed with which the line and its regiment of sleekly space age stations were thrown into use was all very impressive. Yet like so many of the Kenyans, I was worried about the cost Africa would pay for its shiny new transport. Part of me also mourned. As I sat and listened to the endless

parade of statistics and watched the crisp new train with its padded seats and air-conditioned splendour, it seemed a soulless pragmatic creation. The old Uganda Railway was christened the Lunatic Line on conception and it lived up to its name with a tale so tall that few would credit it as fact. It was a railway born of blood and sweat and prophesy, a creature which shaped worlds and of which the poets sang. It was a railway which left none unstirred and which Teddy Roosevelt described as "the most interesting railway journey in the world".[72] I am sure this upstart newcomer has a tale to tell but it has not been long in the making while the journey is one of practical speed not slow wonder.

Even as I edit this section in 2019, the railway has moved onwards across the Great Rift Valley, before halting abruptly 75 miles short of the Uganda border as the Chinese lose confidence in the vast debts accrued. As the Madaraka Express too threatens to become a train to nowhere, a true reincarnation of the Lunatic Line, this new tale of money and the stench of corruption, of Chinese and African workers powering across Africa, is worthy of the telling, but who will tell it? Who will sing of the Madaraka Express?

It had rained shortly before we landed. The sunlight was bouncing off the puddles and zigzagging between the fat droplets of water on the bonnets of the cars in short fierce shafts of burning light. Beside the road, street sellers were laying out their stalls again, peeling back tarpaulins from giant wooden giraffes and bulbous metal hippos. The verges were gaudy with piles of chairs and mattresses, crimson crates of Coke and stalls heaped high with yellow mangoes. You can buy almost anything from a roadside stall in Nairobi or from the young boys who dart between the cars selling through the windows of the traffic jams. We spent much of our life crawling through gridlocked streets watching the endlessly fascinating mobile market. For now, though, the air was a heady mix of hot dust and wood ash, overlain by wet leaves and blossom while in the background lurked just a hint of stale sweat and diesel fumes. It hit me like a body blow, overwhelming the memories and melting uptight English bones. I have never lived in Kenya but for the first time on this trip I was back in tropical Africa, giddy with colour, feeling that I was home.

“Welcome to my little home from home.” We turned through the sturdy gates and formidably high walls, seemingly a sad necessity in the more upmarket suburbs of a city that has earned itself the nickname of Nairobbery. Inside was a haven of tranquility straight out of a 1950s propaganda poster, a huge house complete with lazy cats and raucous hadidas, large dull brown birds with beaks like scimitars and a random raucous shriek of a call, which roamed the lush green lawns pecking for worms. Off to one side, past the flapping line of laundry and two enthusiastic dogs, tails beating as they strained to greet us, stood another small cottage with a rusty red corrugated iron roof. My sister, Penny, was spending several months working on a Kenyan soap opera, *Makutano Junction* (literally translated as Junction Junction), and had rented the cottage in the exclusive suburb of Karen. We really would have a home from home for the next few weeks.

“Oh,” she warned, as she showed us around, “don’t leave any food out in the kitchen or any windows open. We have a mystery visitor. There’s something that gets into the kitchen at night and crashes about. It takes bites out of any food left lying around – doesn’t eat it all – leaves a real mess. Haven’t a clue what it is! I’ve tried peering in and no success. So now if I hear it, I just open the door and yell ‘shut up’ and usually I hear it scurrying away. But I don’t dare leave the bedroom door open in case it comes to investigate!” In all the months she was there, she never did manage to catch sight of it although the smart money was on a bushbaby, or possibly a monkey. Nor did she ever did find a fully foolproof way of keeping it out. Our bedroom would be closer to the kitchen than hers. That night, the bed was narrow, the mattress lumpy and the springs squeaky. Mark, the African novice, seemed entirely unfazed and was snoring almost before his head hit the pillow. I lay in bed thinking about being back in Africa, listening to the house settling round me, checking for lizards and spiders, and with one ear open for listening for intruders in the kitchen. It felt like heaven. I was back where I wanted to be.

Karen Dinesen moved to Kenya in 1914, to marry her cousin, Baron Bror Blixen-Finecke. Together they moved to a farm in the Ngong Hills just outside Nairobi but Bror was a hunter, a gambler and a womaniser and they divorced in 1920. She found true happiness both with a British lover, Dennis Finch-Hatton, and with her farm, making both famous in her memoir *Out of Africa*. As life in the city centre has become more difficult, the leafy suburb of Karen, built on that farm, has become a new focus for Nairobi’s wealthier community.

The shambolic and fractious nature of the Scramble for Africa is never seen more clearly than in the way Britain ended up with this particular colony. Inland Uganda, once known as Equatoria and parts of which had formerly been within Sudanese control, were definitely on the British radar, because of their forests, ivory and the probable source of the Nile. The lands to the east and down to the coast were not. While Egypt and the Sudan had been part of the Ottoman Empire, a narrow strip along the East African coast from the Red Sea right down to what is now the north of Mozambique had been under Arabic influence for well over a thousand years. Mombasa was already a prosperous Islamic trading centre when Arabic geographer Al Idrisi visited in 1151 CE. Known to the Arab world as Zinj, the East African ports became a vital link in maritime trade routes, with access to gold, ivory, hard woods and, most importantly, slaves from the African interior, while silks and spices arrived from the Indies.

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to arrive when Vasco da Gama sailed into Mombasa in April 1498. When greeted with understandable caution, the explorer reacted with rage, decimated and looted the city. The devastated Sultan sent a hasty letter of warning up the coast to Malindi where the King meekly made him welcome with all honours. The shortsighted monarch even went so far as to provide da Gama with a pilot to guide him across to India – presumably on the basis that it would get him out of his hair as fast as possible! Unfortunately, the result was to give the powerful European ships the vital secret of the trade winds, the monsoons, known locally as the kazkazi and kuzi, that blew sailing vessels across the Indian Ocean and back again. For Europe, this was the vital key that unlocked the trade route to India. A thriving multi-cultural trading system that had transferred goods across the Indian Ocean from China to Indonesia and India across to the Middle East and Africa was disrupted and then destroyed. Within a few short decades, the Europeans were back. Ultimately the Sultan's error led to the colonising of the subcontinent and the great age of European imperial expansion in the east.

It took a while for them to get a real foothold on the East African coast. The Portuguese returned to Mombasa in 1528 but were bitterly unpopular, did little

to try and develop the region and never really managed to hold onto a lasting community. They did build the formidable Fort Jesus in 1593 to try and fend off the first signs of interest from the British after James Lancaster visited the area in 1591. They eventually gave up completely in 1698 and the Swahili Coast became part of an Omani Empire, with its capital further south on Zanzibar and the Swahili Mzrui clan in control in Mombasa. Portugal slunk away to concentrate its efforts further south in Mozambique and Angola.

Change gathered pace in the mid-19th century. In 1841, Britain sent a consul to the Zanzibari court. Soon after began to arrive a trickle of European missionaries and explorers, chief amongst them David Livingstone, a passionate abolitionist and a best-selling author. The UK's *Abolition of Slavery Act 1833* had theoretically finally abolished the slave trade throughout the British Empire but the ownership of slaves on the Indian subcontinent was exempt – only finally banned in 1860 – while the Portuguese-run slave trade across to Brazil, the Arab slave trade in the Indian Ocean and Africa's internal slave trade were all still flourishing. In Zanzibar, Europeans, Americans, Africans, Arabs and Indians were all freely profiting from and openly owning slaves. Many say that the Arab slave trade was more tolerant and less brutal than that of the Atlantic, but estimates suggest that only one in twenty-five targeted or captured even made it as far as the slave market while those that did were then transported tightly packed in dhows, with only the barest handful of rice and water and no hygiene facilities. The cruelty did not perhaps reach the unimaginable levels of torture faced by those transported to the Americas, but it was, at best, inhuman. Abolitionists were now attempting to cut the head off the snake and turning their attentions to those areas outside their legal jurisdiction. Naval blockades were set up in African waters from 1873 to

In India today, there are between 50 and 70,000 Sidis, members of a little-known community descended from former African slaves brought into the country from all down the East Coast, as far afield as Ethiopia and Mozambique. Slaves were trafficked across the Indian Ocean from the earliest years. Medieval and Mughal rulers prized the Africans for their military prowess and many black slaves reached positions of high office within the royal palaces. The numbers imported increased sharply with the arrival of the Europeans, with the Portuguese and Dutch in particular, trading an estimated 570,000 slaves in both directions across the Indian Ocean between Africa, India and Indonesia. On abolition, most of the slave fled to the forest and today the Sidi are an all but forgotten people, shunned, casteless and poverty-stricken, ekeing out an existence on the margins of Indian society.

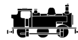
attempt to stop slave ships while others searched for lucrative alternatives to offer as a carrot on land.

Although no longer a missionary by the time he arrived in Zanzibar in 1866, Livingstone was almost a cult figure back in the UK. He didn't actually coin the catch phrase which summed up his philosophy – that appears to have been the creation of an anonymous journalist who wrote in a review of his book, *Livingstone's Travels in South Africa* (February 1858 edition of Harper's Bazaar) "Civilization must accompany Christianization and commerce was essential to civilization…"[73]. Livingstone's three C's appealed to the sensibilities of the abolitionists, the pragmatism of the politicians and the pockets of the traders. He himself, while a devout Christian, had proved to be a highly ineffective missionary, only ever making one convert, but he was a deeply committed and effective explorer. Although he abhorred their practices, he also acknowledged that he became increasingly reliant on slave traders for his survival, working with them to provide him with information, supplies, safe passage and even, at times, with employing porters, although, unlike some of the other explorers of the period, he never directly employed slaves. It is Livingstone, along with Hanning, Speke and Burton, who opened up to Europeans the vast majority of the East African hinterland, readying the way for the colonisation of the interior which was to come a decade or two later.

New towns such as Freretown and Rabai near Mombasa were set up to house freed slaves but many of those freed from slave caravans and ships were children. Scores of these were taken back to Bombay by the British and placed in orphanages or with host families. Explorers were urged to employ them and Livingstone was the first to do so, hiring several of the men he had rescued himself years earlier. It was these men, now converted to Christianity and well-educated, with a wide knowledge of languages and diplomatic skills who became essential to his survival and who, eventually returned his body first to Zanzibar and then to London. The so-called Bombay Africans went on to work for many other explorers, helping not only to map the hinterland of Africa, play a crucial but little-known role in the abolition of slavery and even help eventually to plot the routes of roads and railways.

Livingstone famously had a habit of going missing, sometimes for years on end, much to the consternation of his admirers. This led to his most famous meeting in 1871 with newspaperman, Henry Morton Stanley, sent to look for him by the editor of *New York Herald*. Whether Stanley actually said "Dr Livingstone, I presume?" is up in the air – the page was torn from his journal – but the phrase has continued to ricochet around the world.

A couple of years later, in 1873, with Livingstone off the grid once again, a British naval officer, Verney Lovett Cameron, was dispatched as part of a Royal Geographical Society expedition to hunt him down and provide him with support. This time the proffered aid came too late. The expedition met the sad little convoy bearing the explorer's body winding its way back to the coast. Cameron's companions turned back to accompany Livingstone home to Zanzibar and England but Cameron decided to push on, becoming the first person known to have crossed Africa from sea to sea, arriving in Katombela on the west coast on 28th November 1875. Like so many others of his era, he firmly believed that Livingstone's combination of trade, infrastructure, civilisation and religion would answer what were seen to be the prevailing ills of "savage" and "barbaric" practices on the Dark Continent. He had plenty of time to mull over theories on his journey and in the resulting book, *Across Africa*, is often credited with being the first to come up with the concept of a trans-continental railway, saying: "I firmly believe that opening up proper lines of communication will do much to check the cursed traffic in human flesh, and that the extension of legitimate commerce will ultimately put an end to it altogether."[74]



My first trip to Kenya was at the age of barely four when we emigrated to Africa. Our father had got a job at a paper mill in what was then still Rhodesia and had flown ahead to get things organised. My mother, my sister and I travelled out by sea on the *Kenya Castle*, through the Mediterranean and down the east coast of Africa, a long-haul taxi service at the tail end of empire. The bitter English winter gradually leavened as we stopped to explore the flaking backstreets of Genoa with the laundry flapping above our heads, and the markets of Aden where Arab men wore skirts and sandals. My memories are little more than fragmentary flashbacks I was too young to remember well. I was left in the playroom on board ship to go through the Suez Canal as Penny celebrated her seventh birthday with an epic drive across the desert to Cairo to see the pyramids. Apparently what most impressed me, according to my mother, was having pawpaw for lunch. What I remember was seeing giant haystacks on spindly legs, the camels all but hidden under their massive loads.

It was as we sailed down the Kenya coast that we crossed the Equator with a fine celebration on board and the crescent moon turned upside down, much to my alarm. And in Mombasa, I got my first taste of black Africa, with its searing sun and technicolour flowers. I have a picture at home of the three of us in a cycle rickshaw, all in straw hats squinting into the sun and smiling for the camera – the perfect image of little colonial memsahibs – but I have no real memory of that. What I do remember was the day we crammed into a mini estate (children in the dog box with the picnic which smelled of sulphury hot boiled eggs) and drove up the coast to the beach. The sand was too hot to walk on and we took refuge in the shade of a giant billboard and drank sticky bright orange Fanta straight from the bottle, venturing out across the fierce white glare in flipflops to paddle in a sea as warm as a foaming bath.

More recently, I had written two guidebooks to Kenya, spending months peering into every corner trying to pry out secrets as yet undiscovered by Lonely Planet. It was while researching those books that I first made the acquaintance of the Nairobi-Mombasa railway, rattling through the empty savanna night with my friend, Stephen, squeezing into tiny banquettes for a formal dinner that promised much and delivered something entirely different. Elbows clashing, we tried to coordinate our heavy old Kenya & Uganda Railways cutlery with each other and the shuddering of the train, carefully negotiating the lumpy Brown Windsor soup in tiny spoonfuls, clanging plates and teeth and splattering shirt fronts. It was something between a party icebreaker and one of those tortuous tasks set on celebrity challenge shows. “This is a skills test. It tests your manual dexterity and steadiness. Only the winning team will get any food tonight.” By the end of the course, much of the soup was spread across the passengers but the atmosphere in the dining car could not have been more festive.

On my next trip, through Western Kenya, I had the opportunity to try out the western branch of the train, also regretfully an overnight service, so there was no opportunity to see the views as we wound our way painfully slowly down the cliff-face of the Rift Valley and out towards the grass plains of the Masai Mara. This was a journey I would be unable to do this time as passenger services were not functioning but I was looking forward to our journey to the coast.

At much the same time as Cameron was trekking across Africa, events in Europe were about to start stirring the imperial pot. France and Britain had long been rivals and were now openly fighting for supremacy in Ottoman territories including Egypt – and, by default, Sudan. Portugal and Spain had more or less settled their territories, but new players were now entering the fray. Belgium had been established as an independent kingdom in 1830; and in 1871, Garibaldi's triumph was complete when Rome finally became the capital of a united Italy. Perhaps most importantly of all, also in 1871, with the end of the Franco-Prussian War, princes of all the German states, apart from Austria, gathered in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles and declared Prince Wilhelm of Prussia the first Kaiser (Emperor) of a united Germany. Engineered by the Minister President of Prussia, Otto von Bismarck, Europe had a new superpower. Europe's three new countries wasted no time in attempting to catch up on their expansionist neighbours. In 1876, King Leopold II of Belgium set up an International Geographers Conference in Brussels, not only inviting all the major national players but twenty-four eminent explorers, geographers, missionaries, philanthropists and other private citizens with an interest. Its aims were supposedly to coordinate the future exploration of Africa and discuss the suppression of slavery. In its wake, ironically, Leopold chose to set up the "Association Internationale Africaine" (International African Association) with himself as the sole shareholder, which, far from solving slavery, eventually turned the Congo into a personal fiefdom of unimaginable cruelty; estimates say he was responsible for up to ten million deaths. Meanwhile Italy set its sights on fiercely independent Ethiopia, suffering a horrific massacre at the Battle of Adawa and pulling Britain back into the Sudan. They never did really succeed although

In 1885, fourteen countries attended the Berlin Conference which led to a General Act agreeing the various principles for the future conduct of colonial expansion. Countries attending included Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, France, German Empire, Italy, Netherlands, Ottoman Empire, Portugal, Russian Empire, Spain, Sweden-Norway, United Kingdom and the United States (who reserved the rights to decline to accept the conclusions of the conference). Amongst the various principles agreed were an international prohibition of slavery; a principle of effectivity (you actually had to colonise the country to lay claim to it, not just claim it on paper); the agreement that any fresh claim of a portion of the African coast should be notified to other signatories; and the definition of "spheres of influence" in which each signatory had exclusive rights.

Mussolini tried again and managed to hold onto a semblance of power in the region between 1936 and 1941.

On 7 August 1885, five German gunboats sailed into Zanzibar harbour. With their guns trained on Sultan Bargash's palace, they delivered a demand from Bismarck to hand over all his mainland territories. Britain may not have had any designs on colonising East Africa but it definitely didn't want the brash upstart Germany to have it, particularly as they had recently (and erroneously) identified the vast inland Lake Victoria as the source of the Nile, of direct impact to their valued territories in Egypt. The British Consul sent a hasty telegram to London and the international diplomacy began. The resulting agreement allowed the Sultan to remain in nominal control but with the mainland territories split into two spheres of influence. Britain took the northern section and Germany the south. The rough boundaries of what were to become Kenya and Tanganyika had been formed. Britain found itself with a sphere of influence it hadn't sought and for which, at that stage, it really didn't have any use.

The answer, for this nation of shopkeepers, was to hand it over to the traders and let them get on with it, few questions asked. After all, the British East India Company had opened up the sub-continent, the jewel in Britain's imperial crown, effectively ruling two-thirds of the peninsula for over a century and making a fortune both for its partners and the UK in the process. On 6th September 1888, the British government granted a new Royal Charter to the Imperial British East Africa Company, headed up by shipping magnate, Sir William Mackinnon. It was a far-reaching document allowing the company effectively to colonise, govern, collect customs and raise taxes across a vast area covering what is now Kenya and Uganda. British subjects were given immunity from prosecution. In exchange for the concession, the company had to pay a percentage of the take to the Sultan; to ensure that all were free to trade; and ensure that no one company could establish a monopoly. The IBEAC started out with high hopes but ran into trouble almost immediately. The situation wasn't helped by a second conference in Brussels in 1890, leading to the Brussels Act, an international agreement on steps the various colonising powers would take to tackle slavery within their spheres of influence. As well as creating a proper framework of government, these included the construction of roads and "in particular railways", steamboat services and

telegraph systems. The occupying powers were committing to significant and hugely costly infrastructure development on a grand scale. This system would not only allow for the development of alternative industries but by offering alternative, cheaper and more efficient forms of transport, negate the need for human porterage and thus put the slave caravans out of business. It was a very capitalist proposal to the problem – simply put the slavers out of business by undercutting them. In British East Africa, this fell on the IBEAC, a commercial company which had had no idea that it would be expected to fund this type of enterprise and was woefully ill-prepared.

The truth was that the company was always undercapitalised and the efforts to keep up with the German Joneses next door left them virtually bankrupt. PL McDermott, the Acting Secretary, in the introduction to his official history,

comes up with a great many reasons for its swift demise. One of the most striking is that while Niger Protectorate had made £78,000 the previous year from selling alcohol,

> The Imperial British East Africa Company, on the other hand, has voluntarily prohibited all importation or sale of spirits to natives in its territories, and has applied in its most rigorous form, the rules embodied in the Brussels Act, in order to benefit the native races in the British sphere of influence.[75]

Even before the effects of the Brussels Act began to bite home, they were virtually bankrupt. The steam ship for Lake Victoria, bought in kit form, languished on the docks in Mombasa because it was too expensive to carry the parts overland and the train hadn't yet been built (it was eventually launched in 1901). The directors did send over funding to build a 60-mile railway inland from the coast but only the first seven miles were actually built in 1890 before the project was abandoned.

The rails from Kenya's first coastal narrow gauge (2ft) railway were pulled up and relaid around Mombasa where wealthy traders bought their own trolley cars (*thelas* in Hindi) so they could be pulled through the streets in comfort. With steel wheels and a wooden platform, they were equipped with a bench seat for two and a curved canopy. Power was provided by the Africans, who worked barefoot, pushing them along the tracks. If two trolleys met going in opposite directions, the lower ranking passenger would have to climb down and their trolley would be lifted off the tracks to let the other pass. The system survived until 1923.

The company was also struggling to maintain the garrison in Uganda under Captain Lugard's command and was already negotiating with the government to keep that going. Following the Brussels Act, the company seized the opportunity, employed two Royal Engineers, James Macdonald and John Wallace Pringle, to survey the proposed route of the line from Mombasa to Lake Victoria, by now thought to be the headwaters of the Nile and key to the lush, forested uplands of Uganda, and applied to Parliament for £20,000 (equivalent to nearly £1.9 million today) to pay for their expedition. The Hansard record of the resultant debate, on the 3rd March 1892, offers a fascinating glimpse into the chaos surrounding the fledgling colony.

Mr JW Lowther, Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, opening on behalf of the company, spoke eloquently and at length, filling in the background to the debate before going onto talk of the outside forces that had made it impossible for the company to manage on its own, explaining that further land in the interior and now Zanzibar itself had by now come within the British sphere of influence and that the Brussels Act of 1890 had placed an unasked burden of responsibility upon their shoulders. The act, he explained, agreed by the major European powers, proposed, amongst other plans, to tackle the abolition of the slave trade through the construction of roads, rail, telegraph and steamboat services. He elaborated:

> The locomotive, in fact, by means of competition, will kill both the caravan and the kidnapper. I think I have already, at an earlier stage, sufficiently explained how it is that the Slave Trade exists. It meets a natural demand, the demand for porterage. The cost of porterage to the interior of Africa, to Uganda, and the coasts of the Lake Victoria Nyanza is enormous. I believe it is reckoned about £300 a ton. It is impossible to obtain animals to carry the burdens, because they are killed by the tsetse fly. By means of a railway we should find ourselves able to substitute the locomotive in the place of the caravan and the kidnapper. Whilst, on the one hand, we should open up the interior of the country to our own commerce, on the other hand, by the very competition of the railway, we produce a means which must kill—must

effectually kill—any further continuance of the slave traffic, slave raiding, and slave porterage.[76]

It remained up to Mr WE Gladstone, briefly out of office (he was to return as Prime Minister, at the age of 82, in August of the same year) to point out that it was all very well building a railway line but the actual routes of the slave caravans were some distance from the proposed route of the railway; anyone determined to continue trafficking humans would simply ensure they stayed away from this fixed location. In an increasingly acrimonious debate, which had PL McDermott almost foaming at the mouth in his report of Gladstone's opposition: "He then went on to oppose the survey on the plea that it could only be prosecuted with bloodshed, and the railway made only by confiscation of the land of the natives."[77]

In spite of this, the vote was comfortably carried by the government (211 to 113), the IBEAC got its money and the survey was fully funded. The results were reported back to parliament in June 1893. The proposed route was 657 miles long, the estimated cost would be £2,240,000 – an average of £3,409 per mile, and the line would be built in 3ft 6in gauge. Equating to about £201 million today, this was an incredibly cheap project in comparison with the US$3.8 billion new line (which has only covered half the distance, as far as Nairobi). It took a year before anything further happened.

The IBEAC had made no secret of their wish to give up manning the garrison in Uganda. In June 1894, it was announced to parliament that due to the inefficiencies of IBEAC management, Uganda and the whole of British East Africa would be taken back under government control and declared a British Protectorate, ruled from Zanzibar. The announcement was in fact regularising a fait accompli. With no official authority, Portal had in fact raised the Union Flag in Mengo only two weeks after his arrival in Uganda, claiming an entirely spurious authority over the Bugandans whose army far outnumbered the 300-man British garrison and really didn't need protecting anyway. The real reason was to ensure they were "protected" from the Germans. The IBEAC would now be relieved of responsibility, bought out at 10s in the pound, although it continued to trade in the area. Sir Gerald Portal died prematurely shortly after his return to London; his delayed and substantially rewritten report, upon which the decisions were made,

called the construction of the railway “an essential condition of any system for the administration and 'development of East Africa”.[78] In August 1895, following a second report by Sir Guildford Molesworth and detailed revision by a five-man commission, the Uganda Railway Act 1896 was first presented to parliament. Again, the arguments were ferocious. This time, it was MP Henry Labouchère who led the charge against the line claiming “they had drifted into the construction of this railway in a most unbusinesslike fashion. There were many persons in this country who had a kind of earth hunger – it was a sort of disease – and their attention in late years had been mainly directed to Africa.” In spite of his impassioned pleas, the vote passed comfortably by 239 to 86; yet Labouchère still had the last laugh. The ditty he had published the previous month in *Truth* magazine struck such a chord that it named the line. It might officially have been the Kenya-Uganda Railway but 117 years later, as it gave way to its speedy upstart successor, everyone still knew it, very fondly, as the Lunatic Line.

The Great Rift Valley

The surface of the earth is never still. As little as 125,000 years ago, during a gap between ice ages, hippos and elephants roamed the lands where Heathrow Airport and Trafalgar Square would later be built in London; go back 450,000 years and Britain was a tropical jungle, the home of crocodiles.

As the continents roam their way around the globe like ponderously slow dodg'em cars, manoeuvring and crashing, merging and breaking apart, they become reshaped and battle-scarred, their ceaseless ballet written into the folds and striations of their geology. Within Africa, part of a series of rifts and faults, formed 35 million years ago, stretch for nearly 6,000 km (3,700 miles) from the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon to the Zambezi Valley in northern Mozambique. This is the Great Rift Valley, Africa's latest attempt to break into two separate pieces, the Nubian and Somali plates. It is most clearly and dramatically seen in Kenya, where it was first recognised and named in 1893 by young Scottish explorer, John Walter Gregory.

The East African Rift forms a giant crooked Y with the Western or Albertine Rift, bordering the Ruwenzoris of Rwanda, separated by the East African plateau from the Gregory Rift which runs up through Kenya and Ethiopia to the Afar Triple Junction where the Arabian Plate is also pulling away along the Red Sea Rift. The two branches join in southern Tanzania, before threading south to the sea at the Zambezi delta.

Forged by fire, the margins of the Rift are marked by a string of mountains, including Africa's two highest, Mt Kenya (5,199m/17,057ft) and Mt Kilimanjaro (5,895m/19,341ft). Most, although not all, of the Rift's many volcanoes are now dormant, with some giant caldera such as Tanzania's Ngorongoro Crater now a haven for wildlife. Yet along its length there are still bubbling hot springs and geysers, earthquakes and volcanoes, such as Kenya's Mt Longonot and Tanzania's Ol Doinyo Lengai, which grumble and shrug, stretch and blow off steam, occasionally having a more major tantrum, raining a fury of fire and rock down on the land beneath, each time easing that continental zipper that infinitesimal fraction further apart.

Spectacular as the mountains may be, they must surely share top billing with the line of lakes that have puddled into the floor of the fault. Almost all of Africa's great lakes (those that are not manmade) lie along the line of the Rift, with many hundreds of smaller lakes strung between, a glinting necklace of oases that were formed as the land at the floor of the Rift dropped away and flooded. Only Lake Victoria, the largest natural lake in Africa is not, settled in a dip in the high ground between the two arms of the Rift. First amongst the giants, Lake Tanganyika is the world's second oldest, second-deepest

and second largest freshwater lake by volume (only Russian's Baikal is bigger), 676 km (420 miles) long and an average of 50 km (31 miles) wide, it reaches a staggering 1,470 m (4,820 ft) deep. Many are neither fed by rivers nor have any outlet, rising and shrinking with the annual rains, shallow pans that have grown in alkaline salinity until the water is barely drinkable. Still others, such as Kenya's Lake Elementeita and Tanzania's Lake Natron, are highly alkaline, the waters fed by geothermal hotsprings that bubble and ooze around the shores. Creating their own eco-systems of red or blue-green algae, their salt-encrusted shallows have become a magnet for flamingos, perched like millions of one-legged, camp, pink bar stools, heads tucked under their wing or awkwardly scooping their supper upside down.

Chapter Seven – Halfway

“Africa, amongst the continents, will teach it to you: that God and the Devil are one, the majesty coeternal, not two uncreated but one uncreated…”
Karen Blixen, *Out of Africa*, 1937[79]

We have reached halfway. I know this because a large sign beside the road says “Equator”. In the dust along the verges are little pools of tourists, each centred on a small boy and a bucket half filled with water. A few feet away, Mark is hunkered down, watching intently. This is big business and every car that stops gets its own private demonstration – there is no sneaking up and piggy backing on someone else’s shilling(s). The science, so carefully displayed, is meant to show something called the Coriolis effect, caused by the rotation of the earth, on either side of the invisible girdle round the earth, made all too visible here by the crudely drawn chalk line that wobbles its way across the tarmac. The kids move a couple of feet north of the line and swirl the water gently,

“Look, you see, sir, the water, it swirls clockwise. Now come with me.” The boy gets up, takes Mark by the hand and moves a good six feet south, across the line. I wait, I know what’s coming next. He swirls the bucket again.

“Now, sir, you see it goes anti-clockwise. That is because we are now south of the Equator.” Mark gets up slowly, looks back down at the bucket and walks back to me.

“It’s bollocks!”

I laugh. “Yes, of course it is, but it’s fun. And anyway, you’re at the Equator. More or less… “A small face peers up at us, followed by an outstretched hand. I fill it with the required number of shillings and he’s off to the next carload without a backward glance. No need to smile at us anymore, his high wattage beam is focused on his next victim.

I stand a little way apart and watch, positioning my feet carefully across the chalk line, a round woman astride a round world, both ballooning around the waist.

I feel a faint urge to draw a buckle onto the chalk line and turn it into a belt then try and pull it in – see if I could get the world to bulge out a little on either side as it breathes in and tries to reach for the next hole in the belt. But do we want a leaner world or should we be fattening it up like a pig? Thinking about it, I'm standing on a giant fault line surrounded by not very dormant volcanoes – probably not a terribly sensible idea to mess with the local geology.

So back to the halfway mark. From where to where? Halfway from Cairo to Cape Town? Actually, it's not far off the mark although most maps, based on the 16th century Mercator Projection, drawn to emphasise the importance of the northern hemisphere, make the continent look top-heavy. The Peters Projection, redrawn, far more accurately, by German historian and cartographer, Arno Peters, in 1974, shows all areas at their true size although shape gets distorted in the process. On this, Africa stretches out and flexes its massive continental muscles while Europe (and the British Isles in particular) shrink apologetically northwards, a shadow of its former bloated self. Perhaps close to halfway through my journeys but still near the start of the great project of writing the book. (Although I didn't realise at that point that it was going to take quite such a long time and be quite a such a life-changing experience.)

The Rift Valley lakes mark the route of the Asian-East African Flyway, an avian super-highway that runs across sixty-four countries from the far reaches of north-eastern Siberia and Alaska down to the southernmost tip of Africa. Twice a year millions of birds of 331 different species make the long haul roughly following the line of the Great Rift Valley as they head south. Some take up to five months, pausing for the autumn in Egypt and the Sudan, while others prefer a more brutal, short, sharp six-week journey south. All generally fly closer to the coast, rarely pausing as they return north in spring. The trans-continental expats are joined by regular African commuters such as carmine bee-eaters, who shuttle between the tropical and sub-tropical zones. Numbers are falling, with birds on the migration path at risk from development, pollution and hunting. Many species are threatened and twenty are now on the globally endangered list.

We'd hired a car and headed north for a couple of days before we took the train down to the coast. It was almost inevitable on this trip, the train west from Nairobi to Kisumu wasn't running, at least not for passengers. I had to rely on earlier memories as we followed the tracks up into the so-called White Highlands, along the edge of the Great Rift Valley. To the right, the cliff face fell away. This stretch, to the north of Nairobi, is the point where the East African Rift can be seen at its most dramatic, a scar slashed across the landscape narrowed to only 45km/30 miles in places while the walls rear up to nearly 3,000m (about

9,800ft). On our way up we had stopped at the Valley View Point (altitude 2,666m/8,000ft). All around us bright scarlet and blue striped and checked Maasai blankets hung on racks waiting for the tourists to arrive. A gaudily painted bus, one of its many signs worryingly proclaiming it 'Public Enemy', screeched into the layby in a spray of gravel and its passengers spilled out in a rainbow of colour, each stretching and bending before making a beeline for the toilet shack and drinks stand. Below us the valley floor was intricately patchworked with fields. The view stretched ever outwards, green and gold, across the savannah, towards a hazy purple-blue horizon and the far side of the Rift, some 90 km/60 miles away.

To our right the Aberdares rose ever higher, a seemingly impossible and impassible tangle of skyscraper trees and knotted lianas. Yet within this steep and secret world, elephants glide shadowed paths like grey ghosts and buffalo crash through the undergrowth to gather and wallow in muddy sun-dappled pools. It was while on holiday at the Treetops hideaway in the Aberdares that the Princess Elizabeth succeeded to the British throne, on the death of her father, George VI, on the night of 5-6th February 1952, the first British head of state to be out of the country at the time of her accession. And it was deep within this hidden world that as the struggle for land and freedom began, the Mau Mau set up their headquarters, fleeing first in disorganised groups before banding together to set up forest communities and training camps hundreds strong. Some were hardened fighters, many the children of massacres, their families, lands and homes destroyed. They took the Mau Mau oath that shook fear into the hearts of the white settlers and they trained to retaliate with violence. As the bloodshed, the burnings, imprisonments and torture grew, the forest provided a haven for the vulnerable. Only when it was over did they finally emerge to find themselves new homes; for many the desire to reclaim ancestral lands continues to this day but even today, few talk openly about the full extent of Kenya's troubles.[80]

Mau Mau is talked of as a time of white fear but while it was undoubtedly terrifying, the figures tell a different story. Thirty-two white settlers were killed, along with 1800 African civilians, 3,000 black police and soldiers and 12,000 Mau Mau guerillas. Over 1,000 were hung and 70,000 were held without trial in detention camps. In 2013, the UK government agreed to pay UK£20 million in reparations to around 5,000 survivors of the rebellion. A permanent memorial to the victims of the horror was unveiled in Nairobi in September 2015.

The road wriggles, twists and turns its way out of Nairobi as it climbs up past the almost perfect volcanic cone of Mount Longonot that rises in splendid

isolation from the flat Rift Floor. Long extinct, the mountain no longer threatens its local wildlife who now only face the imminent daily danger of becoming dinner for the resident lions; life is tough when your role in the food chain is as a Happy Meal. On the road climbs, then drops down, past Hell's Gorge and Lake Naivasha, a rare freshwater lake that waters the lush plantation lands of Happy Valley, famously colonised by cocktail-swilling aristocracy who partied and debauched their way into fortune, scandal and disgrace, culminating in the murder of the Earl of Erroll, as depicted in the 1987 film, *White Mischief*. With it, all along the way, writhes the railway line, snaking its way round the hills and up into the highlands. It seemed impossible that those early railway builders had managed to scale this formidable wall yet it had been done.

To many of the locals, the arrival of the railway was the stuff of mythology. Many, away from the coast had had few or no dealings with foreigners. Most made the leap straight from the Iron Age to the Industrial Revolution with no stops in between as this giant, snorting, fire-breathing monster clanked into view. Lt Col John Henry Patterson, one of the engineers tasked with building the railway, talks of meeting a huge convoy of some 4,000 porters heading from Uganda down to the coast.

> Of course none of these wild men of Central Africa had either seen or heard of a railway in all their lives, and they consequently displayed the liveliest curiosity in regard to it, crowding round one of the engines which happened to be standing at the station, and hazarding the wildest guesses as to its origin and use in a babel of curious native languages. I thought I would provide a little entertainment for them, so I stepped on to the footplate and blew off the steam, at the same time sounding the whistle. The effect was simply magical. The whole crowd first threw themselves flat on the ground howling with fear, and then – with heads well down and arms well spread out – they fled wildly in all directions, nor did the stampede cease until I shut off the steam and stopped the whistle. Then, their curiosity gradually overpowering them, very cautiously they began to return, approaching the locomotive stealthily as though it were some living monster of the jungle. Eventually, two of their chiefs summoned up the courage enough to climb on to the engine, and afterwards

thoroughly enjoyed a short run which I had to make down the line in order to bring up some construction material.[81]

Work began on the railway survey on 7th December 1891. In a speech to shareholders on 18th May, 1892, Sir William Mackinnon included within the list of aims the intention to "open up to the knowledge of Great Britain this new region and its resources, and to establish with the chiefs and people such friendly relations as would render practicable [this] object in view…"[82] As the line powered inland, carving through tradition, some embraced its arrival but many did not. The British saw the vast open savannah, with its scattered villages and small agricultural plots and assumed, quite wrongly, that there was no real system of land ownership or governance – that any uncultivated land was unclaimed. The flurry of traders and camp followers who travelled with the railway swarmed in uninvited, unaware of local traditions and customs, trampling over ancient rights. There were dire warnings, pockets of fierce resistance and blood was shed on both sides.

The prophesies had begun long before the train had even been conceived as a form of locomotion when eighteenth-century Kamba healer and seer, Syokimau, foretold the coming of a pale-skinned people who would arrive riding on a fire-breathing serpent with many legs. It would stretch across the land, she told, until its tail rested in the water on one side and its head reached the water on the other. Her words resonated as the railway marched across the landscape from the sea to the inland sea of Lake Victoria. Syokimau lived in the Machakos region near what is now Nairobi in an area that has become a suburb of the city. Both the suburb and Nairobi's first commuter railway station are now named Syokimau in her honour.

Two of the most infamous episodes of confrontation involved the same aptly named trader and latterly the chief accountant of the Imperial British East Africa Company, Andrew Dick. In November 1885, a party of some 1,150 men, most of them Agikuyu, and led by a young Swahili man, was sent out from the IBEAC garrison at Fort Smith (built in 1888 some fifteen kilometres/eight miles north of modern Nairobi city centre) to collect food supplies to support the upcoming rail camp. On their way, they passed a Maasai manyatta (village), stole some milk and persuaded some of the Maasai girls to go with them to their camp. The Maasai elders visited them and warned them off but next morning, on the

orders of the young Swahili leader, some of the caravan stopped by the manyatta again, kidnapping and raping two of the Maasai girls. In the ensuing mayhem, a gun went off. The Maasai swooped down in a revenge attack, eventually killing 646 members of the caravan, around 540 of them Agikuyu porters, the rest Swahili askaris. Around 40 Maasai moran (warriors) also lost their lives.

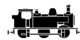
Andrew Dick was at Fort Smith when news of the massacre came through. He was desperate for revenge and somewhat reluctantly, the commander, Thomas Gilkison, gave him a sergeant and 30 soldiers and sent him to investigate. In spite of being warned not to proceed beyond Kedong, he took three further French officers and carried on to the Maasai manyatta, attempting to take up to 200 head of cattle, sheep and goats as retribution. The Maasai, understandably, resisted, Dick and his men were attacked, and Dick was separated from the rest of the party. Reports say he fought ferociously, with some even saying he single-handedly killed up to a hundred Maasai before running out of ammunition. It was no use and he was, inevitably, speared to death. The rest of the party withdrew, abandoning his body. A week later the Maasai Laibon (chief), Lenana, sent messengers to Fort Smith and a series of meetings eventually worked out a no blame settlement. With the Kedong Massacre,[83] what was to become one of the bloodiest lines in the construction history had claimed its first victims.

The other began shortly before this, also in 1895, when the trigger-happy Andrew Dick (still alive at that point) shot two Nandi warriors who had wandered into his camp. The Nandi (now known as the Kalenjin) rose in protest, triggering a series of violent clashes in a sustained guerrilla campaign masterminded by their Orkoyiot or Supreme Chief, Koitalel arap Samoei. The violence eventually lasted eleven years, spread to involve members of several neighbouring tribes and led to the deaths of several Indian railway workers and Somali porters; the destruction of the newly built telegraph system in 1900; and the deaths of forty-three police officers, an army officer and forty-five Nandi warriors.

In October 1905, Samoei was invited to discuss terms for a truce with Colonel Randle Meinertzhagen. As he walked forward to greet the colonel, Meinertzhagen drew his pistol and shot him; his troops, the King’s African Rifles then opened fire and slaughtered Samoei’s entire retinue, including the women and

children. Meinertzhagen collected Samoei's royal regalia and his head, sending them back to England as trophies. After years of research, Egyptologist Dr Kipkoech arap Sambu and doctoral student Kipnyango arap Seroney rediscovered the staffs of office, which were returned to Kenya by Col. Meinertzhagen's son in 2006. The staffs, which symbolise the right of kingship, religious leadership and military power and were considered to bestow divine right on the bearer, now form the centrepiece of a museum in Nandi Hills Town (303 km/188 miles northwest of Nairobi, on the far edge of the Rift Valley) dedicated to a man considered by many to be Kenya's first nationalist leader. It stands on what is believed to be the site of his grave. Both his lion cape and his head remain missing, somewhere in the vaults of a museum in England. No one has been able to find them.

It was a sobering story. Yet again I felt as if I should apologise for something abhorrent done by someone I had never known long before I was born, even while knowing that my apology would ultimately be recognised as a pointless gesture, signifying nothing. There are times when I deeply resent my national ancestors – at least I had that in common with their victims.



The IBEAC traders and militia beat the railway workers into the hinterland by a couple of years, a commercial and military vanguard that saw uneasy and often bloody encounters with the various peoples already resident in the lands over which Britain had established an unrequested Protectorate. In general, trade deals were done where possible but the British did their best to steer clear, particularly of the warlike Kikuyu. Alongside the company and government officials, however, there were always unscrupulous chancers, willing to gamble on the opportunity of personal fortune. Yorkshireman John Boyes was young and hungry for success when he arrived in 1898, heading into deep into Kikuyu territory where he managed to befriend the suspicious locals and create a personal fiefdom that he exploited to the maximum as the hungry juggernaut of the railway construction camp rolled ever onwards, requiring food and water, timber and firewood, labour and land.

On 30th May, 1899, 327 miles/526 km from the coast, the railhead camp reached the flat marshy plateau, known to the Maasai, according to Charles Miller "as Nakusontelon, 'the beginning of all beauty." [84]The last significant area of flat land before the Rift Valley, it also boasted a small stream, the Uaso Nairobi (Cool Water), so while its swampy disease-ridden environment was less than ideal, it had already been used by the Royal Engineers as a staging post for livestock transports. It was here that the forward railway HQ sprang into life, first with lines of tents then as rapidly growing lines of corrugated iron and timber bungalows, sectioned as ever in the colonies by colour and class. It was not a place of beauty. Miller claims it "bore a not altogether inexact resemblance to a miniature Dachau without walls". [85]As it grew, colonial officials arrived, transferring the seat of the Protectorate government up from the coast in 1901, only to find themselves in immediate conflict with the railway authorities who were used to wielding absolute power over the town they had created.

Alongside the residential areas came all the workshops and factories, goods sheds and shunting yards necessary for the onward construction and running of the railway, the hospitals and schools, social clubs and entertainment for the workers. And ever shadowing the progress of the railway came the traders, some white, but mainly Indian, quick to take advantage of the thousands of workers. The new colonists and the local Africans set up shops and tiny, cramped market stalls or *dukas* between the houses and lining the muddy streets. From the railhead camp, the city of Nairobi had been born.

With Lt Col Henry Patterson in charge of turning Nairobi into a working town, Ronald O. Preston was in charge of construction. He had come out to Kenya after eleven years as an engineer in India, accompanied at all times by his formidable wife, Florence, one of a handful of European women to brave the rigours of the railway encampments. It was Florence, at 4pm on 20th Dec 1901, who drove the final ceremonial spike into the line when it reached Lake Victoria. The lakeside town, now named Kisumu, was named Port Florence in her honour. Before any of this could happen however, Preston had to take the railway up into the Highlands, where at Limuru, at an altitude of 7,500ft/2286m, his crew came face to face with the devastating wall of the Rift Valley escarpment. There was a perfectly good plan in place, a series of eight viaducts would gradually allow the

railway to snake 610m (2,000ft) down over a ten mile stretch of line. This was obviously going to take a long time and a lot of money to build but the authorities were impatient. They were determined to speed ahead across the flat valley bottom and the open savanna of western Kenya while a second crew laboured over the Herculean task of scaling the escarpment.

For that to happen, there needed to be a temporary link between the two lines – and that was a far more hair-raising affair. Slightly different solutions were used for each of the four successive inclines, designed to use the trains themselves as counterweights on the 450m (1500ft) drop, with slopes that varied from sixteen to a precipitous forty-five degrees. Special kangaroo-style flatbed cars were designed to carry coaches, with one set of wheels on 10ft stilts. These in turn would travel on special heavy rails and sleepers designed to take the double weight on the steep gradient. Using both gravity and steam and connected by pulleys, the empty train coming up would act as a brake to the rapidly descending down train, while the heavier down train would haul the up train up the cliff face and onto the escarpment. It was ingenious and very, very complicated to build, particularly bearing in mind that the expert workforce was now split into several sections, with separate gangs responsible for building the permanent and temporary routes down the Rift, manning the Nairobi workshops and pushing forward the onward route across the western plains.

No sooner had they reached Nairobi than the Chinese railway construction team ploughed on apace with their phase 2a, the rebuilding of the 120-km line from Nairobi–Naivasha, including 27 bridges totalling 17.3 km in length and four tunnels with a combined length of 7.756 km. The total cost was estimated to be KSh.150 billion. The work was completed in August 2019. The grand plan had called for the route to be extended through to the Uganda border but the debts have mounted to such a point that for the present, at the time of writing, the onward metre gauge line is being restored to maintain the link, rather than completing the standard gauge line. It seems that there is a limit to Chinese largesse, after all.

It was the workforce who inevitably bore the brunt of the difficulty, clambering up and down the muddy slope, carrying sleepers and rails far heavier than normal, with at least two porters needed for each. Many lost control, seeing their precious bounty disappearing at speed down the slope and only stopping some 400ft below. According to Miller, eventually Preston had to station a worker at each end of every sleeper and actually sit on it until the rail section could be laid down – although the men carrying the 363kgs/800lb, 9m/30ft length

of steel would also lose their footing at times, allowing the rail to emulate the sleeper and smash its way to the bottom of the incline.[86]

Somehow, the lift was built successfully by early 1900 – without a single fatality – remaining in operation until 4th November, 1901 when its closing was celebrated by an excursion train from Nairobi to Naivasha, out via the lift and back on the new viaducts.

Back in the city we headed for the Nairobi Railway Museum, tucked down past the goods sheds at one end of Nairobi Station (the old one in the town centre, not the shiny new one that looks like two trains playing chicken). We were the only tourists there but we gathered quite a posse and our visit had a distinctly party atmosphere. John the Taxi worked regularly for Penny's film crew and came highly recommended. He'd arrived at the house, bright and early, beaming with anticipation, and had become an invaluable member of the team – our guide, mentor and nanny throughout our time in Nairobi, even when we hired our own car to head out of town. "You will get lost – I will send someone to drive ahead of you to show you the way." He was invariably right. We began to get to know him, hearing about his relatively new wife, brand new baby and his huge ambitions as we slowly threaded our way through the traffic into the city centre. I perked up when I caught sight of the huge white signboard proclaiming NAIROBI RAILWAY STATION but nothing is simple in the Nairobi traffic. We were on the wrong side of the dual carriageway with eight-foot cast-iron railings down the central reservation. There was no way to do a quick U-turn or even to hop out and walk across.

"We can walk."

"No, you can't go there, it isn't safe."

Street crime was making parts of the city centre a virtual no-go area for tourists, too visibly prosperous a target. John kept us firmly in the car. For the next hour, we crawled to the roundabout at the end of the road, crept round it, dodging salesmen, and inched our way back to the station turnoff. Finally! It was nearly as

slow along the dirt road past the station to the museum, winding through the potholes and carefully skirting the old ladies cross-legged on the grass, a cloth or basket laid out in front of them with a few mealies (corn on the cob) or potatoes for sale. Past the rusty sign for the Stomach Clinic Bar and Restaurant – "POP IN FOR:- KUKUTIKA, CHOMA, STEW, FRY, ATHOLA, MBUZI, MATUMBO, BOIL, AND ALL YOUR FAVOURITE TASTY MEALS. LIVE BAND COMPRISING OHLANGA AND ONE MAN GUITAR." – and we were there.

Propped up against the wall in the car park, baseball cap pulled down low over his eyes, was a middle-aged man with a well-worn face. As we pulled in, he sprung into salesman's overdrive.

"Hello, my name is David, I can tell you much about the museum. It would be my pleasure to show you around?"

"David Gitundu?" I asked. His eyes widened. "My brother-in-law was here a few months ago and he met you. He said I should look out for you because you know so much." There is sheer joy in watching a grown man doing a happy dance in a dusty car park. By the time I had finished explaining what I was doing there and he had realised that our relationship was becoming one of professional equals, his chest was puffed out, Mark and I were enveloped in contractual bear hugs, and his guiding commenced. Born in the station yard, David had spent his entire life with the trains. He was entirely self-taught, self-employed and self-promoting and was a mine of information with a passion for his subject. By day he hung around the museum, guiding when possible. In the evening, as the train was about to leave, he set up his stall on the station platform, selling souvenirs, postcards, snacks and, most importantly of all, his own watercolour paintings of the trains.

"Mel, Mel… come and look at this! Let me tell you about the boiler." Mark had wandered round the side to the tempting gloom of the goods sheds and the giant Garratt locomotives which stood sentry in the shadows, draped by the purple cascade of jacaranda in full bloom. He looked as if he'd been given a golden ticket as his head spun this way and that. Where to start? In or with those?

"Sorry! Going this way. Don't need to know about the boiler. Anyway, you've told me about boilers about 20 times before." We've spent a lot of time in

railway museums over the years. I was heading, as fast as I could, towards the shallow concrete steps and peeling door that led into the main room of Nairobi's addition to our personal portfolio. Mark never could quite understand how I was writing a book about trains that wasn't all about how they operated. In this, as in pretty much everything else, we approached the subject from virtually opposite directions. I had discovered this truth on one of the first trips we did together. One late afternoon, we had found ourselves high on a mountain strolling through the agora of an ancient Greek city in southern Turkey. The light was golden, the air scented with pine and rosemary and the views tumbled down to the distant waters of the Aegean. It was the picture of perfect romance. Mark was staring at the marble columns. In those far-off halcyon days, before I knew better, I asked what he was thinking.

"How on earth did they manage to get all this builder's rubble up the mountain? It's staggering." He had a point. I think it was from that moment on, I began to learn that while we both love exploring and we might look at the same view, we see two entirely different worlds. It continues to make both our lives unexpected, entertaining and, frequently, frustrating. Now, while Mark was happy poring over the vast engines, built to cross the savannah and scale the cliff-like walls of the Great Rift Valley, I was drawn inside, past the heaps of rusting iron, to the dusty wooden cases, the faded typed signs, the cards spotted with age and haphazardly attached with drawing pins. Here were the ageing photos, curling at the corners, the minutiae of everyday life from tickets to letters, a stationmaster's lamp to a driver's hat. Here were the stories I had come to find.

"See that man there?" David pointed to the tiny slightly blurry head at the back of a faded photo. "He's an MP now. And this one, he was Kenya's first black engine driver." He had a story about every exhibit, they were his family and his friends.

"Mel, come and take a picture!" I hadn't noticed Mark and John come inside but they'd found themselves a perch on an old Mombasa trolley. David roared with laughter.

"No, this is the one you must sit on," he scrambled over to the cow catcher of a train propped up next to the wall and patted the seat next to him. "Come and

sit here." "See this photo – this is the American President, Theodore Roosevelt, riding on the front of the train when he went on safari." And there indeed was the photo of "Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, President of the United States, accompanied by Frederick Jackson, Acting Governor of British East Africa, Mr C Sandiford, Locomotive superintendent and Frederick C. Selous, the noted big game hunter on the front of a locomotive at Mombasa in 1909." The three men seemed very at home on their bench seat, the scruffier Selous with his bush hat and bushy beard slouched between the two statesmen in pith helmets. To one side of the tracks and the only one not on the train, distanced from the group and distinctly less at ease, Sandiford, keeper of the Leviathan, appeared more like a supplicant. A carefully worded notice attached to the bench proclaims that passengers travel at their own risk and absolves the High Commissioner of any responsibility for "personal injury (whether fatal or otherwise)".

At the age of 50, Roosevelt celebrated the end of his presidency with a lavish hunting safari in Africa lasting nearly a year, from April 1909 to March 1910. His son, Kermit, went along as official photographer and Andrew Carnegie offered lavish financial backing. Roosevelt was both a keen hunter and conservationist, responsible for the foundation of the National Parks system which spread out from the USA across the world. The teddy bear was even named in his honour. This was ostensibly a research trip for the Smithsonian Museum, so Roosevelt took along three of their staff, including a brace of zoologists. However, the hunter seemed very much to the fore. They did collect a few live animals but it became something of a murderous if carefully annotated rampage through the African bush. The expedition deluged the poor museum with so many exhibits (23,151 in total, from 160 different species) that it took eight years for them to be unpacked and catalogued. The President travelled in style fit for an emperor, complete with a bathtub and personal library of 60 volumes. Overall, the expedition, more like a nomadic town, employed over 250 porters and guides. He wasn't quite the first to travel in such a lavish fashion. Lord Randolph Churchill had famously set out on safari across South Africa in 1892 with 20 tons of luggage including a dozen crates of Bolinger champagne and a piano. Yet two things marked out Roosevelt's Presidential Progress.

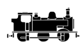
The train was crucial. Hiking for months through the bush was punishingly hard and dangerous. If the animals didn't get you, there was a good chance that disease would. Roosevelt stepped from the boat virtually straight onto Governor Jackson's lavishly appointed private train for the 581-mile (935 km) journey to Lake Victoria. He soon settled into his panoramic front seat, recalling:

> On our train the locomotive was fitted with a comfortable seat across the cowcatcher, and on this, except at mealtime, I spent most of the hours of daylight… The first afternoon we did not see many wild animals, but birds abounded, and the scenery was both beautiful and interesting… In the dusk we nearly ran over a hyena; a year or two previously the train actually did run over a lioness one night, and the conductor brought in her head in triumph. In fact, there have been continual mishaps such as could only happen to a railroad in the Pleistocene! The very night we went up there was an interruption in the telegraph service due to giraffes having knocked down some of the wires and a pole in crossing the track… [87]

There was also huge interest back home, with *Scribner* Magazine paying the President $50,000 for a series of monthly articles, later published in book form as *African Game Trails*. It was a progress which was to change the face of the safari forever. Until then, the safari had been, by and large, the professional affair of hardened men of the bush such as Frederick Courtney Selous, now signed up to manage the President's hunting holiday. With this came the realisation that there was money to be made – a lot of it – bringing tourists out to hunt big game, as long as you gave them the niceties of life and helped them bring home their trophy.

"So it was the train that created safari tourism?" I asked, as Mark, John and David all lined up to be photographed on the throne-like seat.

"Yes, but not quite that way," came another voice from behind us. Unnoticed as we listened, enthralled, the museum's curator, Maurice Barasa, had come out to join us and was standing quietly behind me. "The real start of the hunting tourism was with the lions."



Across the room, one of the old wooden display cases looked even more battered than those around it. Its glass was broken. Instead of repairing it, a notice

had been pasted to the front “This portion of the glass casing was cleverly cut by a fanatical collector who stole the famous lion claws of the most notorious man-eater lion of Tsavo. He intended to sell them for several million dollars! However they were recovered.”

Maurice reached carefully through the broken pane and from the corner retrieved a tiny, unnoticed parcel wrapped in kitchen roll. On his palm lay three ivory white claws, as big as his little finger and fat as his thumb, each wickedly curved into a hook perfectly designed for tearing at fresh flesh.

There were two lions at Tsavo. They were shot eventually by Lt. Colonel John Henry Patterson, the engineer in charge of building the bridge across the Tsavo River. He claimed that the lions took up to 135 workers. Patterson sent the skins to the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. They are still on display there. In 2009 University of California scientist Justin Yeake decided to try and find out the truth with a little scientific accuracy, doing chemical tests on the Chicago skins, hair and bones, measuring the ratio of carbon and nitrogen isotopes against humans and various prey animals.[88] The results showed that Patterson’s figures were probably highly exaggerated, that one of the two lions seems to have eaten about eleven humans and the other twenty-four, although outside parameters were set with true scientific caution at anywhere from four to seventy-two. The one that caused the greatest carnage was shown to have severe injuries and disease within its head and jaws which, together with the drought that had plagued the region for the previous thirteen years, would have made it increasingly difficult for him to catch and kill a lion’s normal prey of grazing animals such as zebra and wildebeest. Fragile humans were an easy target. In the end, it doesn’t really matter whether it was four, seventy-two or one hundred and thirty-five. Those claws were meant for business; the results would have been horrific.

“This is all we have here,” Maurice continued. “We would like to have them back. Before he was President we wrote to Senator Obama asking if he could help. As he’s Kenyan, we thought he would understand, but we didn’t get a reply. Even if they did come back, the National Museum wants them too. They say the lions are very important so should be in their museum, but they have everything else. But they should be with us. The lions are railway history.

"Of course, these are not the same lions as the one that ate Charles Ryall. You have seen the carriage outside?" I nodded – the ageing carriage, complete with scratches and torn window nets stood in the yard outside, near the giant engines. In June 1900, an entirely different man-eater was terrorising the population of Kima, about 418 km (260 miles) inland. I couldn't help thinking that the local choice of names was really unfortunate but horribly apt. If Tsavo means "place of slaughter" in the Kambo language, even more brutally, Kima means "minced-meat" in Swahili. As Superintendent of Police, Charles Henry Ryall, was called on to solve the problem and agreed to stop over, sitting up late into the night taking it in turns on watch, in a train carriage with two other Europeans, an Italian, Parenti and a German, Huebner. Ryall, on the top bunk, had the midnight watch but couldn't stay awake. In the few moments that he fell asleep, the lion seized its opportunity, and pushed into the carriage, the door slamming shut behind it. Standing on the German engineer, who passed out through sheer terror, the lion reached up for Ryall, breaking his neck with one blow and dragging his corpse out through one window as the shaken Italian locked himself in the bathroom and escaped on the far side.

Ryall's mother put up a £100 reward. Maurice pointed to the yellowing newspaper cuttings. Word quickly spread and fired the imagination, drawing in hunters from across the world to try their guns against the ultimate predator. On arrival in this alien environment, they needed help and the hardened locals found themselves a lucrative new business supplying and guiding the usually dangerously incompetent rookies in search of a trophy. The hunting safari had been born. The photographic safari came in 1919, when an American, Charlie Cottar, read Roosevelt's book and set out for Africa with some cameras and cars to build Kenya's first luxury safari lodge. Meantime, the railway workers of Kima had to cope with a further three months of terror before Ryall's murderer was finally brought to justice – by Patterson, the bridge-building hero of Tsavo.

Is it a bird, is it a plane…?

By 1920, with the entire Cairo to Cape route firmly in British hands, the train system up and running, the dare-devil aviation pioneers turned their attention towards Africa. A series of 44 aerodromes were cleared at points all down the map and the race was on for who would be the first to complete the journey by air. After several failed attempts and a great many crashes, the successful team were Flt-Lt Christopher Joseph Quintin Brand and Lt-Col Pierre van Ryneveld who left Brooklands on 4th Feb 1920. During their eventful 45-day trip, they managed to write off two planes (a Vickers FB.27 Vimy 'G-UABA, The Silver Queen', and a borrowed Vimy 'F8615, The Silver Queen II') before their eventual arrival in Cape Town at 4pm on the 20th March in a third, an RAF Airco D.H.9 ('H5648, Voor-trekker' ('Pioneer').

Five years later and things had progressed to the point where the newly fledged Imperial Airways were ready to look at the start of commercial flights. Alan Cobham had started his flying career with the Royal Flying Corps during World War I before becoming a test pilot for De Havilland. On the 16th November, 1926, he set out from Croydon Airport in a De Havilland DH50J. To cope with take-offs in the rarified high-altitude atmosphere of the African hinterland, the original 230HP Siddley Puma engine was replaced by a 385HP Armstrong Jaguar. With him flew engineer Arthur B. Elliott and filmmaker BWG Emmott of the Gaumont Company. Each man took only one small suitcase, weighing no more than 20lbs, and the party also had a gun, rifle, revolver and ammunition.

They flew south from Cairo along the Nile, making up to five stops a day, with the crew spending Christmas in Khartoum before heading down to Kisumu on Lake Victoria and heading overland to Ndola in Northern Rhodesia (Zambia). Their sightseeing flight at 50 ft over Victoria Falls nearly proved to be fatal when water from the spray got into the carburettor. Only some nifty aerobatics cleared the blockage and allowed them to land safely in Livingstone on the north bank of the Zambezi. Crowds became ever more enthusiastic as they made the last few legs south via Bulawayo to Pretoria, where they were given an official honour guard to escort them to Johannesburg. From here, they hopped south to Kimberley, Bloemfontein and, finally, on the 17th February, to WynBerg Aerodrome, Cape Town. The route had been tested. Just to make sure, the three men had a short rest, then flew the whole way home again, arriving back in Croydon on 13th March, 1926. Cobham was awarded the Air Force Cross (he later received a knighthood) wrote a book *My Flight to Cape Town and Back* and a film, *With Cobham to Cape Town*, was released later in 1926.

By the late 1920s, there were weekly Imperial Airways flights to Alexandria, along with airmail post, as part of the London-Karachi flying boat service. The first commercial flights south from London to Cape Town began on 20th January 1932. Very slight tweaks had been made to Cobham's route and the planes now flew: London, Paris, Brindisi, Athens, Mirabella, Alexandria, Cairo, Assiut, Assuan (Aswan), Wadi Halfa, Atbara, Khartoum, Kosti, Malakal, Juba, Kampala, Kisumu, Nairobi, Moshi, Dodoma, Mbeya, Mpika, Broken Hill, Salisbury (Harare), Bulawayo, Pietersburg, Johannesburg, Kimberley, Victoria West, Cape Town. The first flights carried only mail, but passengers were added soon after. Tickets cost £130; the flight took ten days, with stops for meals and overnight. The plane, an HP.42 bi-plane, could carry twenty passengers and a crew of four.

The route's role in aviation pioneering was not quite at an end. On 2nd May 1952, the world's first commercial jetliner, De Havilland Comet 1 G-ALYP, set out on its maiden flight from London-Johannesburg. This time, there were thirty-six passengers on board, the flight had only five stops – at Rome, Beirut, Khartoum, Entebbe and Livingstone, completing the journey to Johannesburg in an almost unbelievably speedy 23 hours and 40 minutes. A ticket cost £175 single, £315 return. The jet age had begun.

Chapter 8 – The Jambo Express De Luxe

Nairobi Station had been transformed by the imminent departure of the single daily passenger service. Silent and deserted by day, it was buzzing with people in the late afternoon. Porters wheeled old wooden carts piled with luggage purposefully down to the far end of the long platform; mothers looked in vain for some quiet corner to sit and relieve aching arms of their babies; and family groups shuffled in huddles, running out of things to say as they waited impatiently to say goodbye. The shutters on the kiosks had been thrown up and street sellers had migrated in with bottles of soda, bags of crisps and popcorn, biscuits and fruit – all the essential munchies for what was meant to be a fourteen-and-a-half hour overnight journey with a dining car on board.

As we wandered along the platform, tickets in hand, looking for our compartment number, we heard a voice call our names from the depths of the shadows. David, transformed from tour guide into salesman, emerged from behind a trestle table filled with postcards, guidebooks and his own primitive watercolours. We went over to say hello and goodbye. I bought a couple of his very simple, brightly coloured paintings of the train. They are not great art but they are almost perfect souvenirs and every time I look at them, I am straight back to the station, with its sounds and smells, creaks and whistles.

The train looked well-used, its forest-green livery with a dashing red and yellow stripe and pale cream band along the windows. It was clean but had seen too much use to gleam. The giant engine looked positively jazzy in its green, red and yellow Rift Valley Railways livery. We'd chosen to go First Class which meant we had a cosy two-berth compartment to ourselves, complete with a hideaway sink.

With a slow lurch, we grind into motion and chug our way slowly through the outskirts of Nairobi. We hang out in the corridor, lean on the open window and wave goodbye to the people along the tracks. I find myself not so much watching the city but watching Mark watching the city. Travelling with Mark can be fascinating. I have travelled since I was four and Africa is as much home as England. There are excitements and thrills but I am well seasoned. There may be

plenty to delight, awe or disappoint but less to shock or surprise. I have an idea of what to expect; Mark is raw, soaking up each experience. This is his first visit to sub-Saharan Africa. Until we met, he had almost never been abroad, brought up holidaying in Britain, only venturing beyond its shores for one long weekend and a couple of carefully chaperoned youth orchestra tours, one to Germany, one to the States. He knows none of the rules and cares even less, stubbornly English but bold to dive in, happy to talk to anyone, trying out his few words of whatever language is appropriate locally. If that doesn't work, he then panics wildly and throws in all the other foreign words he knows, ending up in a French-Welsh-Turkish-Italian-Arabic-Swahili tangle that gets louder and more convoluted until there's the inevitable "Help, Mel!" and two sets of uncomprehending eyes swivel towards me to interpret.

Right now, he's hanging his head out of the window, under a sign clearly saying you must not lean out of the train, chatting to the people in the next compartment, a party of white Kenyans heading to Mombasa, clearly intent on a riotous weekend.

"Mel, are those all allotments?" The hill is covered by rows of many hundreds of tiny, corrugated iron shacks, each set in a small rectangle of garden, most planted with maize and vegetables.

"No, they're houses," I reply. It was the first time he'd seen shanty houses and while this settlement was vast, it was by no means the worst; there was evidence of planning and organisation, of houses that were at least waterproof, of streets and lighting and drainage. We stood together and watched as the sunset glinted across mile after mile of undulating iron rooves. There was really nothing we could say.

Inside, the party next door was gaining in volume, with a crate of beers and the first bottle of vodka going down fast. The business of the train swung into action as the stately train captain arrived round for a ticket check and we were invited down for dinner. Squished into a tiny booth, we were presented with a menu board, made our selection then ate a meal that bore no obvious resemblance to what we thought we'd ordered. We think it was meant to be Chicken Maryland. The train was swinging and hiccupping more and more violently in freeform

syncopation as Mark and I jostled for elbow space and tried to time our forks and spoons along with its jumps; it was a little like trying to eat on a roller coaster.

By the time we eventually got back to our cabin, the beds had been turned down with crisp white sheets and pillows. We sat with the lights off, watched the darkness outside with its curtain of stars and listened to the increasingly wild celebrations next door. Suddenly, at about 10.30pm, there was a lurch, the train came to an abrupt halt and simply didn't get going again. We could hear the clank of metal on metal somewhere outside and peered out of the window. There were blue flashes some distance in front of us. Mark set off to see if he could find out what was going on. He reported back a little while later.

"A freight train has derailed about half a mile down the line. They're clearing the wreckage and repairing the rails. We're not going anywhere until they've got it sorted."

We hung around and watched for a while but I decided eventually that I might as well go to bed. All fine until about two hours later when there was a plaintive but insistent knock on our window. We peered out and a couple of the Kenyans from the next compartment were swaying gently, down on the tracks.

"Please can you let us in? We went to see the work at the other train and our friends thought it was funny to lock us out. Ach man, that's fine but this is right near where those poor bloody buggers got eaten by lions…" We let them in, they thanked us profusely, we gently refused the remains of their vodka and peace descended once more. Finally, at 4.43am, the train shuddered back into life with a sigh, a wheeze, a hollow hoot, a grind of squeaks and clanks, warming into the arrhythmic clackety-click-clack of the old wheels on the older rails. I snuggled into my sheets, stared out at my black blanket of sky and stars and drifted off to my railway lullaby.

By this stage we were of course really overdue. No one minded terribly and the Kenyans were used to trains getting there – eventually. If they'd cared about the time, they would have flown or driven, both considerably faster methods of making the journey. Derailments, it seemed, were a regular occurrence. We couldn't add speed to make up the time: the shaking would rip both the train and

track to pieces. As the day wore on and we slipped further and further behind, the partying Kenyans quietly rustled up a car to meet them halfway and abandoned the train so they didn't lose their entire weekend on the beach. For the rest of us, it meant that a journey we would normally have done in pitch darkness and fast asleep was now being done in daylight; this was an unexpected sightseeing bonus which was taking us right through the Tsavo National Park. I phoned the car hire company in Mombasa and warned them we'd be late, grabbed my camera and found a free doorstep to sit on, a perfect place to talk to local villagers, admire the babies held up to us for inspection, and watch for game. The game count was pretty pathetic – a couple of birds, one dead zebra and three live ones, but the vast expanse of Tsavo's red dust, just broken by the first spring green shoots, was awe-inspiring. The train was a welcome anchor to normality amidst the immensity of the arid semi-desert.

Just before midday, the train captain reappeared, looking very apologetic. We were due, he said, to arrive in Mombasa at around 4pm (our original ETA was 8.30am) or at least we would have been.

"However," he continued, "I'm afraid a second train has capsized and this time it is more serious. We are not going to be able to get as far as Mombasa but will stop our journey at Mazeras, which is about 22 km (15 miles) inland. We will arrange a bus to get you all into the city." I was sad not to be doing the last run into Mombasa by train – it left the journey incomplete – but there was nothing we could do about it. After a short discussion, we decided to phone the car hire people again, explain the situation and ask them to meet us at Mazeras instead.

"No problem."

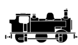
Crawling into Mazeras station, I took charge of getting our luggage off the train while Mark headed out in search of wheels. As he tells it, he was only halfway to the carpark when he was accosted by two very polite young Kenyans.

"Mr Elliot?"

"Honestly," he said later, "I have no idea how they knew me." I had my own ideas on that – there were not that many beanpole-tall, obviously English men around. They led him towards a shiny maroon 4x4 about twice the size of the one

we'd ordered. The curse of Kenya had struck again. The last people to hire it had broken their only Rav 4 so we'd been upgraded to a Pajero. Mark was delighted; I could only think of the fuel consumption of this gas-guzzling monster, which was on my carefully calculated and rapidly dwindling work tab. As the next few days went by, I began to appreciate the additional height we gained but loathed its suspension. Each time we hit one of the vicious, unmarked speed bumps that lurked on the edges of most villages, its sprung seats catapulted me into the ceiling. Mark thought it was hilarious and started speeding as he steered towards them. Even today when I emailed him to check on the make of the car, he asked hopefully if I'd found one for sale.

Less than an hour later, we had checked into our beachfront hotel in Nyali where the French windows of our ground floor hotel room opened onto lush lawns, the scarlet and orange of bottle brush and bougainvillea. Past the coconut palms, we were lounging in the sun-warmed shallows of the Indian Ocean, soothed by the ebb and flow of the wavelets murmuring and sighing across the sand.



> Once agreement had been reached, the early building of the Uganda railway was almost entirely focused on India, rather than Europe. It was considerably closer and easier to access, with a large, reliable, well-trained – and cheap – pool of railway workers ripe for the plucking. It was for this reason too that the decision was taken to build the railway to the Indian metre-gauge system, in order to use materials manufactured in India, even if they would not link up with others on the African continent. Most of the HQ staff of the IBEAC were in Bombay. Our stereotypical image of colonial men with moustaches and pith helmets, women with tight corsets and big hats swathed in scarves, sipping drinks on broad verandahs, waited on by servants in crisp white uniforms with tightly wound turbans undoubtedly did come to exist, for a remarkably short period, for a very few people, but Kenya's first railway builders had a much less gracious life.

Those in Mombasa lived in hastily erected bungalows with corrugated iron roofs. Once out in the field, they were initially in tented camps, protected from the wildlife by rudimentary brushwood fencing, bonfires and, if they were lucky, a handy water tower to climb.

Because the East African coast nominally remained part of the Omani Empire, British rule in Kenya was complicated. In 1920, Britain 'upgraded' inland Kenya from a protectorate to a colony but as the Sultan also had pre-existing treaties with France and the USA, the 15km/10-mile wide coastal strip became a Protectorate and was never fully annexed. Fast-forwarding to independence in 1963, this necessitated two sets of parallel talks that guaranteed freedom of religion and effectively gave the coastal strip its independence from both Britain and Zanzibar while joining it to the Kenyan hinterland.

In 1895, George Whitehouse arrived in Mombasa from the UK as Chief Engineer and Manager of the railway. He rapidly met up with the Consul-General in Zanzibar, Arthur Hardinge, the senior British man in the region, to try and settle an incipient civil war breaking out along the Swahili Coast and the Kenyan Highlands as various factions amongst the Arab rulers and the Kikuyu objected to the British presence and land claims. A population survey of Mombasa, conducted by Hardinge in 1896, showed there were only 107 Europeans in the city out of a total population of 24,719, of whom twenty-nine were railway employees and their families and twenty-four Protectorate officials and families. There were also 5,962 Indians, 14,574 Swahili and 2,667 slaves.[89] The Europeans must have felt vastly outnumbered, particularly as they battled the fearsome, disease-ridden climate which led to constant outbreaks of fever from cholera to blackwater fever and malaria. This, however, did not stop them getting on with the job in hand.

It was apparent from the start that they would need trained workers. In Egypt, they had had the vast resources of the corvée, the essentially slave-like fellaheen lent to them by the Mamluk rulers. In Sudan, they had Egyptians, trained on the Egyptian railways, English tommies and as many Sudanese prisoners of war as they could round up. In Kenya, they had none of these, only African tribespeople who neither wanted nor welcomed the railway, nor saw any particular reason in working for money when they had enough to do farming their own land. The sensible solution, from the British perspective, was to look to India where there was a relatively long history of railway building and a large population of experienced workers, from railway builders to clerks, smiths and draughtsmen. A

deal was struck with the Government of India, with each Indian "coolie" to receive 15 rupees a month, together with transport to and from India, accommodation, food, and medical support. There would be bonuses for good workers and deductions for bad. Any worker who chose to stay in British East Africa would have the right to do so. Transport was provided by the British India Steam Ship Company with the workers arriving by both steamship and dhow. Within a year, there were over 4,000 Indian workers spread across the line; by the end, around 34,400 Indians were sent across as indentured workers on the 931km/582 mile Mombasa to Kisumu line. They had the choice, from the start, of choosing to stay or returning home at the end of their contract period. Of these, 2,493 Indians and five white people were to lose their lives, most to malaria and blackwater fever, while another 6,454 were sent back to India, injured or ill, 16,312 chose to return home and 6,724 chose to stay and make a new life in Kenya. These had the options of branching out on their own or choosing the steady pay, accommodation and possible education and advancement of the railway "family". Additional work, both skilled and manual labour, was provided by a host of small Indian and European contractors, each of whom managed several hundred workers, including local labourers who were invaluable in bridge-building and digging out the endless embankments and cuttings.

These railway Indians undoubtedly formed one of the key Asian population groups in East Africa but there had been Indians resident on the coast for many centuries prior to their arrival. The trade winds (monsoons) had ensured a highly lucrative Indian Ocean trade network for centuries before the arrival of the Europeans and by the time white people first set foot on the coast, there was a deeply embedded community of nearly 6,000 Indians in Mombasa and some 20,000 in Zanzibar. Not only were they trading on their own behalf in gold, ivory, timber and spices but acting as intermediaries and middlemen, running slaves and managing finances on behalf of the Omani Sultans. The railway workers, who included Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, came mainly from the Punjab; the traders were mainly from Gujarat. The Sikhs were often highly skilled, arriving as blacksmiths and masons, carpenters and engineers. As the line came into commission, a new wave followed as railway police and military. Those who tracked the railway inland, setting up hotels, shops and restaurants were largely

The Kenya-Uganda Railway required endless climbing in its construction, starting at sea level in Mombasa, rising to 1750m (5750ft) at Nairobi, climbing again to 2347m (7700ft) in Uplands, dropping to the floor of the Rift Valley before one last heroic climb to its high point of 2784m (9136ft) at Timboroa Station in northwest Kenya. Its final destination, Kampala, is at 1200m (3,900ft).[90]

entrepreneurial Gujurati traders, who rapidly overwhelmed the number of Europeans in every settlement. Until Nairobi became the colony's capital in 1905, 80 percent of the population was Indian and the main shopping area for everyone, despite the efforts of separatist white inhabitants, was the Indian Market, burned down twice before finally settling in its current location as the Asian Bazaar. From 1898, the Indian rupee became the official currency, lasting until 1906, when British East Africa got its own rupee. This was eventually replaced in 1920 by the florin.

Building the railway really did mean starting from scratch, clearing virgin bush, hacking back trees, crossing swamps and constructing bridges. Once out of day reach of the coast, the trains began to earn their keep almost immediately, portering the rails and sleepers, plentiful stocks of water, food and building materials to the railhead for the workers. Beyond the line of work, porters and ox carts were used to heft the supplies ahead up to 20km/12 miles, setting up camps for the crews heading towards them. In areas destined to be permanent stations, whole towns were set up, starting with the construction of access to water and reservoirs, engineering workshops and administration blocks, accommodation and medical facilities, goods depots and flour mills. At Kilindini, their efforts were compounded by the need to create a deepwater port and offload heavy goods efficiently, directly onto the rail network. Water was always in short supply with workers sharing scarce waterholes with local residents, domestic and wild animals. Some of the water was brackish, some infected with parasites, causing desperate shortages of proper sanitation and outbreaks of amoebic dysentery. In times of severe drought, workers even found themselves competing for water in dried-up rivers with predators such as crocodiles and hippos. It was essential both for the workers and the engines that the railways supplied and sourced plentiful resources of clean fresh water to keep this enormous industrial treadmill rolling forward. A combination of boreholes, watertanks and reservoirs were installed at regular intervals along the tracks, alongside a telegraph system, essential for keeping in touch with the outside world.

Wildlife constantly tried to re-encroach on the tiny oases of civilisation that the railway workers attempted to carve from the bush. Food was almost

permanently in short supply and up to half the workers ended up malnourished and suffering from scurvy. The answer of the railway company was, most frequently, simply to ship anyone unable to work back to India and demand new, fitter workers. The Indian Government was appalled and complained to the governments of both the UK and the EAP. High level discussions took place and regimens were supposedly put in place to try and provide better nutrition and working conditions but the railway company was squeezing every penny from an overly tight budget and made stupid decisions, such as giving a largely vegetarian workforce a daily meat allowance. There were medical stations and hospitals but these were simply overwhelmed by the lack of care and nourishment. The workers did their best to treat each other with traditional medicine. One Ayurvedic practitioner, Sayyed Baghali Shah, became renowned as a healer and mystic until he died in a rail-trolley accident in 1902. A mosque is now built over his tomb at Mackinnon Station and all trains have traditionally slowed there to pay their respects.

Once station masters were more settled, they started vegetable gardens. Meanwhile, when their contracts had expired, other Indian railworkers chose to stay in the EAP, create smallholdings and started planting vegetables to sell to the railways. They also worked with the native Kenyans, supplying seeds and acting as intermediaries for selling their crops. This worked well on the coast where they could buy land from the Arabs but was far more problematic in the rich farming highlands inland, already disputed by the whites, Kikuyu and Maasai. In 1902, Sir Charles Elliot, now both Consul-General in Zanzibar and Commissioner for the East African Protectorate, began a process of segregation, reserving the sale of land in the "White Highlands" purely for Europeans, cutting out the Asians who were now restricted to buying far less suitable, often fever-ridden low land. [91] There was never a legalised apartheid similar to South Africa's but society became more openly and legally racist as British East Africa developed. There was a Whites Only Officers' Club in Kilindini, on the coast, as early as 1896. Housing was separated by race and rank and by 1898, the Uganda Railway Committee received a letter from white staff members asking them for a separate Railway Institute for whites and Eurasians, excluding "pure-blood" black and Asians from membership. Two separate institutes were set up, along with two cricket clubs.[92]

After a couple of sybaritic days exploring the coast, revelling in Swahili history and food, and basking in the warm sea waters, we reluctantly turned back inland. Our time in Kenya was coming to an end but we had one final treat in store. En route back to Nairobi, we were stopping off for a couple of nights at Tsavo National Park, one of the greatest game parks in the world. It would take us much of the day to do the 266km/165 mile drive, particularly once we were off the tarred road and into the park with its maximum speed of 40km/25mph. We weren't in any particular hurry; the road itself was sufficiently entertaining, cutting straight and flat through the bush, rising steadily but slowly away from the coastal palms and the roadside lines of shanty shops, cobbled together of corrugated iron and cardboard, plywood and car tyres. The last of the coastal water vanished and the landscape bleached to browns and greys, the thin, hot dust a pervasive gold and orange-red. In this arid semi-desert of the hinterland, villages faded into the landscape, their cover broken only by the vivid red, white and blue paint of the giant Omo advertisements that covered the whole of the local shops. The sky was solid with thick, grey, low-hanging cloud which was promising much but delivering little.

"Is that Kili?" I had promised Mark a view of Africa's highest mountain, Kilimanjaro, just across the border in northern Tanzania. He was terribly excited. Being British, he thought Ben Nevis, at 1,345m/4413ft, was high. Nairobi is at 1795m/5889ft but Kilimanjaro is 5895m/19,341ft above sea level. I had grown up in the African highlands and had had to adjust to how little England was, in so many ways. I wounded one of my early student boyfriends in my first year back in the UK when he bought me a poinsettia in a pot as a pre-Christmas present. I was pleased and bemused, worried that I wouldn't be able to pot it out to grow on. When he explained it was meant to be a houseplant and that was how they came, I burst out laughing. We had had a poinsettia hedge in Zimbabwe, of 10m-high trees in flaming red, orange and white. The poinsettia was just so tiny, but its single flower was a welcome burst of winter colour and the gesture was lovely.

“No, not yet. That’s just a big hill. You won’t see it until we get to Tsavo. You’ll have to be patient.” I hated having to disappoint him. We stopped for lunch in Voi in the Taita Hills, stretching out to admire the magnificent view from the hotel’s clifftop terrace while we drank our coffee.

Tsavo, covering a vast swathe of the Tara semi-desert in central Kenya, is so huge that it’s been split into two separate national parks: Tsavo East and Tsavo West. The Chyulu Hills National Park is attached to the western edge of Tsavo West. Tsavo East, north of the main road, is far larger, covering a staggering 13,747 sq km, almost exactly the same size as Montenegro. This is truly untamed country and far less visited by tourists with fewer resort hotels and lodges, home to the Galana River and the 300km long Yatta Plateau, the world’s longest lava flow, as well as giant herds of elephants and buffalo.

To the south of the road, Tsavo West is a fraction of the size at 7,065 sq km, although even that is roughly the same size as New Jersey. Tsavo West is meant to be the lush green sister, with open savannah woodland, but it was hard to see when we arrived at the tail end of a long, bitter drought. Everywhere was red orange dust and the gnarled, twisted grey bones of trees and broken branches. A tiny amount of rain had encouraged the first vivid green shoots to poke their heads up along the verges of the dirt roads but the sullen clouds promised much and delivered little. The benefit, from our point of view, was that the animals were gathering closer to the waterholes and rivers so we got see them; the drawback was that the light was terrible for photography.[93] Here too are the great herds. David Sheldrick was the first warden of Tsavo and the Sheldrick Foundation has been closely associated with the park ever since. Elephant orphans rescued at the enchanting Daphne Sheldrick Elephant Orphanage in Nairobi are brought to the Sheldrick Sanctuary here as they get older, as part of their rehabilitation, to learn how to live wild. Poaching remains an ever-present issue but numbers have doubled to around 12,000 elephants in recent years and careful guarding helps preserve both the elephants and the black rhinos in the separately fenced rhino sanctuary.

As we entered the national park, a semi-circle of painted rocks told the story of the maneaters of Tsavo. These were not the only problematic lions to

plague the track. Once the busy railhead moved past, the lions returned to stalk many rural stations and workcamps, now often sparsely manned by a Station Manager and his family. In 1903, WR Foran quotes a message sent down the line by a fearful but exceedingly polite manager saying:

> Please inform station master Makindu instruct drive up – mixed approach station with caution or beware serious troubles or life dangers. Four lions with consorts, aggressively on platform and completely in charge my official functions. Regret impossible perform duties necessary. Please therefore arrange grave matter under report as said lions and consorts making fearful roars and acting savagely. Am in terror of own life.[94]

Apart from keeping our eyes peeled for Mt Kilimanjaro and potholes, we were now in game-viewing country but it was the heat of the day and the land was so dry there was barely a blade of grass to be seen. All we needed was a melting clock and the image of the tangled, broken grey branches and vicious white thorns piled haphazardly across the caked red clay would be complete. We looked hopefully for lions and elephants but there were none. Occasionally we saw a few zebra or kongoni idly swishing their tails in the shade but it was simply too hot and we headed straight to the Kilaguni Serena Safari Lodge and a long, welcome drink. Part-owned by the Aga Khan Fund, these luxury lodges have been well ahead of their time, run on sustainable and environmentally friendly principles and putting money back into the local economy to support the surrounding population. It was lovely to be ending our trip in great comfort and knowing that we were doing some good at the same time. Each lodge is different. This is a tall, stilted wood and thatch building, winding round a waterhole, with superb verandah views from the main living and dining room and every bedroom. They should stretch back across the plains to the mountains on the border and the drama of Mt Kilimanjaro, rising in glory like a giant Christmas pudding into the sky. But after all my promises to Mark, the weather defeated me.

"See those really black clouds on the horizon?" He nodded. "Well, if they weren't there, right now, you'd have the most perfect view of Kili. I'm so sorry! I have failed." Luckily, the action at the waterhole was so riveting that we could ignore the distance and spend our time watching herds of zebra, wildebeest and buffalo, the occasional giraffe and even, to my intense joy, an aardwolf, my first

sighting. A tree hornbill hopped along the balcony and monkeys eyed us from nearby trees, all hoping for munchies if we stopped concentrating.

Next morning, we were up before dawn for our morning game drive, with the game far more lively as the sun rose and the dew vanished from the intricate spiders' webs. We explored as far as we were able, watching the sun rise from the high Poacher's Lookout over the plains then heading towards Mzima Springs, an extraordinary oasis, where four springs pour water into a pool that has traditionally provided Mombasa with most of its clean water, with 250 million litres a day piped to the city from an aquifer deep below the surface. Yet there is potential trouble in paradise. Drought has hit here too in recent years, with a build-up of population and farming in nearby areas demanding more of the water supply. Just as the government is talking of installing a second pipe to siphon off even more of the water, there is evidence that the water level of the pool is falling, many of the local hippos have died and there have been outbreaks of waterborne disease in Mombasa. None of the issues had been fixed at the time of going to press. For tourists, it remains a romantic haven, filled with waterbirds and greenery, somewhere to while away time in the shade, keeping an eye out for hippos and crocodiles.

Our next stop could not have been more of a contrast as we headed west into the Chyulu National Park to see the Shetani Lava flow, which is 8km long, 6km wide and 5m thick, the youngest of the volcanic eruptions in the region, created in 1855. Although nearly 150 years old, only now are the first signs of tough vegetation beginning to break through the black uneven boulders of lava. Shetani means devil and it's an apt name. We saw numerous small deer such as klipspringer hiding in the grasses nearby but we'd failed on the elephants and it was time to head for Nairobi. I was sad, not only because I love them but because Mark had never experienced the thrill of seeing them in the wild.

We were heading back to the main gate when there was a gentle rustle and a giant matriarch strolled silently out of her hiding place behind a dead tree onto the road in front of us. Mark stopped and I hastily gave him a lesson in elephant etiquette as I scanned the bush around us. As I suspected, we were right in the middle of the herd. They'd been spraying themselves with the red dust to help

stave off the flies and were almost perfectly camouflaged, as red-orange and grey as the landscape itself. They were utterly unconcerned by our presence and we sat and watched as they scavenged what little they could find before eventually melting away again. It was a perfect farewell.

Turning left back onto the main road, we left Tsavo with heavy hearts and headed back towards Nairobi. Who knew when I would be back? Now, at last, with Kilimanjaro behind us, the sun was finally coming out. We could see the rail running almost parallel to the road as we slowly climbed towards the highlands, the land around us gradually becoming a little greener. Our last stop of the trip was at Makindu, 356 km (221 miles) northwest of Mombasa, where lush beautifully maintained gardens filled with shady trees surround an elegant Sikh gurdwara. As we pulled in and parked, we felt particularly blessed by a male peacock who leapt straight onto the warm bonnet, fanned his tail and began to preen to his own reflection in the windscreen, as utterly absorbed as Narcissus. With land donated by the railway authorities, it was initially set up as a simple corrugated iron hut with four doors, representing a welcome to people of all colours, caste, creed and nationality, from all points of the compass. One of the early workshop depots and communal meeting points, it became part of a network of temples across the country, offering prayer and companionship as Sikh railway workers gathered under a tree. Legend surrounded it from the early days, with claims that the gurdwara's first guru was saved from a fire by the miraculous intervention of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh Guru. Numerous other tales of miracles have since attached to the site and as donations grew, in 1926, the first gurdwara was built with a prayer hall, *langar* (dining hall) and dormitory, offering all travellers free vegetarian meals and a safe place to stay for two nights, all part of the Sikh tradition of hospitality and worship that remains unbroken to this day. It has become the largest and most prominent gurdwara in East Africa, linked indelibly with the railway workers. Across the road are a small hospital and clinic, also funded by donations. The original Guru Granth Sahib (the Holy Book of the Sikhs), rescued from the fire, was returned to Makindu by a special train in 2010. A reflective and peaceful place, everyone is welcome, no payment or questions are asked, although you are of course welcome to leave a donation. Many Kenyans from the city come here for weekends and festivals to socialise and pray and

passing travellers continue to make use of the dormitories. A couple of hours later, as we came back to the car, the peacock was still on our bonnet, as totally self-obsessed with his reflection as before. We shooed him away with some difficulty, said a last silent farewell to the railway workers and headed back towards Nairobi and our overnight flight to London.

It should have been easy to find the airport. We were entering Nairobi on the main road, on the same side as the airport – it would be signposted for miles around. Right? Wrong. We certainly saw many signs of it, saw planes arriving and departing but big signboards showing us which way to turn, there were none. Finally, I recognised the dual carriageway heading into the town centre. Sprawled across it was a giant Kenya-China Friendship Arch. I knew we were close.

"Right," I said to Mark. "Now we look for a garage and then we can turn in the car." We headed under the arch, saw a petrol station on the far side of the road, found a way – eventually – to get over there and filled up. Now came the difficulty. Planes seemed to be coming down off to our left. We headed out, eyes peeled for a sign, but there was nothing. In short order, we found ourselves in a sprawling industrial estate, heading hard in the direction of Karen and my sister's cottage.

"We need to try again," I sighed. We turned round, went back towards the arch and this time spotted a very small sign saying "Airport". We took it but found ourselves at the reception of an airport hotel. Back on the road, we went through the arch and disappeared towards the city centre. Eventually, now beginning to worry about the time, I gave in and phoned John the Taxi for instructions.

"I simply don't understand what we're doing wrong." He listened closely to where we were, then laughed.

"Oh, it's quite simple. You go to the arch, then do a U-turn, back down the other side and take the unpaved dirt road that leads through the market. You'll see lots of local buses. That takes you straight to the airport entrance." We followed

his advice, bumped cautiously and somewhat disbelievingly through the busy local market, narrowly avoiding small children, and he was, of course, quite right. We came up to a smart entrance with a barrier and security booth and in front of us lay the Departure Building. Our relief was almost sufficient to mask Mark's disappointment in saying goodbye to the Pajero.

My next destination was Tanzania, just down the road, but though there had once been a train link, this was no longer functioning and the two countries were currently squabbling. Bizarrely it was going to cost less for me to fly back to London and then out to Dar es Salaam. Meantime, Mark had used up all his annual leave and for the rest of the trip down through Africa, I would be on my own. I would miss him dreadfully but the journey, on more familiar territory, should also be easier from now on.

Chronology

1794	Agreement between Ottoman and British Empires to allow use of Red Sea ports opens up the land route to India via Egypt
1798	French arrive in Egypt; the fleet is defeated at the Battle of the Nile, the army at the Battle of Aboukir.
1799	Napoleon leaves Egypt
1809-22	French scholars publish the *Déscription de l'Égypte*, leading to Egyptomania and the era of archaeological discovery
1811	Mohamed Ali massacres the Mamluks and consolidates his power as Khedive of Egypt
1819	Mohamed Ali Pasha builds Mahmudiya Canal between Alexandra and Cairo
1829	Lieut. Thomas Waghorn cuts the journey time from Bombay to London to 40 days by travelling via Cairo
1825	World's first steam-powered passenger railway line opened in England on the 26th September (the Stockton & Darlington Railway).
1830	British engineer, Captain FR Chesney of the Royal Artillery, surveys the potential route of the Suez Canal, correcting Napoleon's faulty calculations.
1834	Mohamed Ali Pasha starts planning Egypt's first railway (not built).
1841	Thomas Cook takes his first day trippers to Loughborough by train on the 5th July (the world's first package tour)
1844	Morse sends first Morse Code signal by telegraph on 24th May.
1851	Agreement signed with Robert Stephenson to build Egypt's first railway (Alexandria to Cairo)
1854	Agreement signed with Ferdinand de Lesseps to build the Suez Canal
1857	Cairo to Alexandria railway starts operating
1863	Licensed in 1860, the first tram service starts operating in Alexandria, Egypt (the same year as the London Underground)
1869	The Suez Canal is opened
1881	On 29th June, Mohammed Ahmed declares himself the Mahdi in Sudan
1883	General Hicks' army is massacred in Sudan on 3rd November
1884	General Gordon arrives back in Khartoum on 18th February

1885 General Gordon killed in Khartoum on 26th January; the Mahdi dies of typhus on 22nd June

1886 Battle of Adowa results in catastrophic defeat for Italians; Kitchener's army arrives in Dongola to start building railway and Sudanese campaign

1888 On 6th September, the Imperial British East Africa Company received its Royal Charter; the Suez Canal is declared a neutral zone by the Convention of Constantinople

1890 Brussels Conference leads to the Brussels Act, an international agreement on tackling slavery

1892 Lord Randolph Churchill's luxury safari to South Africa

1893 Cairo Station is built

1895 East Africa Protectorate formed, taking over management of Kenya and Uganda from the IBEAC

1895 Major General Slatin escapes after 10 years enslaved by the Mahdi in Sudan

1896 The Uganda Railway Act was passed in the UK Parliament allowing work to start on the Kenya-Uganda Railway; the railway reached Nairobi in 1899 and Lake Victoria in 1901

1898 British win overwhelming victory at the Battle of Omdurman on 1st-2nd September, including one of the world's last cavalry charges (including Winston Churchill); 6th Sept, Kitchener blows up the Mahdi's tomb; Sudan passes to British control; from March to December, man-eating lions terrorised rail workers at Tsavo in Kenya

1902 First Aswan Dam built by the British

1909-10 Theodore Roosevelt's epic hunting safari through East Africa

1914–1918 World War I

1914 Egypt officially becomes a British Protectorate

1919 Hundred die in Egyptian strikes; Charlie Cottar builds Kenya's first luxury safari lodge and starts up photographic safaris

1920 East Africa Protectorate becomes a British crown colony; in February to March, Flt-Lt Christopher Joseph Quintin Brand and Lt-Col Pierre van Ryneveld succeed in making the first flight from Cairo to Cape Town, taking 45 days

1922	Egypt technically made independent with a puppet king; British keep hold of foreign and defence policy and the Canal
1924	Egyptian Officers' Revolution crushed; Egyptian and Sudanese railway systems separated.
1927	First Alexandra Station built
1928	Foundation of the Muslim Brotherhood by Hassan al-Banna
1932	Cairo Railway Museum created
1939–1945	World War II
1952-3	Egyptian Revolution overthrows King Farouk; Egypt declared a republic with Muhammid Najib as first President;
1952-56	Mau Mau campaign waged in Kenya, ending officially with the capture in October of rebel leader, Field Marshal Dedan Kimathi; the world's first commercial jet flight flew from London to Johannesburg on 2nd May 1952 largely following the Cairo to Cape route through Africa
1952	George VI dies on 6th February and Queen Elizabeth is given the news of her accession while on holiday at Treetops in Kenya with Prince Philip
1952	Acropole Hotel opens in Khartoum
1954	Evacuation Treaty signed with the UK; the British leave Egypt
1956	General Nasser becomes President of Egypt, nationalising the Suez Canal and expelling British troops from the Canal Zone, causing the Suez Crisis; he went on to nationalise many industries including the railways.
1955-72	Over half a million die in the First Sudanese Civil War, also known as the Anyanya Rebellion, the south's demand for greater automony; it was eventually ended by the Addis Ababa Agreement on 27th March 1972.
1956	Sudan gains independence from the UK on 1st January and secedes from Egypt
1956	President Nasser of Egypt nationalises the Suez Canal prompting international Suez Crisis
1958	First of many military coups overthrows Sudan's civilian government

1959	Egypt and Sudan sign an agreement over usage of the Nile's water; no other countries along the river are included
1963	Kenya gains independence with Jomo Kenyatta as Prime Minister; the country becomes a republic the following year with Kenyatta becoming President
1967	Egyptian war with Israel leaves Israel in control of the Sinai and Gaza; the Suez Canal is closed
1970	Aswan High Dam opened; President Nasser dies and is succeeded by Anwar Sadat
1975	Suez Canal is reopened
1978	Oil discovered in Bentiu in southern Sudan
1979	After years of talks, a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt returns Sinai to Egypt
1981	President Sadat is assassinated in Egypt and succeeded by President Mubarak who declares a state of emergency
1982	Kenya declared a one-party state by President Daniel Arap Moi
1983	Sharia Islamic Law and martial law are introduced to Sudan
1983-2005	Civil war between the strongly Islamic north and the largely Christian south in Sudan led to an estimated 2 million dead and another 2 million displaced. It ended with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed on 9th January 2005, although intermittent bloodshed has continued ever since
1991	Osama bin Laden is invited to Sudan, which becomes his safehaven for the next five years until 1996
1992-97	Series of bomb attacks by Gama'a al-Islamiyya Islamic Group in Egypt, aimed primarily at tourism and government, leading in the deaths of 62 people at Luxor in 1997
1998	On 2nd January, simultaneous bombs exploded at the US Embassies in Nairobi (Kenya) and Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), killing 224 and injuring 4,800; it was the first major attack by al-Qaeda.
1998	Bahri Station in Khartoum North opens
2002	In July, around 200 Samburu and Maasai people accept $7million reparation from UK military for live ordnance left on their tribal lands

2005-6	Series of bomb attacks rock tourism resorts along Egypt’s Red Sea coast
2009	The International Criminal Court issues arrest warrant for Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir for genocide in Darfur; Chinese-built Merowe Dam is completed in northern Sudan, displacing 15,000 families
2011	In January, two-day referendum leads to almost 99% of South Sudanese voting for independence; the new nation of South Sudan is officially created on 9th July
2011-3	Beginning on 25th January, as part of the Arab Spring, millions of Egyptian protestors gathered across Egypt to demand the resignation of the government; Mubarak resigned on 11 February. Elections in 2012 brought Muslim Brotherhood leader, Mohamed Morsi, to power but he was toppled by a military coup in 2013, leaving General Abdel el-Sisi as President.
2011	With Somalia in chaos, Kenyan forces enter the country to try and restore order, leading to the first of a continuing series of devastating terrorist attacks by jihadist group al-Shabaab, including the September 2013 attack on Westgate Mall, Nairobi, which killed 67; a hotel attack near Lamu resulting in 48 deaths in June 2014; a massacre killing 148 at Garissa University College in April 2015; and an attack on the DusitD2 hotel in Nairobi in 2019 which left 21 dead.
2013	Muslim Brotherhood declared a terrorist organisation in Egypt; British agree to pay £20 million in compensation to Kenyan victims of torture during Mau Mau
2016-17	Islamic State attacks on Egypt including shooting down a Russian airliner over Sinai, killing all 224 on board
2017	May. The new Chinese-built Nairobi–Mombasa railway is opened in Kenya.
2019	Sudanese military arrest President Omar al-Bashir; his trial began in July 2020 and was adjourned. At the time of writing, the Sudanese have agreed to hand him over to the ICC who are setting up a court. Al-Bashir remains in prison.

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