

Reflections

A literary supplement to the C.S. Forester Society Newsletter



Up the creek
without a paddle:
odd couple
Katharine Hepburn
and Humphrey
Bogart in John
Huston's classic
adventure

Number 1: July 2002

In the wake of

The African Queen

The riddles of *The African Queen*

Colin Blogg investigates a Boston archive, to shed light on Forester's reminiscences of how *The African Queen* began – and on how it ended: with deliverance or disaster?

In 1935, CSF was living in Longton Avenue near Crystal Palace in South London.¹ *The Peacemaker* and *The Gun* were recently published, but selling slowly. His American publishers were not happy. Two novels had been started and abandoned.²

In *Hornblower's London* (1957), CSF describes Sydenham Hill station as the second most sequestered railway station in the County of London. (The first is at Upper Sydenham). On a particularly memorable day, CSF had been talking to his agent, Peters, in the morning. Peters had tried to persuade him to become interested in a project being run by *The News Chronicle* (wrongly attributed to *The London Times* by Hodapp).³

CSF rejected the idea because 'his oldest brother was dying of cancer' and 'Cecil wanted to spend as much time as possible with him.' So, he continued his expedition from Sydenham Hill station to the London shops and lunched at his club. On the way home, as he passed the ticket barrier at Victoria station, inspired by a travel poster to 'the Dark Continent', an idea 'popped' into his mind; it was followed by others as he walked along the train. They took more definite shape during the twenty minutes journey. He was then too excited to wait until he reached home and 'phoned his agent from a call box in the station. Then he rushed on home and immediately started work on the five-part series, - impressively completed in ninety days or less. This was then turned into a novel.⁴

If you read it carefully, the five parts can still be discerned. Then it became a very successful movie and, ironically, was finally changed back into serial form again for publication in *Everybody's* in 1952 as an eight-part series.⁵

¹ John Forester, *Novelist and storyteller: the life of C.S. Forester*, (2000), page 794.

² *Little, Brown & Co.-CSF, 26 February 1935*, *Little, Brown & Co. archive*, Houghton Library, Harvard; John Forester, *op.cit.*, page 246.

³ C.S. Forester, *Hornblower's London*, *John Bull*, 189 High Holborn, London WC1, May 18th 1957, p.18; cf. J.D.P. Hodapp, *The Good Shepherd*, Anapolis (1989).

⁴ C.S. Forester, *op. cit.*

⁵ C.S. Forester, *The African Queen*, *Everybody's* (1952).

The arrival of the manuscript in America provoked a somewhat curious response. On 27 July, 1934, Roger Scaife of *Little, Brown and Co.* in Boston wrote to Charles Evans at *Heinemann*, 'We did very badly on the last Forester book.' Sales of *The Gun*, (or *Rifleman Dodd*), and *The Peacemaker* had been poor, less than 4,000 copies. He proposed a crazy scheme of publishing *The African Queen* under an obvious pseudonym to stir up interest and to cut the last two chapters.⁶ The message came back via Carol Hill to McIntyre at *Little, Brown* on 10 September, 1934, that CSF had no objection to their editorial changes, but would not agree to have the novel published under a *nom de plume*.⁷

What is not clear now is whether the final chapters were indeed removed for the American market. I have in my hand *Heinemann's* 1935 1st edition of *The African Queen*, with all 19 chapters, ending with Rose and Alnutt departing for Matadi and marriage. *Heinemann* claimed at the time to Scaife that removal would 'leave the story too much in the air,' perhaps as in the original English *News Chronicle* version? But if that is so, it differs from John Forester's recollection of the explanation given to him by his father – unless the editorial change was not actually made.⁸

It is worth noting that I cannot remember finding any other record of editorial interference by the publisher between CSF and *Little, Brown & Co.* in the thirty years of correspondence that I have read so far!

⁶ *Scaife-Evans, 27 July 1934*, *Little, Brown & Co. archive*.

⁷ *Hill-McIntyre, 10 September 1934*, *Little, Brown & Co. archive*.

⁸ John Forester, *op. cit.*, page 248.

The problem is fully outlined by Isabelle Roblin (pages 5-7), with the *Mid-Century Note* giving Forester's 1963 explanation.

What CSF told his son flatly contradicts this note – or so it seems. The issue is discussed further on page 12, after John Forester's second contribution. In the meantime, readers may well have come to their own conclusions from the body of "evidence" which will have been presented to them! (Editor).

WHAT ROSIE KNEW:

How the *News Chronicle* ended its serialisation of *The African Queen* in July 1934



The original version of *The African Queen*, serialised in the *News Chronicle* in 1934, was very different from the one we associate with the author in his prime. Rose and Allnutt are planning to attack a German cruiser called *Dortmund*, on an East African River.

One issue this raises is – just when and how did CSF hear about the naval operations on the Great Lakes which underpin the ending of the final version.

Another is the character of Rose Sayer. An issue highlighted by press reports (late June 2002) of the imminent trial in Morocco of Arabs who planned suicide attacks on Anglo-American warships in the Straits of Gibraltar!

ROSE KNEW NOW, what she had half guessed days ago, that there was only one way of making a certainty of it. There must be a hand at the tiller, steady and unflinching, to steer the boat to the objective.

That hand must be her hand. And there must be a hand at the engine to tend to the furnace, to see that the steam pressure should be neither too high nor too low, to deal with the crises which would arise even in five minutes' running.

Rose knew whose duty that would have to be. Her face softened with pity in the darkness as she listened to Allnutt's troubled breathing. Then it hardened again to its cast of fierce resolution. The thing must be done, the blow must be struck for England, cost what it might to her and Allnutt – and she had no doubt of what the cost would be, she could trust herself, but she did not know if she could trust Allnutt. She knew, as much sick nursing had taught her, that death is dreadful to the living. Yet there was a cold logic which she could apply. A certain instant death was more to be dreaded even than a probable death near at hand. There were still cartridges in the revolver. She reached silently into the locker and took the weapon out. Allnutt stirred and muttered in his

sleep, and she froze into rigidity. Nor did she permit herself to relax fully again that night.

DAWN WAS ON ITS WAY across the Indian Ocean toward the Swahili coast. The sounds of the night were giving way to the silence, which preceded the sounds of the day. From the fetid

**"Jesus!" she said,
"Jesus!" – just as Joan
of Arc had said at the
stake.**

swamps and the salt marshes there was rising the thick mist, clammy, and blinding, which ten minutes' equatorial sun would sweep away. When just the faintest outline of material objects could be seen Rose spoke ever so quietly.

"Wake up, Allnutt," she said. There was tenderness in her voice as well as that unmutable firmness.

Allnutt roused himself. His teeth were chattering and every joint was racked with pain.

"I have the revolver here," said Rose. "Unless you obey me I shall shoot you, Allnutt, I shall kill you."

With this last sentence Rose's voice rose a note or two in the scale. The

hysteria, which is never far removed from high resolve, showed itself for a moment, for she had grown fond of Allnutt. But that was the only time it wavered.

"We are going to steer the launch against the *Dortmund* ourselves," explained Rose, steady once more. She would not even make some such verbal concession to weakness as "It is the only thing to do." But Allnutt made no protest. Instead – "Yes, miss," he said. "I fought last night it was the only thing to do. But you needn't come, miss. Don't you come? I can manage the engine and the steering myself, all right."

Perhaps he could. It was possible. But Rose was not going to trust a mere possibility.

"No," she said. "Get the furnace going."

Allnutt went forward to the engine in the half-light.

"Put that revolver away, miss," he pleaded. "You don't need it. Honest you don't. I won't let you down. Please, miss."

Allnutt had not words to explain the resolution, which sustained him, or the pain he felt at being driven to his duty at the point of the revolver.

"No," said Rose, remorseless as fate. "Get the furnace going."

Soon the roar of the draught made itself heard. Those

eternal pencils of steam began to whisper and sigh.

"Steam's up, miss," said Allnutt. "We better get out of these branches before we put the fuses in."

"Yes," said Rose.

Allnutt stretched flat on the foredeck, leaned out over the bow and screwed the deadly things home as the launch drifted idly. Then he came back to the engine.

"Right," said Rose.

"I have the revolver here," said Rose. "Unless you obey me I shall shoot you, Allnutt, I shall kill you."

ALLNUTT OPENED the throttle and the launch began to chug its way over the black water, through the shredding mist. Overhead there was a hint of brilliant blue sky.

The African Queen plugged steadily along the winding channels, the mist was fast disappearing.

Then across a corner Rose's straining eyes suddenly saw, faintly, the outline of the upper works of the *Dortmund*, her bridge, and funnels, and masts and the big guns on her deck. The white flag with the iron cross drooped at the stern. And once round the corner they could see her whole bulk, a looming mass, just as a little flow of wind swept the surface of this wide arm of the river clear of mist.

Allnutt began to work feverishly upon the engine, while Rose swept *The African Queen* round in a shallow arc towards the cruiser's tall side. A whistle shrilled on the *Dortmund's* deck as the launch squattered valiantly towards her. Hurrying white specks dashed hither and thither.

When *The African Queen* was a hundred yards away the guns broke into thunder and flame, and the shells screamed close overhead. Allnutt, working madly on the engine, was too busy to hear them. He looked up suddenly and saw the cruiser's side, high as a house, looming over them.

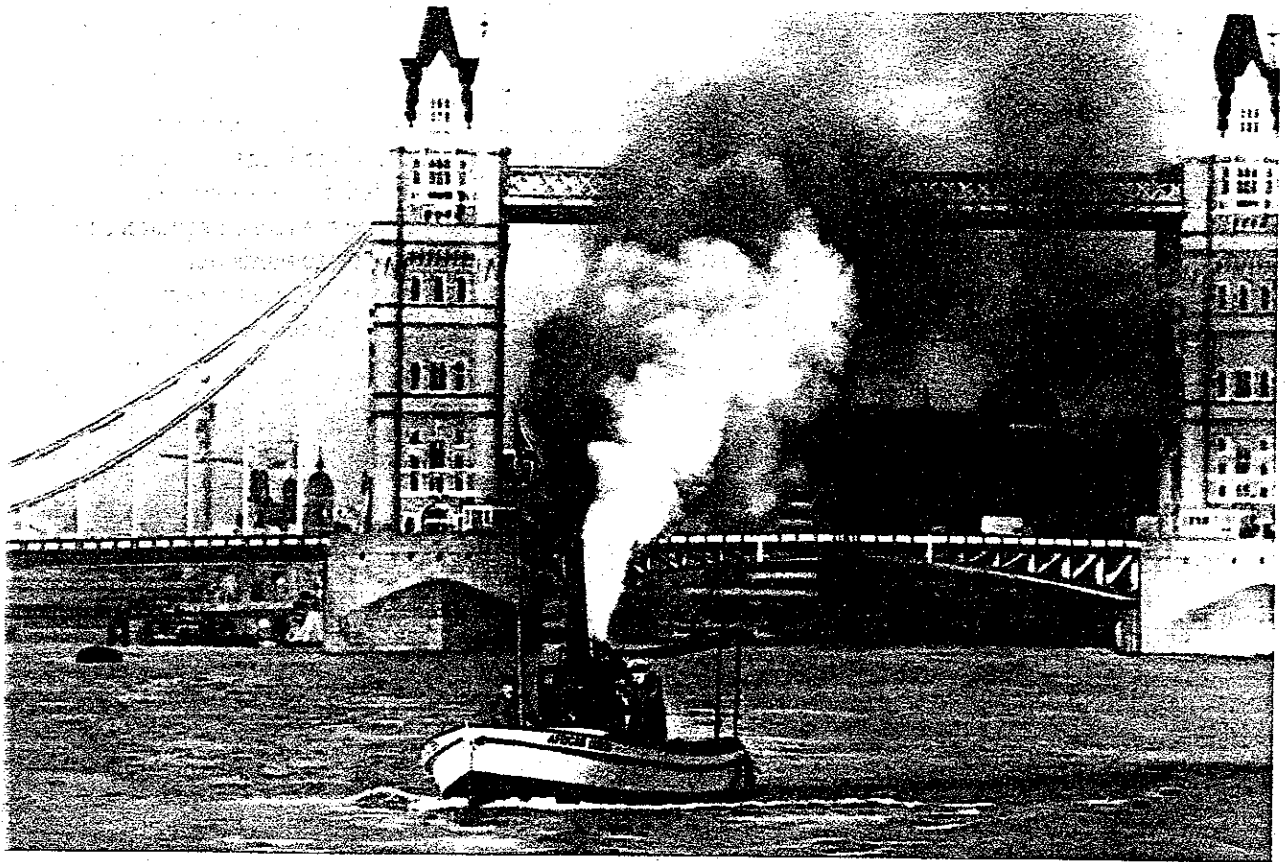
"God Almighty!" he said.

Rose held the tiller steady as the boat drove on.

"Jesus!" she said, "Jesus!" – just as Joan of Arc had said at the stake. Then the torpedoes clashed against the steel side, and burst with a deafening roar and a cloud of spray.

There was a huge hole in the *Dortmund's* side, and the muddy river poured in as through a sluice, and she heeled, and heeled further, and half righted herself, and then sank upon the muddy bottom, with just her funnels and masts showing over the surface.

Wild creepers would grow on them in the months to come; but there was not even that much memorial left to *The African Queen*.



War, national identity and the alternative endings of The African Queen

Isabelle Roblin came from the film of *The African Queen* to the first American edition, by Little, Brown & Co., Boston (1935). This was shorter than the version familiar today - and its ending made it a surprisingly different book. Remarks made by CSF in 1963 - backed by critical arguments - only deepen the mystery!

Rosie Sayer and Charlie Allnut, English people lost in the heart of Africa at the start of World War I, decide on a plan whose futility is obvious: to do something for England! So, they struggle down the uncharted Ulanga-Bora river to Lake Wittelsbach, in a decrepit steam launch pompously named the *African Queen*, to sink the *Königin Luise*, a 100-ton armed steamer which protects German Central Africa against Allied attack. But the *Queen* is herself sunk by a storm, Charlie is lost, and Rosie is left drowning. The untimely storm might well have been raised by Providence for Germany's benefit, as once its purpose is wrought it abates as miraculously as the storm on the Sea of Galilee in the Gospels.

Jesus' disciples were of course saved by a miracle! Roblin was struck by the fact that, in her 1935 American edition of *The African Queen*, Rosie and Charlie were not. She justly describes their tragic fate as a "very beautiful ending of the pathetic and secret war of the two queens". In 1914, of course, the Germans were confident that God was on their side: *Gott mit uns*. In this version of the story, says Roblin, Forester all but endorses that claim. The *Königin Luise* may hark back to the historical Auguste von Mecklenburg (1776-1810), the queen of Friedrich-Wilhelm III of Prussia, a great lady to whom a shabby, colonial African queen could scarce hold a candle! Roblin links Wittelsbach to

a more ambivalent ruler: Ludwig II of Bavaria, the patron of Wagner and Schiller, a reputed madman, drowned in another lake in 1886. The Dream King's fictional *Doppelgänger* is Allnutt, the mad engineer of a ship of fools on a lake of insanity. But this, too, enhances Germany's triumph: For if Charlie and Rosie find some redemption from mediocrity through their patriotic efforts and their love, their drowning is a thoroughly pessimistic conclusion: And such pessimism would have been even more obvious to readers in the 1930's, against the backdrop of the rise of the Nazi Germany.

Researching in Canterbury, Isabelle Roblin found the *Penguin* edition of 1956, which four additional chapters had changed into a very different book! Rosie and Charlie do not drown. They are brought before a German military court. Their judge, the captain of the *Königin Luise*, is impressed by their bravery and their achievement in bringing the *Queen* down the uncharted river. Such chivalry and consideration are in marked contrast to the disdain which will soon be shown by a British officer. For the focus now switches to the Royal Navy, which has brought a pair of gunboats to the lake, and so succeeds where Rosie and Charlie failed. With the *Königin Luise* sunk, it is expected that Charlie will join a South African army which is being raised to invade Germany's colonies in Africa, and that he and Rosie will get married. And so, indeed, they did! But that, and whether or not they lived happily ever after, is another story.

Tragedy or comedy: which came first?

Isabelle Roblin saw this longer conclusion as seriously flawed, because such a happy ending was incompatible with the coherent tragedy on to which it had been tagged, and because it effectively made the novel into a comedy.

To be fair, the longer ending did have merits. It tied up several loose ends, gave the adventure a precise place in the History of the Great War, and vindicated the adventurers by proving that their objective was a possible one after all. But more importantly, the longer ending inadvertently reduced the story to a tale of the inconsequential folly of two nonentities, who could have well gone down with their boat. It also transformed the Germans - overtly and unconvincingly - from ruthless militarists into knights in shining armour, who would not harm a vanquished foe, but who scorned surrender, however impossible the odds. And worst of all was what the longer ending did to Rosie and her man.

They began as tragic heroes, carried away by *hubris* through disaster into legend, like Phaeton or Icarus.¹ Now, in the long version, they did achieve salvation, - but at the cost of becoming comic stereotypes: a woman forced to marry her seducer. They were unworthy of their destiny after all!

Unfortunately, however, Forester may never have seen it that way! Which version (the tragedy or the comedy) came first? And why did the author either expand, or truncate, his original?

Roblin soon found that the longer (19-chapter) *Penguin* version was identical to the original 1935 British edition, from *Heinemann and Sons*. There was also no reason to suppose that the shorter (15-chapter) version had ever been published in the UK. She was unable to get information from *Little, Brown & Co.*, publishers of the shorter (1935) American edition, about why they had apparently issued a truncated text. But the *C.S. Forester Society* in the United States told her that "*The African Queen* (1935) [was] the original for the famous movie of 1951. A good book too, even with the different ending"! Further enquiry established the existence, and located the text, of a preface by C.S. Forester, specially written for the American edition of 1963 - the longer version!

Roblin found Forester's "mid-20th-century note" was enigmatic, evasive and inaccurate. Forester all but says that *Little, Brown & Co.* pressed him to delete the longer ending and that, as this required no further work from him, he immediately agreed. He was in any case preoccupied with another novel, either *The General* or *Captain Horatio Hornblower*.² He was so engrossed that he just did not consider the literary implications of deleting the last two chapters until it was too late! So, the 1963 reissue of the book, in the form in which he had first pictured it, was all the more welcome!

Roblin notes that the longer version actually had *four* more chapters than the shorter, and sees Forester's mention of *two* as a slip, resulting from the memory-loss caused by his arteriosclerosis. Stephen Troughton-Smith, Forester's nephew, to whom *Heinemann and Sons* had referred her, now offered a further explanation. The British (in 1935) would have welcomed a reminder of the glory days of the Great War, to distract them from the current

¹ Phaeton was hurled from the Sun's chariot to his death in the sea. Icarus, flew near the Sun on wings of bees' wax, fell and was drowned. *Hubris* is the tragic hero's fatal flaw - going too far for the gods to tolerate! (Ed.)

² Apparently *Flying Colours*. (Ed.)

crisis in Europe. Isolationist Americans, however, would have been indifferent, if not hostile, to a tale of British heroics in a war the USA had joined late. And Forester was perfectly happy to give both his British and his American readers a version tailored exactly to their particular tastes and expectations!

Troughton-Smith agreed with Roblin's view that the shorter, tragic version was by far the better book: "absolutely in line with CSF's style, with the bitter-sweet conflict between the failed endeavour of Rose and Allnutt and their unsung patriotism - forming the only epitaph they would ever get".

Reconciling the contradictions

An academic colleague of Roblin's suggested a further reason for the deletion of the longer ending: 1930's America would have been outraged by the notion that Charlie might possibly get away with bigamy! But the transformation of the Hun into a chivalrous opponent still caused her major disquiet - especially as her initial conclusion had proved untenable. She had thought that Forester had originally written a tragedy, but changed it (during World War II) into a morale-booster even more effective than the Hornblower series, as the enemy was Germany, not France! Now the 1963 preface had ruled this out. So Roblin turned to a French classic of World War II. Comparison can be made, she suggests, with the famous resistance novel *Le Silence de la Mer* by "Vercors" whose gentle, cultured, francophile protagonist presents a moral challenge that no real Nazi could have ever done.¹

Roblin's original preference had been the shorter, tragic version of *The African Queen*. She then came to see the merits of the longer version, whose closing ambiguity refuted the notion that it was mere comedy. But to finally settle the matter, she turns back to where her quest had begun - the John Huston film - for "the best of both worlds"! Here, by chance rather than design, *The African Queen* actually sinks the *Königin Luise*. The *Luise* collides with its wreck at the very moment that Charlie and Rosie have been granted a brief stay of execution (as spies) so that the German captain can first grant them their last request - by marrying them! They thus evade death - undergo baptism by immersion in the lake, - and swim vigorously and optimistically towards a new life!²

¹ Jean Bruller. *Le silence de la mer* (1942). (Ed.)

² Excerpted from Isabelle Roblin, *The Königin Luise affair: the two endings of The African Queen by C.S. Forester*, *Guerre et Identité*, Caen (1999). Translated by Lucy Blogg.

A very personal explanation

The "Mid-Century Note": C.S. Forester's special Preface to the 1963 American edition of *The African Queen*

The hardest literary work which ever comes my way - and then only when I cannot possibly avoid it - is that of revision. I find it extremely hard to find an interest in work which I have completed. In the routine of writing which I have evolved over so many years, my secretary transcribes my manuscript and sends it to the publisher. And the next time I see what I have written is when the proofs come. By that time, if I have been normally industrious, the next job of work is under way, and I am so wrapped up in it that it is only by a desperate effort that I can make myself attend to the proofs at all.

There is another explanation. That is that if I set myself to the task of correction, I then have to examine my own work, and the more coldly disinterested I am when I examine it, the better. I personally find it a shock when I present myself to myself in this fashion and I avoid it whenever possible.

*I do not know what novel it was that I was writing by the time the typed script of *The African Queen* reached Messrs. Little, Brown and Company. It may have been *The General* or it may have been *Captain Horatio Hornblower*. Whichever it was, however, I could not work up any interest when they told me that they did not like the end of the book and had thought of a simple way of changing the end without calling for any effort from me. The fact that no effort was called for was sufficient inducement. I wrote blithely and agreed, and it was only when my complimentary copies reached me in England that I really appreciated what had happened to the book when it had been docked of its last two chapters.*

*My own opinion was that the loss was pretty serious, but it was too late to do anything about it and anyway I was far too interested in getting *Captain Hornblower* out of prison or in promoting Lieutenant-General Sir Herbert Curzon. So that it is with very great pleasure that I welcome this reissue of *The African Queen* for the opportunity it gives me of presenting the book in the form in which I first pictured it.*

C.S. FORESTER



Entre deux guerres!

Is a ship a she? Christopher Smith shows that answers are demarcated as much by the Channel as by political correctness!

'Artemis was flying through the water now; at that speed with the wind abeam and the sea nearly so she lurched savagely and with unremitting regularity, hitting each wave as it were something solid, her fore-castle awash with the white water which leaping over her port bow.' So begins Chapter XI of *The Ship*. A stirring account of a ship at sea, it uses the correct language. The author refers to *Artemis* with the pronoun 'she', using too the possessive 'her'. In fact, 'she' occurs 5 times in the chapter, and 'her' 8 times, 6 times as pronoun and twice as a possessive. Forester's usage has nothing to do with the fact that the cruiser is called *Artemis*. 'Hotspur was silent as a church as she crept out', we read in Chapter VIII of *Hornblower and the 'Hotspur'* and there is nothing even faintly feminine about the name of that vessel. It is clear that referring to ships as 'she' and 'her' is an integral part of Forester's nautical manner.

But would he be allowed to write that like today? Publishers have a habit of sending their authors little booklets of notes on the preparation of manuscripts. Generally the advice is very helpful, with hints about word-processing, preferred format and so on cheek by jowl with 'house rules' – like instructions about spelling 'realize' with *s* or *z*. But sometimes publishers go further and trespass on to matters of usage. One press – wild salt horses would not make me say just which – concludes its comments on the desirability of avoiding sexist language with a formal prohibition of the employment of 'she' and 'her' with reference to ships. 'It' and 'its' are to be used instead. This is going a bit too far!

Forester's usage is typical of generations of maritime writers and seamen. Under 'she §2', the second, i.e. 1986 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes: 'Used (instead of *it*) of things to which the female sex is conventionally applied... (a) Of a ship or boat'; it records a first example dating back so early as 1375. Confirmation is provided by Tom McArthur's *Oxford Companion to the English Language* (1992): 'she/her is widely used to refer to ships or other means of transport ... and sometimes to machines' (p. 430). A similar point had been made in the 1988 *Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* by Randolph Quirk *et al.* (5.111.n). In the

1975 *Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage* the Americans William and Mary Morris, who show at some length how aware they are of the issue of sexist language, provide a special section on the topic of 'she as pronoun for ships' (p.555). They have no difficulty at all about a usage they regard as time-honoured. Speculating on its origins, they wonder whether it reflects that seamen, absent from their wives on long voyages, formed a bond with the vessels on which they served. Though they note that statements, such as 'the *General Robert E Callan* and her sister ship, the *General Harry Taylor*' – may seem ludicrous, 'the custom', they conclude, 'of referring to ships as *she* continues.' In France, the matter is ordered differently. The masculine is used almost exclusively, except for ships with plainly feminine names like *Jeanne d'Arc* and *Normandie* that are often, but not always, treated as feminine. The controversy over the matter is discussed by M. Grevisse in *Le Bon Usage* (1964), §269, and custom has generally opted to make ships masculine.

Where English has stood on the matter since time immemorial is clear. Does female emancipation and respect for women really require a change? If the usage were derogatory, there would be a case. But in fact it is usually affectionate as well as familiar. Navigators value the ships that have carried them so far, long-distance sailors of both sexes feel deeply for their yachts. They mean – and they imply – no disrespect by keeping up the custom of calling them 'she'. Writers who seek an authentic atmosphere by following their example cannot be criticised either. Passengers may, of course, refer to their cross-Channel ro-ro ferry as 'it' if they wish, just as they are free, if the desire so takes them, to talk about the front end of the ferry and the back, about left and right. If it comes to the push Trinity House will probably not mind too much if they substitute 'young persons' for buoys. But other people have rights too, even privileges; they are entitled to maintain, to keep and use, to read and write in the idiom of the age-old language of ships and the sea, to claim their linguistic portion of a rich maritime heritage. Forester was not mistaken when he struck the right note by calling *Artemis* 'she' and we can safely echo him.



A decaying corpse – as dead as mutton?

Over 50 years, John Huston's film of *The African Queen* has attained a status of its own. CSF's initial verdict was scathing – and not without reason. But therein, argues John Forester, lay an irony that his father could never have perceived!

"In 1950 John Huston completed arrangements to film *The African Queen* with Kathleen Hepburn and Humphrey Bogart. Cecil was initially dubious about Bogart but thought that Huston and Hepburn would make a good film. He told me that Huston was a friend of his, but he had not met Hepburn. In January, 1951, she played in *As You Like It* in San Francisco, a production that Cecil disliked, and Cecil met her after the show, as he wrote Frances. *Then I had supper with her... and we talked about the African Queen and it seems likely it will be done; she's a very highbrow woman indeed but without any brains at all. Next day I'd planned to see the Italian picture Bitter Rice, and she invited herself – just literally – to come with me and it was awful. Don't waste your money on seeing it.... I said a hurried farewell to K.H. sitting in her car outside her hotel, and since then I've had a rather crabbed thank you note*

from her (writing worse than mine) and now she's left town.¹

"Shooting was complete in 1951 and my father told me his reaction to the film as far as it had progressed. *I've seen some of the rushes and I'm as pleased as everybody else by Bogart's acting. Seeing him so good has taken quite a load off my mind, for I was quite genuinely worried.* His statement contrasts with his opinion of the film, as written to Frances. *... I went to the preview of The African Queen on the night of the 23rd ... It's hard to be definite about the film. It's a fine corpse, so to speak, except for the end, where corruption has already set in so that it stinks. Up to the end they followed the book quite slavishly, even in minute detail, so that it's exactly like the book except that it's as dead as mutton, and I can't think why – the humour is quite good, and*

¹ CSF-FP 15 January 1951

the love story is quite convincing, and Bogart and Hepburn do real good jobs, but the soul of the thing just isn't there – but other people may not notice its absence. A lot of people said they liked it, to me, but in the usual Hollywood fashion they were probably telling everyone else how awful it was. The technicolor's not bad, and some of the river scenery is fine. There's an abundance of lions and crocodiles and things, some of which have a bearing on the story, and the leeches are really magnificent. Bogart is supposed to be a Canadian, which gets over the Cockney problem. Hepburn is really quite convincing. God knows why the picture is a decaying corpse, but I think it is."¹

From the bizarre to the ridiculous!

"A few weeks later Katherine Hepburn confirmed Cecil's opinion of her intellect by suggesting the plot for a sequel to *The African Queen*. On yellow foolscap paper just like my ms. paper, 3-1/2 pages of indecipherable pencil scribble, with some of her suggestions for a sequel to the *African Queen*, including the discovery of a diamond mine by her and Humphrey Bogart. It ends with his being knighted and buying a yacht. Well, well, well."²

"The film has notable defects. As the *African Queen* is running downriver past the fort at Shona, under rifle fire, a rifle bullet completely parts the main steam line. When cannon balls parted main steam lines in American Civil War gunboats, the engine-room crews were boiled alive. Aboard the *African Queen*, Bogart holds the broken ends of the pipe together and makes the repair with rags and friction tape, an act that would be barely possible with a toy steam engine. The end of the film is utter nonsense. In the novel Rose and Allnutt attempt to use the explosive-laden *African Queen* to sink the *Konigin Luise* at its nighttime moorings on the lake, but the *African Queen* is caught in a storm and sinks. Allnutt is first discovered by the Germans on the island that they use as a storage depot, and is condemned to death as a spy or saboteur. Rose is then discovered on another island, their story comes out and, very ill with malaria, they are sent under flag of truce to the British port at the end of the lake. In the last chapter, which has a historical basis, the British get high-speed motor gunboats to the lake and sink the *Konigin Luise*... As in other Forester novels, the protagonists perform heroic deeds but have no effect on history

¹ CSF-FP 26 December 1951

² CSF-FP 22 January 1952

"In the film, after the *African Queen* is overwhelmed in the storm on the lake, Rose and Allnutt are both condemned to death. They are on the deck of the *Konigin Luise* with the nooses round their necks, when the *Konigin Luise* steams into the still-floating capsized hull of the *African Queen*, setting off the explosives and sinking herself. Rose and Allnutt swim away from the wreck, cheering.

"That ending is completely against the Forester inclination. It is physically impossible (the *African Queen* would have sunk), entirely improbable (the chances of hitting a half-submerged hulk in a lake large enough to justify a steam gunboat are extremely small), and completely against the pessimistic Forester attitude that his heroes must not succeed."

An ironically premature burial?

"However, Cecil thought the film was a decaying corpse before seeing its end. While much of the dialogue of the film copies the book very closely,³ it is played with a humor that Cecil had not written into it. More than that, the balance between Rose and Allnutt was more equal in the film than in the novel. The novel concerns the growth of a rigidly religious, small-town, small-shopkeeper, circumscribed woman approaching old-maidhood into a determined and competent executive with the added bonus of sexual awakening. A considerable part of the novel discusses how the hierarchical family relationships in which Rose had grown up fitted her, almost unconsciously, for the task of sinking the *Konigin Luise*. In that respect, the story of Rose is very similar to that of Able Seaman Brown in *Brown on Resolution*, and somewhat similar to that of Rifleman Dodd in *Death to the French*. The Allnutt of the novel is a far weaker man than that of the film, one who has drifted because he has no plan for his life. He is directed by Rose, but enjoys being directed and also enjoys the maternal overtones of Rose's sexual love for him because that is his character. These concerns are the core of the book that Cecil had written but that he did not see in the film. In the film Cecil saw a happy cooperative couple between whom humor was possible and for whom a happy future was likely, just the characteristics that did not fit the Forester scheme of life."⁴

³ There is much additional dialogue to explain situations that in the novel as told by the impersonal narrator.

⁴ John Forester, *Novelist & Story-Teller: the life of C.S. Forester* (2000), pages 652-655. Used by permission.

The African Queen in context

John Forester locates *The African Queen* among a brace of “maturing novels”, and sees it as the product of his father’s boat trips in Europe, and his reading of books of reference.

But CSF’s 1939 explanation of the alternative endings contradicts what he claimed in 1963.

And the adventurers’ real feat was not sinking the Germans, but keeping *themselves* afloat!

“Cecil published only one novel, *The Peacemaker*, in the interval of more than a year after the two Peninsular War novels of 1933. He attempted two other novels and dropped both. The next completed novel was *The African Queen* in 1935. In this Cecil combined his avid reading of history, his experience running quiet rivers in the *Annie Marble* and much fiercer rivers in the kayak, and his developing skill as a portraitist. The historical setting is true enough, for the Germans controlled Lake Tanganyika for the first year of World War I. Their naval superiority on the lake, exercised by steam gunboats, was destroyed by British motor gunboats brought up overland from Cape Town in December, 1915. The *Britannica Atlas*, 14th edition published in the 1930s, shows the Ugalla River (Cecil used ‘Ulanga’ as the name of his river) running westward through Tanganyika (in 1914 German East Africa), disappearing into a dotted line of uncertain location, and emerging under a different name to flow into Lake Tanganyika, just the route and condition that Cecil described.

“Cecil had heard at the time, or read later, of the exploits of the motor gunboats. As he put the plot together, it developed as a logical progression of *Brown on Resolution* and *Death to the French*. Allnutt and Rose, like Brown and Dodd, played their hidden part in history; like Dodd, but not Brown, they felt they belonged to their society, and though at first outcast by circumstances they returned to it, a satisfaction compensating for the negligible historical effects of their actions; beyond both Brown and Dodd, their unexpected companionship developed into an equally unexpected bond of intimacy. Rose had been raised in conditions and with morals like those of Cecil’s youth with the addition of evangelical religion. The intimacy growing between Rose and Allnutt reflected that of Cecil and Kathleen on their happy boating voyages. By this time Cecil had probably lost his former

concern for what his family might think when he wrote about Rose and Allnutt’s immoral union,¹ which he described in terms that, for him and probably for his market, were explicit.”

The enigma of the endings

“In *The African Queen*, Cecil first combined a devotion to historical forces, a sense of social milieu, and the bond of personal love. It was not entirely his own intent. The original version of the novel ended with the sinking of the *African Queen*. So Rose’s and Allnutt’s love and devotion disappeared into Lake Tanganyika, whatever personal fulfillment they had achieved cancelled by their failure to affect history. In the American version, Rose and Allnutt manage to swim ashore, the *Königin Luise* is sunk by British gunboats brought in overland, and there is some prospect of a future life together for the pair of them.

“As Father told me in 1939, when I commented on the difference between the English ending and the American, “You know what those Americans are like – they always want a happy ending. My American publisher demanded a happier ending, so I had to write one for him. I produced one that fits the story without too much destruction of its feeling, but it does not suit my taste. I feel that success is too much of a burden to ask the story to carry.” There may also have been the question of length, for even with the longer American ending *The African Queen* is one of Cecil’s shortest novels.”

Other technical problems

“Cecil had his usual trouble with technical matters. He repeatedly mentioned the *African Queen*’s boiler with its leaky water tubes. All boats of that class had fire-tube boilers, not water-tube boilers. One of the items of stores she carried, destined for the mine’s workshops, was a pair of cylinders of compressed gases for welding – oxygen and hydrogen. Compressed hydrogen would have been a most unlikely commodity in German East Africa.

¹ We have no letters of this time

General welding was and is done with oxygen and acetylene. Acetylene is dissolved in acetone at low pressure in cylinders that look more like tin cans than torpedoes. Also, under these conditions of transportation, acetylene would probably have been generated at point of use by dropping pellets of calcium carbide into water, the same process as used in the acetylene bicycle lamps used by the male cyclists of Cecil's and Kathleen's families. If two torpedoes were required, the story could have told of two cylinders of oxygen aboard the *African Queen* – one cylinder doesn't last very long in use and the mine might well have ordered two. In addition, with oxygen and either acetylene or hydrogen aboard, Allnutt would certainly have improvised a burner to supply the high temperature necessary in repairing the propeller and its shaft (instead of attempting to make charcoal and finally using wood) even if the proper equipment wasn't available. Cecil listed "gas pressure gauges" as part of the *African Queen's* cargo, items which don't normally go with the gas cylinders but are the pressure regulators of the welding equipment. Possession of that equipment would have simplified the repair of the propeller and shaft, but Cecil did not have Allnutt use it. If Cecil preferred that Allnutt work with charcoal and wood like an old-fashioned blacksmith, then he should have written the appropriate cargo list. Lastly, Cecil has Allnutt remove the propeller shaft without taking care to plug the hole that its absence left in the hull, a hole that would have sunk the *African Queen* in an hour or less.

"Cecil followed *The African Queen* with *The General*..."²

² John Forester, *Novelist & Story-Teller: the life of C.S. Forester* (2000), pages 246-249. Used by permission. Cecil's love of messing in boats on the river – and its results, not only in the *Annie Marble* books but in *Plain Murder* and *Shadow of the Hawk* and, eventually, in *Flying Colours* and *Hornblower and the Atropos*, is described on pages 205-210; 215-219; 243.

John Forester's account of the two endings of *The African Queen* is extremely problematic. John says:

1. "the original version of the novel" ended in disaster
2. an American version, ending with the gunboats, had been published by 1939
3. the *Americans* had demanded a *happy ending*

Readers will have made up their own minds on these matters. My own view, as Editor, is:

- a) Propositions 1 and 3 above are wrong. Isabelle Roblin (pages 3-5) and Colin Blogg (page 2) have established, quite independently, that the original English edition did contain the gunboats



conclusion, and that the excision of this episode was discussed (CB) and indeed performed (IR) by *Little, Brown and Company*.

- b) Proposition 2 has its own, smaller, problems. John's claim is contradicted by CSF's *Mid-Century Note*, where the author claims that the 1963 American edition, which restored the cut, was the first US edition to reflect his original intentions.
- c) Possible alternative explanations are:
 - I. that '1939' is a slip, of memory or the pen, and that the real date was much later
 - II. that 10-year old John Forester confused the two first editions, and could have asked his question in words like 'Why is this one longer?' – whereupon his father, in effect, told him what he wanted to hear

It is hoped to clarify this issue. There are also two more:

- When and how did CSF hear of the gunboats?
- Was post-war America as ashamed of isolationism as pre-war America had been obsessed with it?

Novelists, scriptwriters – and storytellers!

Forester and wartime cinematography

Forester and Norman Raine (*Elizabeth and Essex*, *The adventures of Robin Hood*) co-wrote *Eagle Squadron* - the story of an American in the RAF in 1941 in love with an English girl. The director was Arthur Lubin (associated with *Laurel and Hardy* and, later, *The Phantom of the Opera*). The next film may evoke *Mrs Miniver*. "C.S. Forester" joined a team of writers on *Forever and a Day*, directed by R-L Chomette, an ex-writer of French slapstick, and English actor Edmund Gouling who came to Hollywood after WW1. The plot has an American coming to London in the Blitz, to sell an old family property – till he is forced into a shelter with his sitting tenant, who tells him the story of the house from 1804 till the present.

The Commandos strike at dawn! - Forester's next venture - was co-written with Irwin Shamforov (Shaw), future author of the epic of isolationist America and World War II, *The Young Lions*. It was directed by John Farrow, husband of "Jane" (Maureen O'Sullivan) from *Tarzan*, father of Mia Farrow and later director of *Botany Bay*, *Around the World in 80 days* and *John Paul Jones*. An RN officer in WWI, Farrow had lived in Tahiti (compiling a French-Tahitian dictionary) before being hired by Hollywood as a naval expert. He served, briefly, in the RN at the start of World War II, returning to Hollywood after being wounded in action. The plot may evoke Steinbeck's *The Moon is Down*. A widowed Norwegian fisherman's life is destroyed by the German occupation. He turns to armed resistance, finds a secret German airbase, and sails with the information to England.

In June 1943 Forester sailed with a USN task-force sent to occupy the Aleutian Islands, hoping to gather material for a book. He was then smitten with arteriosclerosis.¹ Another fact from that year may be of interest - about an officially-sponsored documentary about USAF operations against the Japanese occupied island of Kiska, which included footage shot from bombers in action. This highly-acclaimed *Report from the Aleutians* was written, filmed and directed over a period of six months in 1943 by - John Marcellus Huston.

Did Forester's path cross Huston's in the Aleutians? As another novelist's path did in Africa.

¹ John Forester, *Novelist and Storyteller: the life of C.S. Forester* (2000), pages 439-441.



Huston and Viertel

Peter Viertel was born in Germany in 1920, but taken in his infancy to California, where his parents worked in the film industry. Viertel had taken up writing for both page and screen before serving in the USMC in World War II, after which he returned to Europe. His screenplays included adaptations of Hemingway's *The Sun also rises* and *The Old Man and the Sea*. His novel *White Hunter, Black Heart* was based on his experiences during the making of John Huston's film of *The African Queen*. First published by *Doubleday and Co., Inc.*, in 1953, it appeared as a *Penguin* paperback in 1990 - with an afterword by Viertel - when interest had been revived by Clint Eastwood's film version. Recent promotional material for the film has stressed this link with *The African Queen*.

Viertel was hired by Huston and Sam Spiegel to write the final draft of the screenplay of *The African Queen*, their second project as *Horizon Films*. Returning from Africa in 1950, he saw

Huston's conduct, on and off set, as a novelist's dream! Huston had withdrawn from a contract with Warner Brothers. His prime motive was, Viertel claims, to indulge in big-game hunting: to shoot an elephant: by obtaining a contract that would allow him a safari way beyond his private means!

There are, however, other factors. Just starting *The African Queen* was a real difficulty, as no major studio would commit itself. The rights were first acquired by Columbia, who planned to cast Elsa Lanchester and Charles Laughton; Warners then stepped in, with Bette Davis in mind. Finally, Huston and Spiegel were forced to go it alone, with Hepburn and Bogart.

Going it alone was symptomatic of Huston's whole career. Now 42, he came from another cinema family and had obtained his first contract, with Universal, in 1932 – with plenty of work – through his father. He had preferred to live as a down and out in London and Paris, before going home to toy with journalism and acting, until the war came to his rescue. After *Report from the Aleutians* (1943), came *The Battle of San Pietro* and *Let There Be Light* (both 1945) and *Know your Enemy*, purpose-written to prepare the US armed forces for an anticipated bloody invasion of Japan. Huston's military career brought acclaim, promotion – and a return to the mainstream. After 4 films for Warners, he went to MGM, and to *Quo Vadis?* He preferred to strike out on his own again, with *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) – which achieved cult status. MGM then offered *The Red Badge of Courage*. It was after this that he plunged into Africa; because the film into which he had put his heart was received coldly – or because Crane's tale of desertion and redemption was too near the bone!

The African Queen restored his reputation. *Moulin Rouge* (1952), a biography of Toulouse-Lautrec, was applauded. Three more films got a lukewarm reception – including *Moby Dick* (1956). Personal circumstances were involved – but perhaps nobody could have reconciled Melville's philosophical novel with the children's story it had now become.

Forester or Conrad?

The film that “Wilson” (Huston) was shooting in Africa was called *The Trader*. “Verrill” (Viertel) describes it as “a period romance of a young American woman who marries an adventurer and goes off to Africa with him. She has the usual nineteenth-century prejudices against Negroes, but when she discovers that her husband is involved in

the slave trade and witnesses the cruelty of this profession, she undergoes a change of heart...” The unhappy ending had the couple seeing the horror of their deeds, and seeking to make amends by releasing the slaves in their custody. Whereupon the blacks ran amok, burned the trading post, killed the trader and left his wife to perish in the flames.²

This bears no relation to the plot of *The African Queen*, and little to Forester's other African novel, *The Sky and the Forest*. It does, however, bear a distinct resemblance to a standard interpretation of a work which may well underpin the end of *The Sky and the Forest* – Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*. Viertel's title, and a direct reference, close the case: “Everything that Conrad had said in thousands of words about the black stagnant river where Kurtz had died was echoed in Wilson's pronunciation of [‘Africa’].”³ Viertel thus portrayed a driven but dissolute director impersonating Hemingway in the African jungle while working on a version of – *Heart of Darkness!* No more on that unhappy theme, or on Viertel's other, unperceived ironies! But light may yet be shed in other ways on *The African Queen*.

The Third (Fourth?) Man

The script of the film that “Wilson” is to shoot is an important issue in Viertel's novel, where he has this to say of it: “It was a strange manuscript, full of brilliant scenes and endless descriptions of life along an African river. Some of it sounded completely unlike Wilson. There was another name on the script besides his. It was a name that was vaguely familiar to me: a journalist...”⁴

James Rufus Agee (1909-1955) was born in Knoxville, Tennessee. He recycled his childhood memories into the libretto for Samuel Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*. “It has become the time of evening when people sit on their porches, rocking gently and watching the street and the standing up into their sphere of possession of the trees... A horse, drawing a buggy, breaking his hollow iron music on the asphalt... A streetcar raising its iron moan... the bleak spark crackling and cursing above it like a small malignant spirit set to dog its tracks...” The style is not unlike the opening of Richard Ford's Pulitzer-prizewinning

² Peter Viertel, *White hunter, black heart*, Penguin (1990), page 41.

³ John Forester, *Novelist and Storyteller*, pages 595-597. Peter Viertel, *White hunter*, page 15.

⁴ Peter Viertel, *White hunter*, page 41.

Independence Day. Agee's script became the prologue of his own posthumous Pulitzer prizewinner, *A Death in the Family*.⁵

After a brilliant period at Harvard (1928-1932), Agee worked as a journalist for a succession of magazines. In 1936, he and photographer Walker Evans spent a summer in Alabama with a family of sharecroppers. This led to the 1941 publication of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a 450-page quasi-fictional account of the plight of the tenant farmer. Agee's prose lyric, however, failed to emulate *The Grapes of Wrath*. Due recognition came only after World War II.

In autumn 1950, Agee went to California to work with Huston on the script for *The African Queen*. This brought both men Oscars in 1952, for best screen-play adaption. But for Agee, the series of heart attacks that would eventually kill him had already begun. He did not go to Africa. Instead, he wrote a life of Abraham Lincoln and the script of *The Night of the Hunter*, adapted Gauguin's Tahiti diaries for *Noa, Noa*, and published *The Morning Watch*, a tale of spiritual conflict in a lonely young student.

In 1999, Viertel confirmed that "James Agee, with the help of Huston, had written an adaption of [*The African Queen*] that was faithful to the subject but was lacking in actual dialogue scenes to be played" by Bogart and Hepburn.⁶ Viertel supplied those scenes, but his work went uncredited. Another idea of his may be equally unacknowledged.

A hopelessly unhappy ending

"Verrill" has much to say about one facet of *The Trader*: "the ending of the story seemed not to be quite right... It was a logical ending, but it seemed to have too much of a sardonic twist. It left me feeling limp and hopeless... The pessimistic ending of the story was depressing... It was logical. Awful and logical. And it still seemed wrong. I suddenly felt that I was a Hollywood writer in the worst sense of the word. I desired a solution that was not hopeless, and yet this story seemed to demand a hopeless ending."⁷

⁵ James Agee-Samuel Barber, *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* (1948); Richard Ford, *Independence Day* (1995);

J.R. Agee, *A Death in the Family*, McDowell-Oblensky (1957).

⁶ Peter Viertel, *White hunter, black heart: afterword*, Penguin (1990), page 411.

⁷ Peter Viertel, *White hunter*, page 42.

Now James Agee hardly seems the man to have transformed *The African Queen* into *Carry On up the Ulanga!* But Viertel would hardly have had so much to say about the ending of his fictional film if he had *not* written what he regarded as an adequate final draft of the ending of Huston's real one. The jury must remain out on the question of just who transformed the credible Cockney Allnutt into the ludicrous rumbling-stomached Canadian!

There is another probability. It seems unlikely that anyone would, by sheer chance, have written an ending with the German ship sunk and the heroes married – however bizarrely – without knowledge of a version of the story in which the ship *is* sunk and the couple *do* marry.

In other words, the film was finally based on the *longer* version of the book, *not* the shorter 1935 American edition. It was just that the budget could hardly cover safaris *and* gunboats!

The terms of Viertel's prolixity over the ending of *The Trader* echo the debate over the tragic and comic, pessimistic and optimistic endings of *The African Queen*. In the end, the film opted for neither – but for the product "of a Hollywood writer, in the worst sense of the word(s)"!

David Stead



Facts behind the fiction

The 90-year Odyssey of the real *African Queen*

The 30' x 8' steam launch that became the *African Queen* was built in Lancashire in 1912 by Lytham Shipbuilding and Engineering Company for the British East Africa Railway Company. She was shipped, probably in sections, to Mombasa in Kenya, taken by rail to Port Florence on Lake Victoria, and on by rail, steamer and truck to Butiaba on Lake Albert. Named the *Livingstone*, she worked (with a sister vessel, the *Samuel Baker*) between Butiaba and the Murchison (Kabalega) Falls on the Victoria Nile, for at least 20 years, before being upgraded into a diesel launch.

In 1951, she was located by John Huston's assistant, who was looking for a suitable boat to star as the *African Queen*. With a cosmetic steam engine, and made up into a suitably decrepit appearance, she was taken across the lake to the Congo (Zaire), for shooting at Biondo on the Ruiki River. It was then taken back to Lake Albert, and on to the Victoria Nile, for further locational work. The *African Queen's* arrival at the lake was in fact filmed where the Nile joins Lake Albert.

The launch spent 16 more years at work on Lake Albert before being sold as a curio to an American, Fred Reeve, who shipped it to San Francisco, and toured it throughout North America on charitable promotions, powered apparently by an outboard motor. It was then sold to a Mr Hal Bailey, who recycled a suitable steam engine from a cider press and a boiler from a tree nursery, before putting her into service as a tourist attraction in Oregon.

In 1982, the launch was acquired by her present owner, James W. Hendricks of Key Largo, Florida. Properly restored as a steam launch, with plant modelled on that in use when she was built, the *African Queen* is still an active tourist attraction. She has starred in a documentary about John Huston – and has returned to the British Isles, for promotions on the Thames and the Liffey, and to take part in the 50th anniversary Dunkirk commemoration.¹

¹ Summarised from James W. Hendricks, *Travels of the AFRICAN QUEEN*, *Steamboat News* 23 (1988); in the C.S. Forester Society library. The boat is based at the Holiday Inn at Key Largo, Florida 33037. Photos of her

The film, the facts, another book about the film... and the film about the facts

Information has been received about a proposed new film, featuring the Spicer-Simson expedition, which we hope to share with readers shortly. Geoffrey Spicer-Simson, the controversial, eccentric and cantankerous commander of the British flotilla which took part in the Central Africa campaign of World War I, is similar in many ways to Lord Cardigan of Balaclava, as portrayed by Cecil Woodham-Smith.² The account on pages 17-19 is excerpted from the article *Naval Struggle in Darkest Africa*, by Darin S. Kinsey – Professor of History at the University of Bellevue, Nebraska – published in the journal *Military History*. The original contains contemporary photographs and much more detail on the situation, the main actors, the eventual outcome and the controversy which has lasted as long as the *Liamba*, a survivor of the battles which, aged 88, is still in service as a lake ferry!³

The *African Queen* was featured as *Film of the Week* in the *Radio Times*, when it was shown on Channel 4 in June 2000. David Parkinson depicts the shoot as “an uncomfortable and discordant production”. Among other problems, Bogart and Hepburn at first failed to empathise. “Neither found their role easy to get into, but from the moment Hepburn began basing her character on Eleanor Roosevelt, the elements fused into a unique screen chemistry, and a gentle humour began to seep into the action that, like the upbeat ending, had been noticeably absent from the script. As Katharine Hepburn recalls in her juicy memoir *The Making of the African Queen, or How I went to Africa with Bogart, Bacall and Huston and Almost Lost My Mind*, the location shooting in equatorial Africa during the making of the film was clearly a strain. The bookend segments were shot back in England, as were most of the scenes with Humphrey Bogart and Hepburn actually in the water, but for the rest of the movie the production was based at a camp near Biondo in what was then the Belgian Congo.”⁴

sent to the Society from Mr Hendricks appear on pages 5 and 9.

² Cecil Woodham Smith, *The Reason Why* (1953).

³ *Military History*, December 2001, pages 54-60; 84.

⁴ *Radio Times*, 24-30 June, 2000.

In the Heart of Darkness – *Die Engländer sind hier!*

Till it happened, the Germans did not believe it could be done – but the British really did transport gunboats thousands of miles to contest German control of Lake Tanganyika. Darren Kinsey wrote his own stirring account of the history behind the battle which ends The African Queen

Lake Tanganyika is the largest lake in Africa after Lake Victoria, and more like an inland sea. Tucked away between the 6,000-foot slopes of the Great Rift Valley, the lake never exceeds a width of 50 miles, but its waters stretch 450 miles, making it the longest lake in the world. For the belligerents, its strategic value far exceeded its impressiveness. Its boundaries made a natural frontier between the Belgian Congo and German East Africa. It allowed quick north-south transportation of German troops anywhere along its eastern border and served as a natural obstacle to any Allied advance into East Africa.

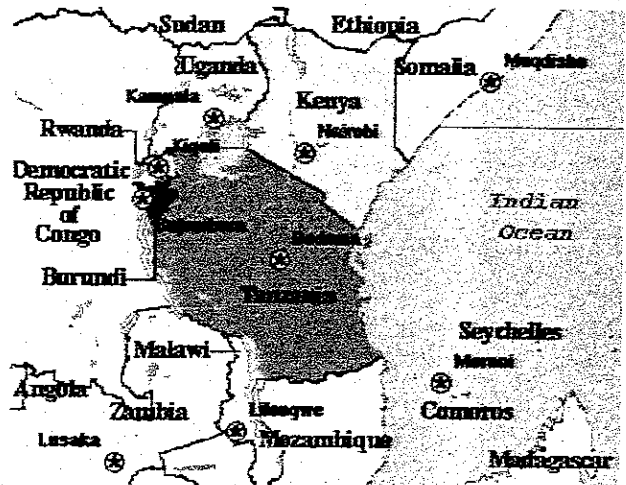
The German lake fleet consisted of two gunboats: the 100-ton *Hedwig von Wissman* and the 45-ton tug *Kingani*. Unknown to the Allies, the Germans also built the massive 800-ton *Graf von Götzen* and launched her in June 1915.

Fortunately for the Allies, John Lee was in the region when hostilities began. Lee, a Royal Naval Reserve officer, recognised the strategic importance of the lake and devised a daring plan to assist the Belgians. The plan called for secretly launching a ready-built vessel upon the lake. It was a truly remarkable scheme, notwithstanding its requiring a trek of thousands of miles across mostly uncharted African bush country – with a ship large enough to challenge the German flotilla.

Lee returned to England with his scheme, and in April 1915 proposed it to First Sea Lord Sir Henry Jackson. Jackson observed, "It is the duty and the tradition of the Royal Navy to engage the enemy wherever there is water to float a ship." The Admiralty quickly approved an expedition with only minor modifications. Lee located two 40-foot wooden motorboats. Powered by two 100-horsepower engines, they could reach 18 knots. Their armament included a 3-pounder gun on the bow and a Hotchkiss machine gun on the stern.

Unfortunately for Lee, however, the Admiralty felt more comfortable giving command to a Regular officer. The first person asked declined the offer.

At an adjoining desk, however, Lt. Cmdr. Geoffrey Spicer-Simson had been eavesdropping. He quickly volunteered his services. The Admiralty approved, and even gave him a temporary promotion to Commander.



Mad dogs and Englishmen

Spicer-Simson christened his ships *Mimi* and *Toutou* – to which the Admiralty voiced no complaint. On June 15, 1915, the two motorboats were loaded and the 28-man expedition boarded the passenger-steamer for Cape Town. Spicer-Simson ordered Lee to go ahead to negotiate a route through the bush from Elizabethville, where the railroad ended. With him went Petty Officer Frank McGee, a former journalist. Shortly after their departure, the commander ordered Sub-Lieutenant Douglas Hope to follow them inconspicuously to lend assistance. Hope, however, made it only as far as Elizabethville, where he sent a flurry of telegrams to Spicer-Simson falsely accusing Lee and McGee of being drunk, exposing the plans of the expedition and insulting the Belgian authorities.

The expedition reached Cape Town on July 12, but a gruelling 8,000-mile journey in the sweltering summer heat remained. From Cape Town, they travelled, boats in tow, 2,488 miles along the Cape-to-Cairo railway. They arrived at Elizabethville on July 26.

Next day, Lee and McGee emerged from the bush to report that they had successfully surveyed the entire route and set up contracts with the native inhabitants in advance. Rather than show his gratitude, Spicer-Simson notified Lee of the charges against him and ordered him back to Cape Town. The commander spared McGee, considering Lee to have instigated the problems (McGee's photographic and written accounts were later published in *National Geographic* in 1922.) It is possible that Spicer-Simson saw Lee as a threat to his authority and instigated Hope's telegrams.

By mid-August, the expedition was again on the move. They had before them 150 miles of dense, uncharted forest infested with mosquitoes and tsetse flies. Steam traction engines pulled the special wagons carrying *Mimi* and *Toutou*. Native bearers carried the remaining supplies. Makeshift bridges had to be constructed across gorges and rapids. As the group hacked their way through the bush, high temperatures and incessant insect attacks made progress miserably slow.

At the Mitumba range the expedition faced an obstacle that nearly brought it to an end. The traction engines were incapable of pulling the boats up. The situation seemed hopeless until the commander devised an ingenious system of pulleys, which enabled the boats to be hauled up the heights by a team of oxen. It was necessary to repeat the process to lower them down. Then the route became less difficult. The entire expedition travelled on a narrow-gauge track 15 miles to the Lualaba. They navigated the 400-mile length of the river to the railhead at the northern end of Lake Tanganyika. It took almost six weeks. They reached the railhead on October 22, then travelled by rail the final 150 miles. Nearly five months after leaving England, they had reached the shores of the lake that would be their final destination. They built grass huts and constructed a makeshift harbour to protect the ships from the terrible storms that often plagued the region.

Soon, indications of the peculiar nature of the leader began to emerge. Spicer-Simson began flying the colours of a vice admiral. Even more bizarre was his choice of skirts as uniforms – not Scottish kilts, but dresses designed for him by his wife. The Belgians disparagingly referred to him as "*Le commandant à la jupe*," or skirt commander. Spicer-Simson objected – not to the comment on his dresses, but to the Belgian reference to him as commandant (major), rather than colonel, his appropriate title.

In dubious battle

On the morning after Christmas, at 7:15, Spicer-Simson received a dispatch that an enemy ship was approaching. He did not allow the information to interrupt his breakfast and neglected to pass the news on to his officers.

It being Sunday, at 9:30 a.m. the officers and men gathered for inspection and church service. As the commander read aloud from his prayer book, an African ran up with a second dispatch. He glanced at it, stuffed it in his pocket, and continued to read. Soon his officers, who stood facing the men, could see the *Kingani* rounding a nearby point.

Despite the approaching danger, Spicer-Simson completed the service. Then he calmly ordered his men to the boats. As the men frantically ran to the boats, Belgian soldiers and thousands of curious Africans lined the bluff overlooking the lake, anxiously awaiting the first clash of naval arms.

Spicer-Simson allowed *Kingani* to pass in order to get behind her. Then the boats moved out into the lake and turned sharply to overtake. Spicer-Simson ordered *Toutou* to attack *Kingani's* port quarter while he manoeuvred *Mimi* to attack her starboard side. The German captain suddenly spied the flags of the British ships rustling in the wind. Taken completely by surprise, he turned his ship hard to port and shouted "*Die Engländer sind hier!*"

Bringing *Kingani's* powerful bow-mounted 6-pounder into play, her captain brought her around to shoot at *Mimi* before she was close enough to return fire. A single hit would have sent the fragile British boat to the bottom, but the bobbing vessels made difficult targets. Observers saw the black smoke pour from *Kingani's* funnel as she built up speed. At 11:47, *Mimi* and *Toutou* closed to within 2,000 yards and began firing, zigzagging as they approached. Stray rounds sent up high towers of water on the lake – each one raising jubilant cheers from the spectators on the ridge. Suddenly a large explosion erupted on *Kingani's* foredeck. A British shell had found its mark. Amid smoke and flames, the British spied the Iron Cross being run down and someone waving the white flag of surrender. *Mimi* headed straight for her prize, as her pilot, an ex-corporal handpicked by Spicer-Simson, demonstrated his negligible abilities by ramming the burning vessel, sending Spicer-Simson sprawling "skirt-over-heels," across the deck. The accident badly damaged *Mimi's* bow and she began to sink. Her pilot headed for the beach.

Once ashore, the dazed Spicer-Simson found himself besieged by a throng of jubilant Africans and Belgians. Out on the lake, *Kingani* was badly listing from the shell hole in her port side. Crewmen from *Toutou* quickly boarded her. The chief engineer spoke English and said that the officers had heard rumours that the British were trying to drag boats overland, but they had discounted them as highly improbable.

In due course a wireless dispatch arrived from Buckingham Palace announcing King George V's gratitude for the "wonderful work carried out by his most remote expedition".

The penultimate chapter

Spicer-Simson had *Kingani* hauled out of the shallow water and again made seaworthy. Then he had her 6-pounder replaced with a 12-pounder procured by the Belgians. The 12-foot gun was a comical sight on the 45-foot ship. And, unless the crew pointed it straight ahead, the recoil threatened to capsize the vessel. Spicer-Simson finished by mounting a 3-pounder aft and renaming his nautical aberration *HMS Fifi*.



The Germans as of yet were completely unaware of the change in the status of the lake. In the early hours of February 9, 1916, the Allies sighted *Hedwig von Wissman* steaming along the shoreline following the same course as that taken by *Kingani*. At 100 tons, *Hedwig* was more than twice the size of *Fifi* and, with two 6-pounders forward and a Hotchkiss gun aft, more heavily armed. And she was reportedly only one knot slower. As *Hedwig* unwittingly approached, *Fifi* raised full steam and the crew started *Mimi*'s engines. At 7:45 a.m., *Fifi* and *Mimi* left the harbour to do battle. *Toutou* remained behind, however, laid up by damage resulting from her crashing into a breakwater during one of Tanganyika's violent lake storms.

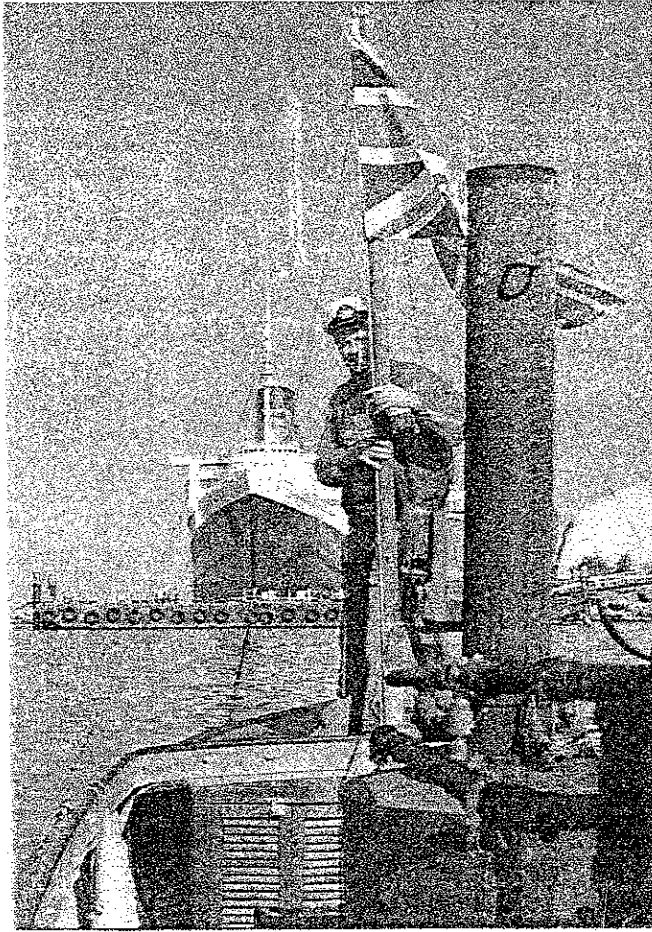
Ominous dark clouds covered the sky, but the lake was calm. It was about 9:30 when *Hedwig von Wissman*'s captain spotted Spicer-Simson's flotilla about six miles distant. The surprised German turned his ship smartly to port and began to flee. In an attempt to gain speed, *Fifi*'s crew poured oil on the logs fuelling her boiler, but her enormous 12-pounder cut her speed. *Hedwig* was soon only a dot on the horizon. Although hopelessly out of range, Spicer-Simson ordered his gunner to open fire.

Luckily, *Mimi* had the speed to catch the German steamer – and her captain made a spontaneous decision to pursue the enemy. Disregarding frantic gesticulations by Spicer-Simson not to leave the flotilla, *Mimi*'s captain roared past.

At 3,000 yards, *Mimi*'s crew opened fire. Some of the shells struck but did only superficial damage. As long as she was fleeing, the German gunboat could only reply with its machine-gun in the stern. As *Hedwig* swung around, however, the distance between her and the rest of the Allied flotilla decreased. *Mimi*'s action had brought the enemy to battle but put herself in a perilous situation – a single hit from the German 6-pounder would have put her out of action. As *Hedwig* pursued *Mimi*, *Fifi*'s guns now came into range, though their shells were going well overhead. Realising this, *Mimi*'s captain fell back to report the information to his commander. As *Mimi* came abreast of *Fifi*, her captain had to endure a torrent of abuse from Spicer-Simson before being able to pass on the vital spotting information.

Hedwig now was a good target for *Fifi*'s 12-pounder, but Spicer-Simson had fired nearly all her ammunition. Only three shells remained, and the next misfired. With the breech cleared, the gunner loaded the second of the final three and took careful aim. The shell found its mark, crashing through *Hedwig*'s hull and exploding in her engine room. The frantic sailors lowered her single lifeboat, which soon became overloaded and sank, plunging the men into the crocodile-infested waters. Minutes later, *Hedwig* slid bow first beneath the waves.

Back in London, *The Times* acclaimed the sinking of *Hedwig von Wissman*, which, because few people outside Africa knew of *Graf von Götzen*'s presence, had symbolised German power on Lake Tanganyika. In London, the crisis on the remote African lake seemed over, but another chapter in the saga remained.



valued at £20. On the back, there was an account by Forester of the background to his writing of the novel. In essence, Forester had intended that Charles Randall, the central character of the story, would feature in a sequence of novels, presumably in much the same manner as Horatio Hornblower.

He also said that, in days of yore the possibilities open to a man in his working life were limited to such occupations as 'tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor etc.' A novel based in such an era would perhaps not cover many details in the course of a lifetime. But in the modern world, with its motor cars and aeroplanes and greater social mobility, one small section of a character's life could provide enough material for an extended work of fiction.

Perhaps Forester even considered that such a modern man would have *greater* fictional possibility than Hornblower! But his ambition never came to fruition, of course! Nonetheless, my own visit to the bookshop was made most satisfactory by my reading of that short and eloquent essay by C.S. Forester.

Adrian Taylor

Coming soon in *Reflections*

Into the New World!

Adrian Taylor writes of a find he made in a Norwich bookshop, suggesting that Forester was at some stage planning a whole series of novels about the hero of his somewhat neglected work, *Randall and the River of Time*...

River of Time revisited...

Not long ago I visited a second-hand bookshop in Norwich. It had a fair selection of Foresters, which I examined for anything of note.

One of the few hardbacks was a first edition, in its original dust-wrapper, of *Randall and the River of Time*. It was in pretty good condition and

- *Nautical Fictions*

4th July 1776 was *not*, of course, the real birthday of Horatio Hornblower! This claim made by Forester about his best-known character was but a ploy for the American market!

What is indisputable, however, is that Forester inspired a whole genre of modern fiction! A future issue will, it is hoped, examine this topic in depth, and produce some surprises!

The Editor welcomes all feedback, comment and criticism about material in *Reflections*....

And of course suggestions, contributions and other offers of help!

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