

# Alice Werner and 'Kisimus' at Bishopstowe

## Introduction

From the time when she met Harriette Colenso in England in 1890 Alice Werner (1859-1935)<sup>1</sup>, the author of this sketch, was a lifelong friend of Harriette and Agnes Colenso. In 1897 Alice was a freelance journalist, and a teacher at Aldeburgh. She published frequently in *The Speaker*, a liberal progressive weekly journal, founded in the wake of the Home Rule crisis in the Liberal Party of the 1880s.

Her friendship with the Colensos was a very creative one for Alice and the history of African scholarship. Before the 1890 meeting Alice had already published poetry and prose of high quality. After that meeting Africa became the focus of her interest. In time she became a distinguished scholar of African languages and a pioneer anthropologist. Her commitment was strengthened, not weakened, by the death of a brother in West Africa.<sup>2</sup>

Alice spent some months at Blantyre (1893-1894) as a missionary but her intellectual gifts were certainly not those of a narrow evangelist. Briskly advised by Harriette Colenso that a mistake once recognised must be remedied, Alice gave up the missionary experiment and, helped financially by the Colensos, took refuge at Bishopstowe where she stayed for a year before returning to Britain<sup>3</sup>. Both Blantyre and Bishopstowe contributed greatly to her later studies, for she drew richly on her experience and observation of Africa during these years.<sup>4</sup> Alice brought great gifts to her studies of African languages and societies.

Born in Trieste, Alice was a member of a very gifted family, her father being a teacher of languages. She travelled extensively with her family as a child. After studying at Newnham College, Cambridge, Alice Werner taught for a time at Truro High School. Her early publications, both in poetry and prose, show the range of her intellectual gifts.

During the Second Anglo-Boer War Alice Werner gave private classes in Afrikaans and Zulu and these classes became part of the formal instruction offered by London University. She travelled to East Africa as the holder of the Mary Ewart Scholarship in 1913, and from 1913-1915 was a research fellow at Newnham. She concentrated her later studies on East Africa and was appointed lecturer in Bantu Languages and Swahili at the School of Oriental Studies when it opened in 1917, to become professor in 1922. She was awarded a D.Litt by London University and was the recipient of the CBE as well as the silver medal of the Africa Society.

In 1908 Alice Werner was naturally involved in the appeal for funds to assist Harriette in the defence of Dinuzulu, in which Lady Schwann was most prominent<sup>5</sup>; but Alice was a committed scholar and fully-engaged teacher, and not prominent in political matters. Not surprisingly she was, however, a supporter of the critics of British foreign policy, the Union of Democratic Control, during the First World War and was one of the intellectuals whose criticisms of the direction of policy led into support for the Labour Party in Britain.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout her life Alice Werner's relationship with her sister Mary seems to parallel that of Harriette and Agnes Colenso: the younger sister was devoted to the elder and more distinguished sibling. Mary was a lecturer at the School of Oriental Studies and the two Werner sisters travelled to South Africa in 1928. That visit included a visit to the ageing Misses Colenso at Sweetwaters.<sup>7</sup>

The sketch republished here shows Alice Werner's literary ability, as well as her power of observation and the richness of mind that she brought to her writings.

Alice spent two Christmases at Bishopstowe: with both the Colenso sisters in 1894 and, in Harriette's absence, with Agnes in 1895. Drawing on her recollections she created a vibrant picture of the missionary work of which 'little Bishopstowe' continued to be the centre. The evocative quality of her writing reflects her keen appreciation of the African scene and how much she empathised with those whom she depicted in this sketch of *Kisimus*.

## 'Kisimus'

Reprinted from *The Speaker*, 24 December 1897

A soft, warm wind from the north, blowing over miles on miles of fresh-springing grass. The night is a riot of colour – of colours which have no name. The sky, jewelled with great stars, is not blue; the rolling waves of veldt, losing themselves in silvery haze, are not greenish-grey; the feathery syringa-boughs, making a delicate lattice-work against the sky, are not emerald-green – yet each has its own distinct tone. There is a bright semi-circle of moon – enough to dim the Milky Way, not the lustre of Aldebaran and Canopus. Orion lies stretched out all his length in the zenith – Sirius at his foot – lower down the Pleiades . . .

It is very still. Even the rush of the Umsindwzi<sup>8</sup> – the background to all other sounds on calm nights – is not heard; the wind carries it off southward. The cattle are lowing restlessly in the kraal; now and then a low-pitched, soft-toned native voice is heard speaking to them reassuringly. No other sound suggests human life – unless it is a vague something which may or may not be the muffled clumping of holiday-making tom-toms from the Indian quarter of the city . . . But, close at hand – in fact, all round us – ring out the hoarse rattle of the bull-frog and the βρεκεκεκεξ κοαξ κοαξ<sup>9</sup> of the other sort, and the chirp of the tree-frog and the crickets. And, if you know when to listen, you may, from time to time, distinguish another sound among all these – an indescribable snoring sound, recurring in regular rhythm, like the backward and forward working of a saw, but not so harsh. It is not unlike the very lowest notes of a violin, if these were repeated indefinitely, without the slightest variation. It is produced by a mysterious lizard, who lives in trees, and seldom, if ever, shows himself by day.<sup>10</sup>

A great meteor shoots slowly from the zenith, like a planet being hurled from its place; it passes westwards across the sky and disappears in the direction of Maritzburg, leaving a trail of sparks behind it. '*Inkanyezi i ya tsheka pezulu*'<sup>11</sup> – as the Matabele bards used to sing of Lobengula.

Scents, as well as sounds, unknown by day rise from the earth at night. The air is full of bewildering sweetness – strong currents, now of one, now of another, strike on the sense. The yucca, with its towering spike of white, waxy bells; the Hoya, draping the west verandah with its bunches of white plush stars; the homelike evening primroses on the other side of the house – all send out their various incense.<sup>12</sup>

The night wears on. The Southern Cross lifts itself clear of the eastern horizon and whirls slowly towards the zenith, followed by the Centaur and the Scorpion, with its 'fiery heart' – the red star Antares. And as they rise, the moon sinks behind Zwartkop, and so, imperceptibly, the pageant of the night-sky passes by, and the earth rolls into the dawn of Christmas morning.

The pale, and yet rich, uncanny colours of the night have sprung into positive clearness and glow in the midsummer sunshine. The new grass is vividly green, young palms are springing up along the Umsindwzi banks, and beside long shallow water-courses arum lilies make a green and white chequer-work, waiting to be gathered for Christmas decorations. Midsummer it is by the calendar, but the rains have come late this year, and properly it is spring – fullest, freshest, lustiest spring. The wind does not bring us the sound of the city bells; we hear nothing but the cries

of birds and insects, the cooing of the small grey doves in the orchard-trees, the twittering of the *potwes*, the sharp shrilling of the cicadas, and the merry chirp of grasshoppers and crickets.

But there is no need of bells to summon our congregation. Over the hills they come trooping in twos and threes, in tens and dozens – here a band of little girls in print dresses, with coloured ribbons tied round their heads, dancing gaily along; there, a group of *amakosikazi*, staid matrons in gowns and shawls, with voluminous dark handkerchiefs tied round their heads, or perchance a cappie (Dutch sun-bonnet) of black stuff for decent Sabbath wear. The men are well in evidence too; some of them have been already sitting about in groups for the last hour or two, enjoying a quiet holiday chat. They are in all stages of European costume – from old Twaisa and Darfingubo, with their brown coats and shapeless felt hats of a brilliant terra-cotta, to the *kehlas* lately down from Zululand, in shirt and *mutya*.<sup>13</sup>

The little grey stone school-house has been swept and garnished, the desks removed, the seats re-arranged, the every-day cupboard of lesson-books and slates draped with a bright-coloured blanket, and two or three vases of flowers placed about the room. On the platform, where the harmonium stands, is a little table, with a basin of water on it, in readiness for the baptismal service. It was an old Bishopstowe custom to have a large number of baptisms on Christmas Day – chiefly for the convenience of those living at a distance – and the people have already a kind of traditional preference for presenting their children at this season, so that there is quite an army of infants in arms, all of them more or less dressed for the occasion, being exhibited to admiring friends and neighbours.

The congregation enters – over 140 all told, and almost more than the little building will hold. The *Inkosazana*<sup>14</sup> sits down to the harmonium and plays the opening bars of a hymn. 'Forth in Thy name, O Lord, we go' – scarcely recognisable, in Zulu words, a different metre, and a new tune – is, perhaps, not specially appropriate to Christmas, but everyone knows it, and joins in with hearty goodwill. Then Sotemba, the carpenter-catechist, begins reading the Morning Service. There is no ordained white shepherd in charge of this little flock in the wilderness – at least, there is only one at Durban, who can only come to them at long intervals<sup>15</sup>. So the native catechists have to do the best they can, with all the help and encouragement that the representatives of their late Bishop's family can give them.

Prayers over, a general revival of attention precedes the baptisms. Besides the babies, there are some older children and two or three adults. Little 'Christmas' – whose mother died a short time back, in a sharp, sudden attack of influenza – is now formally invested with his name; it was her last request to the family that they should not let this season pass without seeing it done. His aunt, who had brought him, has somehow contrived a christening robe, and the baby's brown feet are enclosed in little pale-blue socks – a casual gift, and worn more for the honour of the thing than any other reason, seeing they are several sizes too small, so that the heel comes into the middle of the foot. Christmas's father is not here – he had met with one misfortune after another, and just before his wife's fatal illness was forced to go to work at a distance to pay off his arrears of rent – so that the kindly neighbours have a specially tender feeling towards the little orphan. The simple ceremony is watched with the greatest interest; and when it is over Moses Sibisi<sup>16</sup>, the St Mary's catechist, rises to deliver the sermon.

It is not a very learned nor a very profound sermon – but neither is it a long one; and it is listened to with the greatest goodwill. The discourse is punctuated by the shrill cries of the swallows, as they come and go under the eaves, and the louder chattering of the buffalo-birds who have their nests in the school roof. And by-and-by

it comes to an end, and after a pause the harmonium strikes up again, and the voices rise in a jubilant burst of sound —

*Bayete, Nkosi ey'ehl' ezulwini!*<sup>17</sup>

And then the people disperse into the sunshine, and the groups still linger under the pomegranate trees, before going their several ways. Some of the elders remain behind, to be entertained with coffee and bread – an unwonted and festive luxury. There have been many troubles about this year – droughts, locusts, cattle-diseases, and other things<sup>18</sup> – but, then, things can be forgotten, for one day at least, if that day is 'Kisimus'. In case there should be any mystery about this word, when seen in print, let the reader pronounce it aloud, accenting the first syllable. It will then become quite recognisable.

#### NOTES

1. For a short biography of Alice Werner see *Dictionary of National Biography, Missing Persons* (Oxford, 1993).
2. See her dedication in A. Werner, *The Natives of British Central Africa* (London, 1906).
3. Killie Campbell Africana Library (KCAL) Colenso Collection (Col. Coll) Dd.86: H.E. Colenso to A. Werner, 19 May 1894 and Rhodes House Library, Oxford, Frank Colenso Papers: H.E. Colenso to F.E. Colenso, 15 September 1897.
4. A Werner, *The Natives of British Central Africa* (London, 1906).
5. KCAL, Col. Coll. KCM.50499, File 32: H.E. Colenso to F.E. Colenso 15 August 1908.
6. M. Swartz, *The Union of Democratic Control in British Politics during the First World War* (Oxford, 1971), p.100.
7. The visit is attested in the later letters which form part of the Colenso Collection in the Killie Campbell Library. In moving words Alice Werner dedicated to the memory of Harriette and Agnes what is probably her best known work, *Myths and Legends of the Bantu* (London, 1933; republished by Frank Cass in 1968).
8. In writing the long 'u' sound as 'w', Alice Werner was possibly drawing on Welsh orthography (cf. 'cwm').
9. A famous quotation from Aristophanes' *The Frogs* which has no meaning but conveys the croaking sound of frogs.
10. It is suggested that this sound may have come not from a lizard but from a species of large tree frog found in Natal.
11. Translation: 'The meteor shot above'.
12. Interestingly, none of the plants to which Alice drew attention is indigenous. See detailed botanical notes below.
13. *amakosikasi*: This is explained by the context, viz mature women; *kehla*: an elderly man of standing in the community; *mutya*: traditional loin covering.
14. *inkosazana*: Title of respect for a woman of standing: in this context clearly Agnes Colenso.
15. Revd A. Ikin of Christ Church, Addington, was for a time superintendent of the Church of England native missions.
16. Both Sotemba and Moses Sibisi were prominent Bishopstowe men. Moses Sibisi was a catechist at St Mary's, the church for Zulu converts in Pietermaritzburg. The building is extant. The Colenso sisters worshipped there in later years. This was because the vestry at St Peter's eventually accepted as their priest the nominee of Bishop Baynes. The Colensos, together with some undeviating Church of England people, refused to accept the authority of Baynes. Sibisi was eventually ordained as a minister in the United Free Presbyterian Church.
17. Translation: Hail, Lord who descended from heaven.
18. The scourges of drought, locusts and rinderpest followed each other rapidly, 1895-1897.

I acknowledge the assistance of Rhodes University colleagues Warren Snowball, Peter Mtuze, Sirion Robertson and P.B. Phillipson, and Bill Branch of the Port Elizabeth Museum.

BRENDA NICHOLLS

## NOTES ON PLANTS MENTIONED IN 'KISIMUS'

1. 'Syringa' is *Melia azedarach*, an exotic tree commonly cultivated in many parts of the world, where it often becomes locally naturalised outside gardens. It is grown for its mauve-coloured, sweetly-scented flowers produced in spring and followed by clusters of dull yellow fleshy fruits, and its large decorative dark-green leaves which are finely divided. It originates from the Himalayas.
2. 'Yucca' (or 'Adam's Needle') is the name given to several species of *Yucca*, probably *Y. gloriosa* or *Y. recurvifolia*. They are woody-based plants with decorative rosettes of long narrow sharp-pointed leaves, and huge plumes of pendulous flowers, and originate from the southern states of the USA.
3. 'Hoya' or 'Wax Plant' is *Hoya carnososa*, a climbing plant with thick leathery leaves and small clusters of white and pink star-shaped flowers with a distinctive waxy texture. It originates from S. China and Queensland, Australia.
4. 'Evening primrose' is a name given to various species of *Oenothera* introduced as ornamental plants or as weeds to South Africa. Of these, *O. biennis* or *O. stricta* is probably the species referred to in the text. They are herbaceous biennial or perennial plants with long unbranched stems of large open yellow flowers that tend to open only in the evening. They mostly originate from the USA.

P.B. PHILLIPSON