

THE WELLS JOURNALS

JENNIFER COPLEY

for my family

i.m. Charles O. Brigg (1906-2007)

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EXTRACTS FROM JOURNALS KEPT BY THE WELLS SISTERS
TEGWANI, SOUTHERN RHODESIA

JUNE 1903 – JUNE 1904

Note: There were many other entries in the girls' diaries not included here. Anna's were mostly lists of books she had read and other facts and figures, interspersed with laments on missing home. After the death of Mary she continued her journal sporadically until the age of twenty. Mary's entries were intermittent, logging flora and fauna and describing expeditions into the bush with her dead sister, Esther. Tabitha's dwelt on descriptions of locals who attracted or repelled her, mingled with complaints about the unsympathetic nature of her parents as regards new clothes, attending lessons etc.

The journals of Anna, the single one written by Mary and the damaged one written by Tabitha where many entries appear to have been torn out, were found in a trunk together with other family effects in an auction house in Bath after the First World War.

ANNA, JUNE 7th

So Much Skin

The heat is unbearable here
but Mother doesn't care.
Day and night we must cover up.
Our skirts trail the floor,
high collars scratch our necks.

After breakfast, she lines us up –
Tabitha, Mary and me –
frowns if our sleeves are rolled up
like a servant's. Then she doses us
with *syrup* for our bowels.

If our hair has escaped from its pins
she scolds us for the brown ringlets
snaking between our shoulder-blades.
I think of Esther, eight weeks dead,
her wild blonde curls cascading.

Father is building a church before the rains come.
At supper his hair is full of dust.
Sometimes he tells us stories
about witch-doctors, chicken bones, twins.
Tab says they are true but she often lies.

The day we arrived at the mission
in best Sunday dresses, white cotton gloves,
the natives just stared.
I'd never seen such huge eyes anywhere
or so much skin.



TABITHA, JULY 11th

The Red Ribbon

I say I have stomach ache.
They leave me alone in my room
with the curtains drawn.
I jam a chair under the door-handle,
peel off my clothes.

Now I am used to the heat, I like it –
how my body runs with water,
paints me white and smooth.

I hang my red ribbon out of the window,
close my eyes,
anticipate his touch.
He will find an excuse to leave the sheds,
flit like a shadow across the yard.



MARY, AUGUST 12th

Borrowing Wings

They've been calling me Baby all day.
It makes me *so* cross.

I watch them bent over their journals
with sharp nibs, pressing down words
as if they hate them.

Anna bites her lips as she writes.
At night she grinds her teeth
saying her prayers.

Sometimes Tab comes into our room
and we all squeeze into one bed.
No one can move until someone rolls out.

Esther rolled out.

She's inside me now
but I can still feel her hair brush my neck at night.
She says I can borrow her wings to fly away.



TABITHA, SEPTEMBER 3rd

Behind the Laundry Wall

Mother nearly caught us!
Daniel and I were behind the laundry wall,
his fingers were on my neck, stroking,
when I heard Mother shout at Zora
for using too much soap.
They were that close!
I did up my buttons but Daniel froze.
His eyes took over his face.



MARY, SEPTEMBER 29th

Squeaker Frog

Yesterday Esther and I sat on the step,
my hot elbow against her cold one.
Twigs snapped in the undergrowth.
There was breathing, snuffling.
Was a lion stalking the house?
Was it stalking *us!*

This morning we looked.
There were flattened sections of earth
under the mango tree.

Other things found:
a squeaker frog (heard it before we saw it)
six different sorts of spider,
a toad, slightly squashed –
we could see inside its stomach.



MARY, SEPTEMBER 30th

The Oxen

Esther and I rode Keen-yah today,
he is the gentlest,
he helps pull the water-cart with Penz,
Mahop, Befful, Busman and Chesbuk.
It was hot but we had our hats.
Moses had his knobkerry,
I'm glad he didn't use it,
the lump on the end is *so* cruel.
We saw pheasants in the pepper trees.
Anna should have come. She had the chance.



ANNA, OCTOBER 12th

Crooked Neck

Mother has a stye on her eyelid
which won't heal.
Today it has swollen up like a berry,
bent the lid right out.

In her medical book it says
styes are a sign of poor health.
Does she want the rest of us to be ill,
shiver like Esther till we die?

The servants call me *crooked neck*
because I bend over books all day.
I hate their stupid faces, corkscrew curls.
If they let Father baptise their babies, we could leave.

Some mornings I wake with tears on my cheeks
for our house, my school, the sea.
We've been here eight months, one week, five days,
sixteen hours, thirty-seven minutes.



MARY, OCTOBER 27th

Rain

Today we woke to a battering on the roof.
Esther and I ran outside,
jumped about in puddles,
opened our mouths to the cold drops
till Father opened the window
and gave us a piece of his mind.

During lessons there were lightning bolts.
We wanted to watch, but Mother
made us carry on with sentence parsing.
We could hear Zora giving little shrieks
as she mopped the floor.

At supper Father told us
one of the village children was struck.
He was sheltering under a tree with his dog.



TABITHA, OCTOBER 31st

Moon Flowers

The old man Moses
follows me about.
He brings me things –
wilting moon flowers,
a necklace of stones.

I've no time for him –
his teeth are black and his belly sticks out.

This afternoon is Mother's prayer meeting.
I will slide the ribbon from the drawer.



TABITHA, NOVEMBER 2nd

In the Compound

I can't shake Moses off.
Today he stood under the fever tree, just watching.
His skin melted into the bark.

Yesterday he was muttering to the witch-doctor –
the one who hates us, not the young one
who seems nice and smiles at me.

Sometimes I feel afraid when I look
at the ridged scars on their faces,
imagine the knife, the spilling blood.



TABITHA, NOVEMBER 4th

Chicken Bones

I was making my bed.
When I reached down to straighten the sheet,
my fingers felt something.
I screamed but I had to look.
It was bones! Greasy chicken bones!

I daren't tell anyone.
Mother would question the servants.
Esme and Zora know what I do.
They probably think I do it with Moses too
because they are stupid.



TABITHA, DECEMBER 15th

Dirty Shorts

I think I have had enough of Daniel.
He came to me today in dirty shorts.
Once I wouldn't have minded.

Before supper I walked around the compound
and everything seemed so dull,
empty as my stomach.

For the first time I wanted to go home
so I could stuff myself
with Grandma's cocoa pudding.



TABITHA, NOVEMBER 19th

Feathers

I've been trying to be polite to Moses
but it's made him worse.
Today he brought me some birds' eggs,
smelly and cracked.
He must have seen my nose wrinkle
because tonight there were feathers
pushed under my door – big black ones.
It's too risky to tell Father –
Moses knows about the red ribbon
or at least I think he does.



TABITHA, NOVEMBER 27th

Twins

Moses has been lent to another farm
for two whole weeks.
God must have heard my prayer.
Daniel has found a secret place for us
though yesterday he spoilt it,
telling me it was where they bury twins.
I'm not going there again.
Imagine lying on something like that?
Daniel can be quite selfish at times.

My birthday tomorrow.
When I told Daniel, he laughed
and kissed me, said I was getting old
and would be married soon.
I suppose I must seem old to him.
Seventeen to his fourteen.
Of course he doesn't look it –
he's as tall as Father and very strong.



MARY, DECEMBER 16th

Spotted Dick

It was spotted dick for supper again.
Esther wouldn't have any
but Father made the rest of us clear our plates
reminding us of children just outside the compound
who would give their eye-teeth for such a meal.
I didn't mean to laugh but Esther was making funny faces.
I was sent to my room but I didn't mind.
Later, Esther and I went out.
The bush smelt wonderful after the rain.



TABITHA, DECEMBER 24th

No Point

What is the point of thinking about tomorrow,
we won't get any proper presents.
I need new gloves, new boots, more ribbons.
I know I won't get them.

We'll have to go to Service twice in two days.
At least Mother will let us off lessons
though we'll still have to read our chapter
and be questioned on it.

As I write this, Moses has his nose
pressed against the window.
It's all squashed, makes my stomach churn.
Why did he have to come back?

Today he was cutting the heads off rats,
feeding them to his dog when he knew I was looking.
In my dreams he gets into bed with me,
puts a stinking hand over my mouth.



ANNA, DECEMBER 28th

Pink Blancmange

After Grace, Mother told us –
Tabitha is going home!
Grandma has been ill and needs someone
but why does it have to be Tab?
She can't even boil an egg.

All she can do is loll in her room,
wheedle for ribbons and hair-combs.
I could read to Grandma,
push her out in her chair,
help her with her long grey stockings.

My only hope is that Tab makes a mess of it.
Grandma would plead for me, the sensible one.
The one to make her pretty sandwiches
with the crusts off and pink blancmange
to slip down her throat.



MARY, DECEMBER 29th

The Skulls

Anna is having Tab's room.
That means Esther and I can be on our own!
When she's hungry, I'll feed her,
brush her hair,
comb out the tangles gently
like Mother never did.

We can have the skulls out when we want.
The shrew and the frog and the other one.
We can open the window at night
to see the horseshoe bats.
If a mamba comes in, we won't kill it.
We'll make a house for it if it has babies.



TABITHA, DECEMBER 31st

No More Bones

I have packed my clothes.
Mother has given me her best blue trunk.
Daniel cried today,
held my arms and begged me.
He is such a child!

Mother has made me a new dress.
When I tried it on it didn't fit.
We struggled to fasten the waistband.
Running up and down stairs for Grandma
will soon sort you out, she said sourly.

She is very unfeeling.
This morning I vomited.
She wouldn't even let Esme
bring me my egg on a tray.

At least I am getting away from Moses.
There have been no more bones
but he gave me a small carved doll, very ugly,
which he said would protect me.
I threw it away.



ANNA, JANUARY 4th

The Prayer

Mother has been forever finding fault
since Tab went. On Monday she took her
to Bulawayo in the bullock-cart,
came back with one of her bad heads.

After I'd helped sort out Tab's room,
I arranged my books in order of preference,
logging the new one I got for Christmas
into my notebook.

Then I knelt and prayed like I always do
for something to happen
so we can get away from here.



MARY, JANUARY 12th

The Syrup

It was *so* hot today,
Esther and I didn't do anything
but lie on the bed.
My throat hurts and things go swimmy
when I try to write.
Mother dosed me with *syrup*,
said I'd be right as rain in the morning.
In the yard, Esme is singing in her language
with lots of clicks in her throat.
We put our fingers in our ears.



ANNA, MARCH 25th

The Beautiful Jewess

I haven't written this journal for weeks.
Mary has been so ill – still is –
and we are on our way to England
to see special doctors.
Everything is all my fault.
I prayed for something to happen
now it has.

The voyage is lasting forever.
Mother gives me jobs to do
like emptying Mary's chamber-pot
and reading to her when her fever's up.
I borrowed Ivanhoe from one of the officers.
I thought Mary would like it but she doesn't;
just lies with her face to the wall
or calls out for Esther.

Mother doesn't approve of my choice of book.
She purses her lips when Rebecca,
the beautiful Jewess, is mentioned.
At least she forgot the *syrup*
and she doesn't brush my hair any more.
I'm supposed to do it myself –
morning and night, a hundred strokes.



ANNA, APRIL 8th

Mr. Lane

Mr. Lane has said I can *keep* the novels!

I logged them in my notebook
and then on a separate list of Favourites.

Mr. Lane is the only friend I have.

He is quite handsome for someone old.

I have listed the officers in order of handsomeness
and he comes out top.



ANNA, APRIL 30th

Aunt Smella

Now we are in London
and Mary is in some hospital
for tropical diseases.

Something rare/something African
is all they have come up with.

Today she sent me a postcard
but it was not her writing.
She's in a room of her own
and the nurses all wear masks
and special aprons.

I am parcelled around the family.
Today I'm with Aunt Ella
who smells of must. Scurf
sits on her collar in thick flakes.
I dread to think what her hairbrush is like.

I don't pray any more.
God hates me so why should I?
He answered my prayer
but in a horrible way.
I miss the ship. I miss Mr. Lane.

Aunt Ella (or Smella, as I call her)
has no books. All I can find
are *Minutes of the Methodist Conference*
and *Tracts*.



ANNA, MAY 6th

Shouting and Sobbing

Tab came today at last.
She's been so busy with Grandma,
she couldn't get away.

Mother's face went white
when we picked her up at the station,
didn't speak to her all the way back
then as soon as we got through the door
I was pushed upstairs to my room.

Apart from putting on weight
and cutting her hair, I don't see
what Tab's done wrong.
After a bit, I crept along the landing,
peeped through the bannisters.

She was sobbing: arms laid
on the kitchen table, head on them.



ANNA, MAY 6th

Shouting and Sobbing

Tab came today at last.
She's been so busy with Grandma,
she couldn't get away.

Mother's face went white
when we picked her up at the station,
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then as soon as we got through the door
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Apart from putting on weight
and cutting her hair, I don't see
what Tab's done wrong.
After a bit, I crept along the landing,
peeped through the bannisters.

She was sobbing: arms laid
on the kitchen table, head on them.



MARY, MAY 8th

The Acacia Trees

I'm having a good day today.
Nurse said I could write my journal
but the words keep going off the page.
Esther holds the pen for me,
warns me when I get to the end of the line.
She says I mustn't get ink on the sheets.

Mother visited this morning
but she didn't bring Tab.
I was *so* disappointed.
Mother says she's gone to Scotland
to Aunt Lucie's, but why?

I'm tired now.
Esther is singing one of the chants
Zora taught her. The acacia trees
are rustling and I can hear
the squeaker frogs outside.
A snake has hatched her babies
on my bed.



ANNA, JUNE 7th

Raw Sausages

A whole year since we got our journals.

I am writing this down to make myself believe it.
Mary is dead. She died last night
when no one was there.

Father has been sent for but it will take ages
for him to get a boat.
Mother has shrunk.
When I came down this morning
she offered me raw sausages.

As I write this, tears are sparkling
on her cheeks but she doesn't sob,
they just keep flowing down.
I don't know if we'll wait for Father
for the funeral. How long can people wait?

I haven't got anything black.





Jennifer Copley writes: inspiration for these poems sprang from my own personal history. My grandfather was a Methodist missionary in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) between the years 1897 – 1914 and brought up his family there. My father was the third child of six. When my siblings and I were young, we would plead for ‘stories about Africa,’ snippets of which appear in the Journals.

My father had an elder brother who fell ill and was brought home to England to seek a cure. His illness was described as *something rare/something African* and nothing could be done. He died, aged ten, and is buried here. His younger sister had died a few years earlier, aged fifteen months, and was buried in Tegwani.

My grandfather built his own house, church and school in Tegwani, all of which are still there.