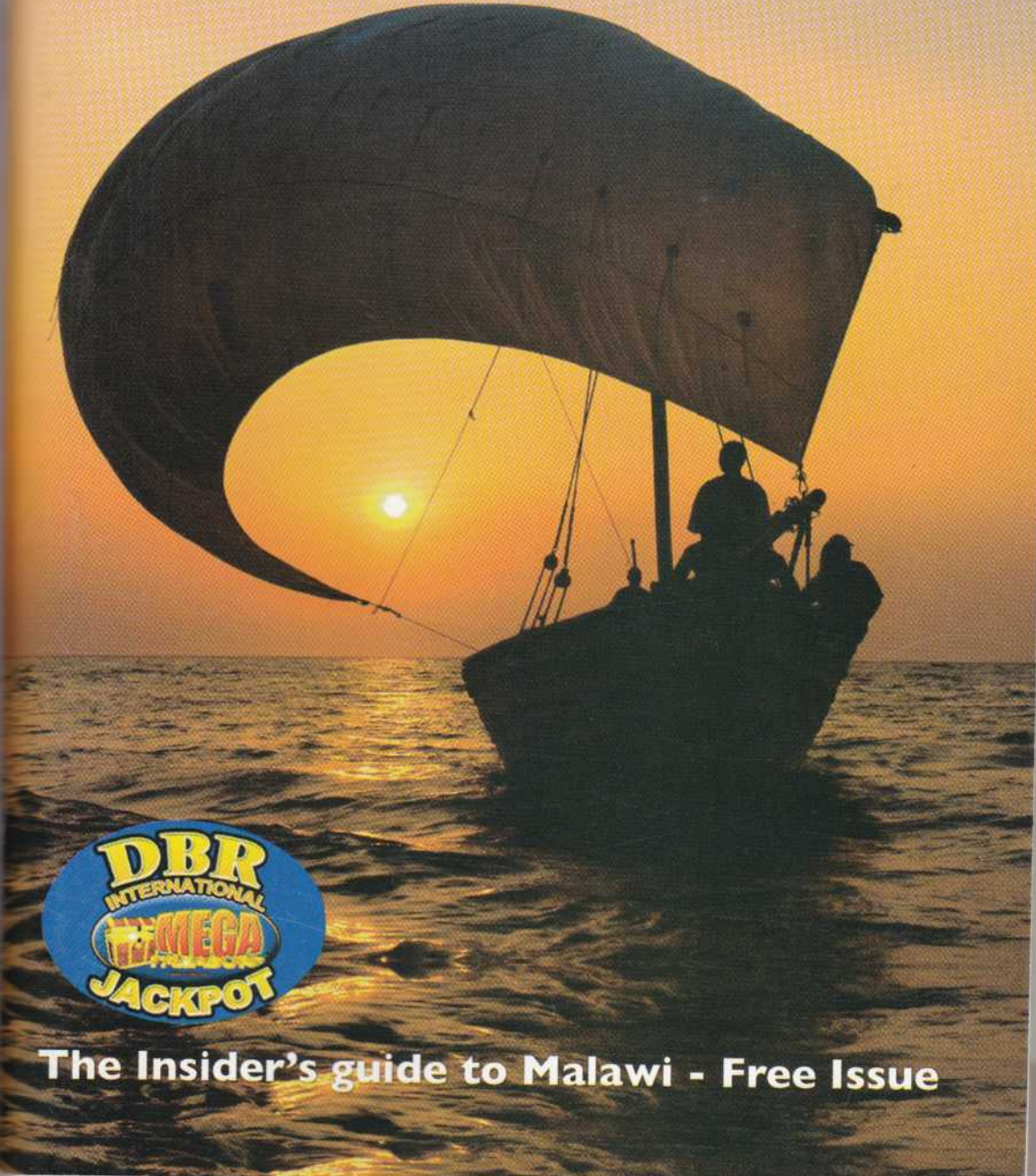


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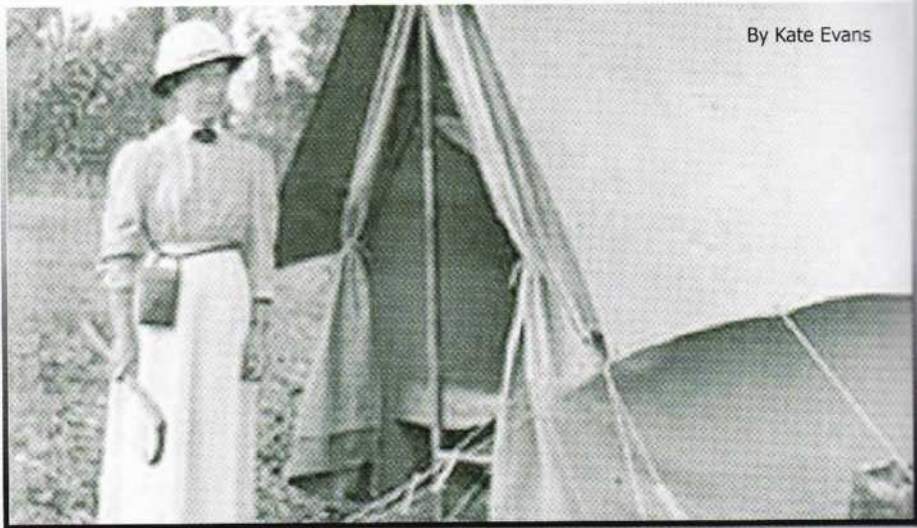
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The Insider's guide to Malawi - Free Issue

Gertrude Benham

Around the World Six Times



By Kate Evans

In the 1913 photograph taken of Gertrude Benham in Nyasaland (present day Malawi), she stands next to a safari tent wearing a pith helmet, starched collar and long khaki skirt. She gazes off to her left, perhaps looking forward to the next stage of her walk across Africa.

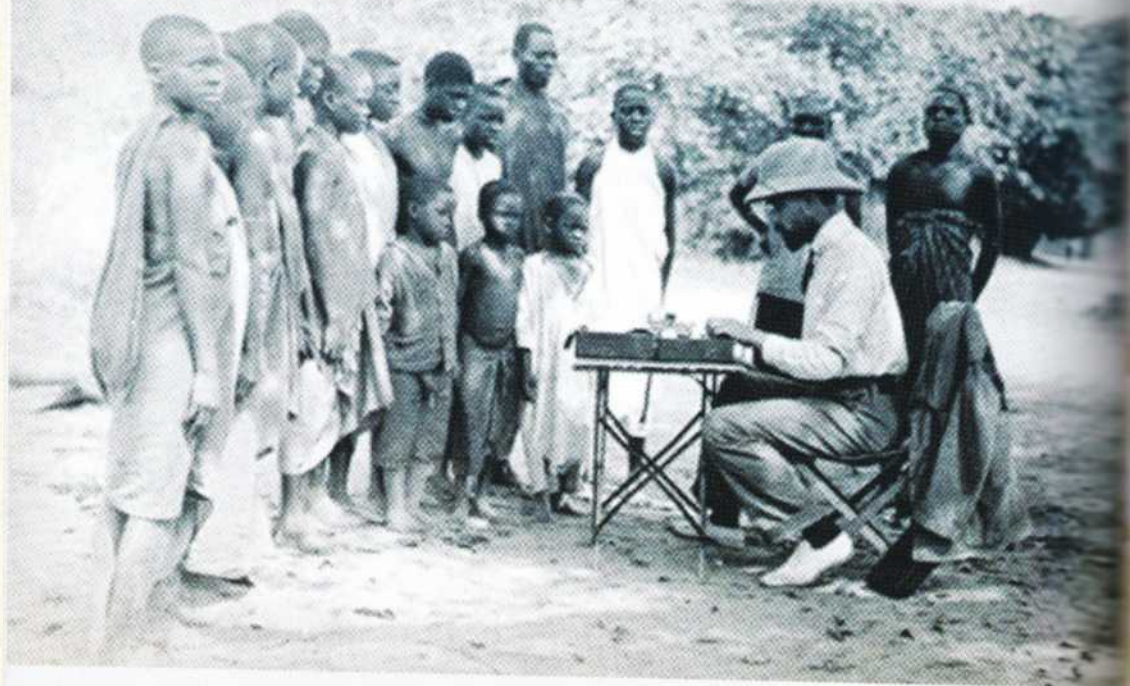
Benham, perhaps most often cited as the first woman to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro, was an avid traveler, explorer and mountaineer. She circled the world six times, visiting virtually every corner of the expansive British Empire, walked over 10,000 miles and climbed over 300 peaks with an elevation of 10,000 feet or more. One of the most remarkable aspects of her life is that she often traveled alone. At a time when women were expected to stay home and raise families, she spent her life traveling to some of the most remote, wild and exotic places in the world.

Born in 1867 in London, the youngest of six children, Benham often traveled to the Alps with her father and developed an early passion for climbing. By her early 20's she had already made over 130 ascents. After her parents passed away, she received an inheritance that allowed her to travel modestly, on about £250 per year, for the rest of her life. She began her adventure in Canada, hoping to climb as many of

the Rocky Mountain peaks as possible. It was there that she beat Professor Charles Fay to the summit of Mt. Fay. Professor Fay was less than pleased not to be the first to reach the peak named after him. Her mountaineering then led her to the Himalayas, Japan, New Zealand, Australia, and to various peaks in South America, and Africa, including Mt. Mulanje.

Perhaps even more impressive than her mountain climbing was her ability to walk thousands of miles. In 1909, at the age of 42, she walked 900 kilometers from Broken Hill (in present day Zambia) to the edge of Lake Tanganyika, before exploring Uganda, Kenya, and then climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro. In 1913, Benham returned to Africa, arriving at the Niger Delta and began an epic trek across the African continent to Mozambique, over 5000 kilometers away. Deep within the Nigerian wilderness, she came upon a British military station where a young officer who, in the middle of writing a letter to his mother, was startled by an English lady arriving alone. He wrote in his letter that the journey she had outlined through German territory, the Congo and then eventually to Nyasaland "sounds perfectly mad."

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She made her way through Cameroon, the Congo, Uganda, Rwanda, sailed down Lake Tanganyika, traveled south and finally reached Karonga, in present day Malawi. From there she took a steamer to the southern end of Lake Malawi and traveled to Zomba and Blantyre. After an excursion to Mt. Mulanje, she took a train to Nsanje and then a ship down the Shire and the Zambezi where she eventually reached the coast of Mozambique.

She traveled lightly with only a few carriers and brought calico and needles to barter for food. For entertainment, she carried the Bible, a collection of Shakespeare's plays, Blackmore's Lorna Doone, Kipling's Kim, and her knitting. She stated in an interview, "I have been quite close to lions and leopards in the bush but they have never harmed me or my carriers. I always go unharmed and I think wild animals in the forest know by instinct that I have no desire to kill. I just wear an ordinary khaki skirt, puttees, strong shoes, and a pith helmet. In addition I have a sunshade and an umbrella - not very war-like

weapons." Later in life she was interviewed by the Daily Mail, remarking that "women have often said they would like to travel but were afraid of the risk. Well, years of experience have brought me to one conclusion. I am convinced there is little risk if plenty of exercise is taken, no alcohol drunk, and the native food of the country is exclusively eaten."

On her last journey in 1938, she set off from present day Sri Lanka for South Africa. She passed away at the age of 71 off the coast of East Africa and was buried at sea. While the Plymouth City Museum has archived much of Benham's collection of jewelry, drawings, costumes, and artwork, many of her photographs and sketches are missing. Her journeys have been compiled by going through ship manifests and letters. While Gertrude Benham is relatively unknown considering her great feats, historians and fans continue to try and piece together her life's travel and accomplishments. The photo of Gertrude in Nyasaland is one of the few that exist and gives us valuable insight into such an adventurous woman.