Guide to the Mary Henrietta Kingsley Papers

MS 1485

compiled by Carol King and Randall D. Law

July 1993

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Paging Instructions

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Overview

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CALL NUMBER: MS 1485

CREATOR: Kingsley, Mary Henrietta, 1862-1900

TITLE: Mary Henrietta Kingsley papers

DATES: 1897–1900

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: 0.5 linear feet

LANGUAGE(S): The materials are in English.

SUMMARY: The papers consist of letters written by Mary Kingsley to English merchant John Holt and his wife. Among the topics discussed are British government policy in West Africa, treatment of Africans, the behavior of missionaries, the interests of the trading community, and public opinion in England. The letters were written during the period between Kingsley's return from her West African travels and before going to South Africa during the Boer War.

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Administrative Information

Provenance

Biographical / Historical

Mary Henrietta Kingsley was born on October 13, 1862, to George Henry and Mary Bailey Kingsley in Islington, England. Kingsley's father was a doctor, although he primarily devoted himself to traveling and writing. Despite a lack of any formal education except a few German lessons, Mary Kingsley clearly possessed a great thirst for knowledge, which was evidenced in her youth by her love of reading, particularly of scientific subjects. During her first thirty years, Kingsley lived the quiet life of an undistinguished Victorian woman, tending the house and caring for her bedridden mother.

Shortly after the death of both of her parents in 1892, however, Kingsley made a brief trip to the Canary Islands. During the next eight years, she returned many times and traveled extensively throughout West Africa, principally Cameroon and Gabon. During her explorations of the previously charted, yet dimly understood, hinterland of West Africa, Kingsley collected artifacts and zoological specimens. Her greatest interests, though, were in African culture and religion. Kingsley wrote several detailed books on her travels and on ethnology: Travels in West Africa (1897), West African Studies (1899), and The Story of West Africa (1900).

In England, Kingsley gained renown through her many lectures on Africa and her behind-the-scenes politicking on several major issues affecting British colonial affairs. In general, Kingsley opposed those measures which proceeded from an ignorance of African culture or which threatened to unduly disrupt native life. For example, she favored the influence of traders, who wished to work with the natives, over missionaries, who sought to drastically transform the local culture. Despite these relatively progressive beliefs, Kingsley apparently viewed the British as the natural rulers of Africa and espoused her own brand of economic imperialism.

In addition to her significance as an explorer and anthropologist, Kingsley provides a valuable portrait of British values during the era of colonialism. And as recent biographers have shown, she also serves as an excellent example of a woman alternately freed from and constrained by the limitations of the Victorian age.

Mary Kingsley died of typhoid on June 3, 1900, while a nurse in South Africa during the Boer War.

Description of the Collection

The Mary Henrietta Kingsley Papers consists of approximately 120 letters to John Holt and twelve letters to his wife, written between late 1897 and shortly before Kingsley's death in 1900. John Holt (1841-1915) was a prominent and outspoken British trader and businessman. Holt and Kingsley met in March 1896 at one of her lectures. He was most likely attracted to her by her position regarding British commercial interests in West Africa. The two became close friends following the publication of Kingsley's first book and her emergence as a political force and a celebrity. During the brief, yet active, period remaining before her death, Holt was Kingsley's primary political confidant.
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Access Terms

Missionaries -- Africa.
Africa, West -- Colonial influence.
Great Britain -- Colonies -- Administration
Kingsley, Mary Henrietta, 1862-1900