

Mabel Ensor and Mengo Gospel Church, Kampala

This chapter on Mabel Ensor comes from *East African Rebels: A study of some Independent Churches*, by F B Welbourn, 1961

This long-out of print book of 255 pages is in two sections; the first on Buganda covers the missionary lives of Joswa Kate Mugema, Mabel Ensor, and Reuben Spartas with an introductory chapter: 'From Religion to Politics'. The second section on Kikuyu has three chapters: 'From Politics to Religion'; 'African Custom against White Sentiment: Female Circumcision' and 'A National Church against Foreign Control: The Kikuyu Independents'.

The book is introduced by 'Independent Churches in a World of Strain: Theology is not Enough' and concludes with 'The Missionary Culture and African Response' in four sections: The frame of reference, The missionary culture, The response to the missionary culture, and A place to feel at home.

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Mabel Ensor against Convention: Mengo Gospel Church

On 1st July 1612 John Ensor of Willingcote in Warwick married Athlanta, daughter of Fedoragh O'Neill of Toaghy, Co. Armagh, of the ancient and princely house of the O'Neills of Ulster. From his uncle, Barnaby, descended the Ensors both of Rollesby Hall, Norfolk, and of Ardress, Co. Armagh, with their long history of service to both Church and State. George Ensor (1769-1843) was High Sheriff of Co. Armagh and a writer of advanced views in politics and religion, especially directed against the English government of Ireland. His grandson, George, was a scholar first of St Catherine's and later of Queen's College, Cambridge, where he actively engaged in religious work (including the famous Jesus Lane Sunday School) and in 1867 obtained a third class in the Classical Tripos. He was to prove in Japan that he was a very able linguist. He was priested in 1868 and, in the same year, both married Elizabeth Wilkins and sailed with her to be the first member of the Church Missionary Society in Japan. In 1872 he was invalided home, where he became known for "considerable powers as a platform speaker... a strong Protestant and a man of considerable ability".

Of his wife's uncles, sons of the Reverend Christopher Robinson of Granard, County Longford, Admiral Hercules Robinson fought as a midshipman at Trafalgar, and Sir Bryan was Puisne Judge and a member of the Executive Council in Nova Scotia. The sons of the Admiral, Sir Hecukles and Sir William, held governorships in most parts of the British Commonwealth. The former became Governor of South Africa and the first Baron Rosmead; the latter added musical publications to his administrative ability.

There were two sons to the marriage, both of whom and a grandson were ordained. Mabel was born at Mowton, Bury St Edmunds, on 17th July 1878; she and her sisters were educated at home under governesses and tutors. At the age of twenty she went to Jaffa to teach in a school, learning Arabic on the voyage out. Her health failed and she returned home; and it was typical of her that she should shortly take up training as a nurse in Brighton Hospitalⁱ. It is against this background of gifted, dedicated, aristocratic Irish Protestantism that her story must be read; and she felt strongly that what the Gospel had not yet accomplished in the field of morals the State must enforceⁱⁱ.

That side of her which became increasingly dominant was puritan. Dancing, short or low dresses and cosmetics, alcohol, most novels were anathema; African music and folklore of the devil; Sunday was an essential day of restⁱⁱⁱ. But there was another side of her which was, perhaps, best known to intimate friends of her own race. There is lyrical quality about such description as this:

“ In order to reach Busoga from the Buganda side (of the Nile) we cross over in flat-bottomed boats passing among exquisite water lilies while fairly close at hand the hippos rise and fall in the water, crocodiles slip off the rocks and disappear and fisherbirds stand motionless on tiny islands, hardly condescending to notice us as we glide by.”

She read widely biographies, books of travel and novel by Christian authors like John Hocking, and gave them as presents to her friends. She delighted in children, perhaps contrasting them too favourably with their less attractive elders. And she was a woman of parts. She writes from Hoima, in addition to evangelistic and medical work, of:

“station upkeep of every description, building, thatching, repairing, making bricks, cultivating coffee, general supervision of porters and work-people keeping accounts... checking monthly book sales for twelve districts.”

Her own hands did not do all these things but, as later with the buildings of Mengo Gospel Church, she supervised them closely and with technical acumen. At the same time she was trying to combat the almost universal dirtiness of houses, even those of able teachers, by introducing curtains, polishing floors with native oils, planting flowerbeds, “taking my sewing etc., and sitting in untidy back-yards which somehow began to get tidier, and asking people of all classes to meals”.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable things was her insistence on games as the proper occupation between supper and bed; and we find her taking home-made jam to a young European, recently arrived in commercial employment, and teaching needlework to the Kabaka’s mother. More than one European insists on her “Amazing Irish attractiveness, her strong sense of humour”:

“She was a jolly happy person and with her Irish wit she would make the grimmest situation seem funny. I used to enjoy an evening spent there with the family... Supper was served on a spotlessly white cloth and everyone behaved as though they had been brought up on English ways. Afterwards there were games. She and Pastor Ben played chess but when visitors were there something much easier was played with much laughter.”

With all these gifts Mabel Ensor went in December 1915 to work under Dr Albert Cook at Mengo Hospital, Kampala, on ‘short service’ terms and living at first as his guest^{iv}. It was a time of severe strain for the hospital staff. To the problems of isolation during the first world war, of additional work for the troops and chronic shortage of staff was added the fact that Mrs Cook was not only wife of the Medical Superintendent but Matron of the Hospital – a situation which had already been found impossible in other mission hospitals. Friction among staff was developing and two lady members were shortly to leave. But Mabel Ensor immediately won high praise. Even at this point she herself sometimes thought that she talked too much and would condemn herself to three days near-silence in her home. By July 1916 she had passed the first part of her Luganda language examination. According to the examiner’s report

“But for one paper, her work has been brilliant... This is the more satisfactory as her hospital duties have been exceedingly heavy; she had practically no time off for language study except what she made for herself, in spare moments”.

Twelve months later she had passed the second part and had decided that she wanted to commit herself to the life of a missionary. She could not be accepted as a full member of the Church Missionary Society till she went on leave in 1920. But, in the meantime, she made it clear to her colleagues that she was primarily an evangelist; and there were accusations that she was irresponsible about her medical duties. Like Elsie Cook^v who became ‘Nakabugo’ of the Nkima clan, Mabel Ensor, through her friendship with Yakabo Musajjalumbwa, the Treasurer of the Buganda Government, became ‘Napima’ of the Empowo clan. It was a signal recognition of her capacity for friendship with Africans^{vi}.

On her return to Uganda in 1920, after leave, it was proposed that, as a temporary relief measure, she should serve for six months at Toro Hospital. But this she steadfastly refused, insisting she was now an evangelist, and seems to have gone direct to Hoima, whence she wrote:

“Women’s industrial work – a new venture – has resulted in great interest, a new feeling of self-respect amongst the down-trodden women who have made enough money to buy clothes instead of begging every cent from the men and have also contributed to the full support of a teacher.”

Here also, finding difficulty in obtaining labour for the re-building of the church, and irritated by the attitude of a Christian chief who refused to help,

“...with the full consent of the pastor and others I went to his house and burnt it ashes – first removing all his goods. This action was much criticized, but the man himself stoutly defended it, and refused to lodge a complaint against me... the ultimate result was... we had hundreds of workers.”

It is said that she even convinced the bishop of the propriety of her action.

In 1923, according to her own account, she had moved to Kamuli in Busoga and it was here that she reported for publication the failure of the Christian mission, at which she had privately hinted from Hoima:

“(The Basoga) have made little progress, they are still flat, still heavy; although there is now a large number of professing Christians, yet bare statistics give no idea of the real truth; a very large number of the baptised Christians have returned to polygamy, devil-possession and drinking: witchcraft is widely practiced, and one is forced to the conclusion that much so-called Christianity is not the real thing but a veneer.”

Then quoting a young Musoga teacher:

“If religion were not connected with education and getting on in the world how many people should we ever see in this church?”

She was officially located to Kamuli in 1925; and it is sufficient indication of the official missionary attitude of the time, and of her disregard which was the beginning of rebellion, that the Mission Secretary should write:

“I am requested to advise you that Native Classes must not be held in, and Negroes must not sleep in CMS houses without the special permission of the Standing Committee.”

She had home leave in 1925 and in September 1926 was posted to Gayaza, again in her beloved Buganda. She had a deep sense of the magnitude of the work which was being left undone (“The days are not long enough to reach all who cry for teaching”); and an increasing conviction of the failure of much which had been done in the past.

“Numbers of these women are not heathen at all, but children of our schools who have married, and gone back to Lubale-worship and sin of the saddest description... a deep need of insistence upon conversion *first* and *character-training* afterwards”.

In order to drive home the decisive character of becoming a Christian she introduced the practice of public statements of conversion; and it is clear that she was over-working herself. In August she was instructed to confine her itineraries to a restricted area and to inform the Secretary of the Mission when she wished to sleep away from Gayaza. He wrote:

“This is done to save her from the effects of an overzealous mature. We fear for her health as she does not get either proper food or rest when left to herself. She is a splendid evangelist but unbalanced.”

There is, however, a suspicion that it was done also, however unwittingly, because she was becoming embarrassingly unconventional not only in her evangelical methods and criticisms of the existing situation, but in the intimacy of her relationship with Africans. Splendid evangelists can be difficult to live with, and Mabel Ensor was no exception. Early in 1928 she made public accusations of immorality against the African pastor of Nakanyonyi

“which she cannot substantiate although she believes then to be correct.”

She refused the bishop’s request to suspend work in that pastorate until the issue could be settled and, on 21st March, resigned her membership of the society, although her resignation was not fully accepted till 14th May, when she went to live, now as a private guest, with Miss Furley, one of the first party of women missionaries to arrive in 1895^{vii}.

She remained “quite friendly to all.”

To resign membership of the Church Missionary Society meant to resign all rights to a salary or a passage back to England. The gesture seems to have been made, immediately, in response to the suggestion that, since she was a paid agent of the Society, it could control her movement. But, having made it, she took seriously the hypothesis that the just shall live by faith and repaid to the Society what remained in her bank account. She started her new life with five pounds, received unexpectedly from a friend in England. Added to her evangelical conviction, and to what others must have found a disconcerting assurance of the will of God, was a social awareness, a political and economic sensitivity (though she would have been surprised, and perhaps shocked, to have such words used of her) which set her apart from the ordinary evangelical society of her day. That she should attempt to live ‘on faith’ – although expressed in terms of

the need for total trust in God – was determined in large part by her recognition of the great gulf which is fixed between missionaries and those they try to serve, simply by their membership of a race which is politically dominant and lives at a standard which is materially far higher. She felt deeply the accusation that missionaries were paid (it was said, well paid) to be Christians: and the fact that African Church workers received more material benefits than many of their fellows.^{viii} In these circumstances, it was difficult to persuade converts that to become Christian meant ‘to give up all for the Lord’.

She understood already at least one of the motives for separation which became explicit in Reuben Spartas – the need for a much more radical devolution of leadership onto Africans than the Anglican Church was prepared to make. It is true that, in her relationship with her followers, it became increasingly clear that she like to be ‘boss’. More than one of her followers, while still regarding her with gratitude and affection, would say that he was misled into serious neglect of family obligations; more than one was driven into rebellion, and to desertion, by her attempts at dictation and her loss of temper at the slightest demur. But this is no more than to say that the attitude of her class and nation – the assumption of leadership, the expectation of obedience – may have been exaggerated by her spinsterhood and by the single-mindedness with which she drove herself to an ever-increasing exertion in a task which at times too often seemed hopeless. She wished not only to serve Africans but – despite what she had to say later – to be African; and she could not be so without cutting herself off from even the relative wealth and security of a missionary salary and retirement benefits. What her evangelical theology called ‘living on faith’ a different theological language would have called ‘the incarnational principle’.

Her actions can easily be criticized. What to her seemed the clear will of God appeared to others too often an unreasoning determination to have her own way. But her decision to separate was not simply self-assertion; it was based on an analysis of African society, of African ‘Christian’ society in particular, and of contemporary missionary methods, which may have been modified, but the seriousness of whose strictures it is difficult to refute in a knowledge of modern conditions.

She felt that very few Africans, despite the large baptismal rolls, were more than nominal Christians, and that most missionaries were too busy building a superstructure to realise that the foundations were already rotten. In a situation of this sort she had to begin again and begin on her own.

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In Miss Furley’s house a flourishing Bible class grew and there is no doubt about the power of Mable Ensor’s attraction, especially for men^{ix}. One of them writes:

“She was a woman with a wonderful gift of leadership and very clever in teaching the word of God. In a very short time she attracted round her many of us who wished to study the Bible. Even some missionaries used to come to our Bible classes. As she was equipped with all these wonderful gifts, I am sure she could have revolutionised the whole Church of Uganda, had it not been for her one peculiar habit of frequent fits of temper which she suffered all the time. It was this that derived her of a permanent Gospel church, as, every now and then, after a thundering quarrel over trifles, all or most of her old followers would leave her; but then because of her wonderful teaching she would build up the group again with new members. I and many others broke away because she had introduced such things as rebaptism of her followers and the celebration of the Holy Communion by anybody at any place, and

she intended to form a new church other than the NAC. Many others she dismissed herself after a quarrel over a very small matter. In spite of all this we loved her all the time she was among us, until she decided to go home.”

Says another:

“She was gracious and generous in the extreme, but with a fierce temper over any challenge of her right to dictate both thought and action”.

The schism formally took place on October 23rd, 1928, and shortly afterwards she went to live in a house built on the land, at Mengo, not far from the headquarters of the CMS, of Kitamirike, son of her old friend Musajjalumbwa. She was joined by Besweri Galiwango, a native township inspector, who left a salaried position to do so; and by Ben Bekalaze and Peter Kabale. They baptised one another in the Kabaka’s Lake at Mengo and the three men were set apart for a special ministry. According to Galiwango, Mabel Ensor, Miss Furley and N P Grubb of the Heart of Africa Mission^x laid hands with prayer on him; and a travelling evangelist from South Africa was the agent in the case of Bekalaze. Mr Grubb writes:

“Various of our missionaries used to have good fellowship with her and ministered to the church, when passing through Kampala... It may be that during Mr Studd’s last visit to Kampala, or mine, we may possibly have laid hands on or prayed for some of the brethren in Miss Ensor’s group, at her request, which to them would have been equivalent to ordination.”

It seems unlikely that Mabel Ensor imagined, or greatly cared, that this would be recognised as ordination by the Anglican Church. But to the men concerned the participation of Europeans from the wider Church was an important factor. By them, and only by them, others were in due course set apart; and they alone administered the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Baptism – not more than 150 were baptised in twenty-five years – was by immersion in the Kabaka’s Lake after a rigorous examination of from five to twelve months; the Lord’s Supper – for which permission to celebrate had been asked from, and refused by, the Bishop – was conducted weekly^{xi} according to a set form; in due course a few marriages were celebrated.

She and her flock lived simply. There were no servants; and the whole household shared the work. By the same token she insisted that those who came to work with her should sell what land they had and give it to the church. It was the only way to relax its fatal grip on them. In 1935, owing to a characteristic disagreement, Galiwango resigned and went to be trained for ordination in the NAC. In the same year she refused a suggestion that she should return to the CMS; and Kitamirike, led to believe (possibly with some degree of truth) that she wished to take from him the land on which stood her church buildings, ejected her. She built again on neighbouring land belonging to Bekalaze.^{xii} Money was short; but in 1936 she was able to write:

“The Stores went on to say that if it was a question of ready money stopping our order, they were not going to be stopped; and they sent on ‘because we quite understand’... For three months we paid no bill nor were asked to pay. At the end of that time a cheque came from a new quarter, and cleared the amount.”

In the same year, Azariah Kikubo was both ordained and married; and, there no being a married pastor available, it was possible to open a second centre at Bumbaja, thirty five miles away in Kyagwe. Too great risks were involved in permitting bachelors to live on their own – even when they were such trusted fellow-workers as Bekalaza and Kabale. But, Kikubo being married, it was possible to post the bachelor Charles Male to work with him and look after the new school.

Since the agreements by which the church used land had no legal status, there was always the possibility that the heirs of Bekalaze and Kabale might disturb its tenure. The question of legitimacy was therefore important and Mengo Gospel Church was incorporated under the Land (Perpetual Succession) Ordinance on 22nd February 1939.

At Mengo, the week's activities, in addition to a weekly Lord's Supper, with another adult meeting and two Sunday Schools on 'the Lord's Day', and a daily prayer meeting, included day school on five mornings a week,^{xiii} two men's Bible classes, a Women's Meeting, a Bible class for members of Makerere College,^{xiv} an open air club, a half-day of prayer the first day of each month and occasional tours of up to a hundred miles in the barren hope of finding new centres for work. Printing was an important activity and the Mengo Gospel Press was kept busy.^{xv} A magazine was started and colportage, for the sale of not only their own publications but of imported books, reached as far as the Abyssinian border. The evenings, after supper and prayers, were given strictly to games, Mabel Ensor herself being a devotee of chess. But things did not go smoothly.

In December 1936 Bekalaze was knocked down by a bus and badly concussed. The condition was complicated by pneumonia and for some time his life was in danger. But he recovered and, after a cranial operation twelve months later, he was left with only a permanent stammer. The public reaction to the accident was typical of the reaction to any forceful evangelism.

"Enemies of our work laughed. 'If they lose one of their chief workers the work will stop', they said gaily"

He had to wait, till 1945, for a house of his own and in 1949 he left to start a private school, later, on medical advice, became a shopkeeper. Kabale was leave in 1942, first to work with an American mission in Urundi (and, through it, to join the Revival), later to start his own private school.

Another disappointment was Kosea Dumi. He had joined her school in 1934 at the age of twelve, been baptised and become successively a Sunday School teacher, an open air preacher and finally a pastor in 1942. After his marriage in 1944 sheer material need drove him to start a private school in Bulemezi. Mabel Ensor helped him with books and money; and he returned to the Mengo household in 1950. But in 1952 he left again and she openly accused him of a lust for money and of selling watered milk. He had, in fact, no more than enough milk to feed his family; and it is a measure of her power over men that he still regards her as his beloved mother in God and christened his younger daughter 'Mabel Ensor' in 1957.

In Kyagwe too the situation was difficult:

"For over fifty years the CMS has been in this district, and murders, drunkenness, witchcraft and other forms of evil are rife. Children cannot come to school because they are drunk; cannibalism is still known..."

Moreover the local congregation of the NAC showed marked opposition – a fact which Mabel Ensor seems to have attributed to the appointment of the ‘modernist’ J. C. Jones,^{xvi} as warden of the diocesan theological college. The higher criticism of the Bible – like the ‘eastward position’ and candles on the alter – was a matter on which she felt strongly, to which she attributed much of the moral evil in the contemporary church and against which she wrote *The Wolves are out tonight*. In order to counter it:

“We are going to be Gideon’s Three Hundred, willing to be broken pitchers if only the light will shine”

Even Roman Catholics, she said, were disquieted by the new venture, because so simple an event as a game of football could be made an occasion for asking their youngsters if they were saved,

“In this country you will often find a Moslem, a Papist, a Protestant and a heathen all living in one house, all relatives all following his own ‘religion’ with the most terrible chaos of thought as a result”

And the enthusiasts of Mengo Gospel Hall were well fitted to take advantage of such chaos for implementing the message of salvation as they saw fit.

In 1939 Kikubo left suddenly. His marriage had not been a success and later he was to join the Seventh Day Adventists. But Kyagwe went on, for Charles Male had been ordained, together with Jairus Bale,^{xvii} in 1938; the former was already at Kyagwe station and the latter was posted there after his marriage to another convert, whose bride-price was paid by the sale of a further piece of land. By 1944 they had started a weekly Gospel School for immigrant Banyarwanda on a neighbouring coffee estate. Bale left later to be ordained in the NAC and, in 1958, to become a missionary in the Sudan. Male (who was himself quick-tempered) was asked to go.

There were, in fact, three fundamental problems that were never overcome:

(i) In the first place, although the ‘faith principle’ is well enough for a celibate community, especially in the days of its first enthusiasm, it is hard on married men, who have to consider the future of their wives and families; and there is considerable evidence, in the reminiscences of her associates, that, although she rated highly, in theory, the importance of Christian homes, she did not appreciate their need for material security. It is surprising that one who knew the Baganda so well should have failed to realise that, while the European standard of living may be an object of jealousy, they wish Europeans not to adopt their standard of living but to raise it. The Franciscan model is seen not as a challenge to the rich but as a threat to the poor.

(ii) Nor did she appreciate their need for spiritual independence from herself. Reading between the lines, one suspects that she not only chose their wives but tried to manage their married lives for them; and one of them left her because she accused his wife of adultery and tried to force him into divorce.^{xviii} She had no hesitation in discussing their affairs in printed reports to her supporters in England – reports which were read to them in manuscript and, often enough, set up in type by them. Perhaps the most striking example concerns the marriage of X and Y, a match for which only the deep conviction of the integrating power of ‘conversion’ could ever have expected success. Y was a very recent convert; she seemed to have been sent by God as X’s wife. But, even today, there are few Baganda for whom the sanction of family approval and tribal custom does not provide greater security in marriage than ‘falling in love’ and the blessing of the Church; and neither of these had a stable background:

“Y’s father is a very well-known and wealthy chief, still active, but of great age... he was one of those who helped Pilkington to translate the Bible. Polygamy and, in these days of grace, its inevitable accompaniment – unbridled lust – carried him far out from the shore. Drink followed, and still follows... Y is the only saved soul amongst his enormous number of children. The country has many of these derelicts. X’s father was actually a missionary teacher and all his children grew up in a missionary compound. Now the old man is a blasphemer, a polygamist, and has disowned X, his eldest son, for turning from the depths of sin to the Lord”

Soon she left him for another man and he regained her only by prompt and vigorous action. But she left him again; and he also left the church (like so many others) to run his own day school. Mabel Ensor was a much-loved woman; but, if it is possible to use Buber’s term, she gives the impression, in her later years, of regarding her African associates precisely as ‘its’, for whose safe passage into the kingdom of heaven she was responsible. She became to them *Mukade* (Mother); and, if this is a just judgment, it means that she let go just that intimacy of relationship with Africans on which her acceptance as *Nampina* had seemed to set the seal. She who started as a friend to Africans ended as a winner of their souls; and the two attitudes are not the same.

(iii) But more than this: she herself had frankly forsaken the practice of identification. She wrote in 1946:

“Bread is the staple food of the Europeans... To the (Muganda) it is a mere luxury... I was brought up on good bread and butter and after thirty years in Uganda still find it impossible to live on an African diet.”

In 1947 she spent an unexpected legacy on a return air passage for medical treatment in England; and a close European friend says that, in the early days, she would not have spent such money on her individual needs. In 1949, although “I personally dine every day with a family of African boys and girls”, she wrote in strong terms of the difference between white and black, quoting the words of Musajjalumbwa on her receipt of a clan name:

“Note, because we have admitted you to the clan, don’t forget you are English: we all want to live in harmony and not create endless ill-will;”

and in 1952,^{xix} although

“When Christ came he set all captives free, we all know which race was the slave-race by the will of God.”

She had discovered that the colour-bar cannot be crossed too readily; but it is a complete reversal of the point of view from which she started; and that she should have failed makes it easier to understand that others, with lesser gifts, should hardly begin to make the passage.

Mabel Ensor’s strategy was based not only on criticism of the orthodox missionary approach. She believed that African society was morally rotten, that European influence had been too often, for the bad

and that Christianity was, for the most part, only skin deep. A large part of the blame must lie with the practise of routine baptism and confirmation without insistence on true conversion or attempts to check wickedness among professing Christians.

“The appalling wickedness following Lent and other ‘Church’ festivities makes one shrink from recognising them now; it is too terrible... With these and many other sad cases before our eyes it is a terrible thing to maintain that water-baptism save a soul from death and makes a child of God. This is the teaching throughout Uganda,”

Baptism by immersion of believers was the rule of Mengo Gospel Church from the start; and it seems that Mabel Ensor reached this position on the strictly empirical grounds that baptism as practised in Buganda, at least since 1890, had very little to do with faith in Christ and was largely a seal of literacy and a symbol of status in the tribe. If it was to have any significance for Christians, it must be as a radical break with African society.

“We know what a sad condition our country of Uganda is in. The drunkenness, the terrible immorality, the lack of trustworthiness in every department of life, the intrigue...”

Her letters to the *Uganda Herald*^{xx} were even more outspoken; and she referred more than once to the revival of pagan practises, even among Christians. Nor had she anything but scorn for the new nationalism, which was appearing towards the end of her time:

“Ignatius Musazi, like Muluma, goes to England, enjoys to the full its hospitality, kindness and protection, and then proceeds to be a Mr Haw-Haw. That is just despicable. He unearths a Mr Brockway, who enjoys free rides over Africa, and without a spark of Christian upbringing plasters a little company of Africans with honeyed phrases. England probably rings now with the news that the poor Baganda live in trees by night and creep out to work in slave gangs by day. We dress up a few better ones to make a show and send over”

It was this critique which made her feel that Christian schools must remove children altogether from the influence of African society; and it is not surprising that it should have met some opposition from the official African Church. What is surprising is that the opposition was not greater and that it appears scarcely to have touched her centre at Mengo. Indeed, as late as 1952, educated Christian parents were sending their children to her school as boarders. It is convincing evidence that, at least at primary level, an education which is unashamedly Christian can also be academically sound. Much what she said was no doubt exaggerated; and she seems to have had little eye for the virtues, which are undoubtedly there along with the vices, of Christian Africans baptised and confirmed in more conventional ways. But, when history comes to be written of the Church in Buganda, her analysis of the situation during the quarter-century which began with the deportation of Mugema, included the death of Daudi Chwa and ended with the deportation of Mutesa II, must be taken fully into account. Much that was written in the missionary magazines was, if not deliberate eyewash, at least a serious failure to see below the surface in Buganda and to mistake for national conversion what was, perhaps, no more than the covering with a Christian coat of paint of old and very unregenerate ambitions.

Part both of the strength and the weakness of her attitude is shown in her relations with the Revival. She had longed for revival and, in the early days, was a close friend of both Africans and Europeans who were

to become its leaders; she had the same love for the Bible^{xxi} (although she underestimated theirs); the same conception of conversion and of its primacy in spiritual life; she spoke the same theological language; they agreed in condemnation of moral laxity in the Church. But, when it came, she could not accept it and gives the impression that between her people and the revivalists there was open war, with the bitterness of succession from her side to theirs. The strength of her position lay in the fact that she had convictions of her own from which to criticize. The fact is that, just as many Christians in England joined the Oxford Group in its early days not because they agreed with it but because they could find nowhere else a positive message to oppose to the political faiths or the moral indifference of the time, so not a few missionaries have thrown in their unwilling lot with the Revival because it alone seems to offer a vital challenge to a desperate moral situation. From her position of strength Mabel Ensor was able to see the weaknesses of theirs; vitality is not necessarily the truth; it may, using the language of truth, nevertheless be a perfect counterfeit. But her weakness lay in her inability to see any good whatsoever in the Revival; and all she had to say was bitterly critical.

Much of what Mabel Ensor said about the Revival is worth saying and to be quoted at length, provided it is understood that this is an account of her and does not tell the whole truth about the Revival. At some other time the Revival must be allowed to speak for itself.

“Some time after we had started a young doctor came out to join the Ruanda Mission. He passed through Kampala, and we asked him to address one of our Quiet Days, which he did. He often came to see us after that, and time passed on. Then one day we heard of a strange new movement in Ruanda, perhaps six or seven years after the Lord led us out. The young doctor and an African teacher, a dear fellow well known to us and who helped our work, were not working harmoniously together. They confessed to one another that they had been wrong, and from this there sprang a ‘confessing’ which spread over the country like wildfire and was carried to Uganda. It had most, if not all, of the ‘Group’^{xxii} features, and was immediately sponsored by a keen and confessed Grouper in Uganda, a wealthy planter. The young doctor implored us to join them. We wondered and waited and were very troubled. This ‘confessing’ was announced and taught with terrifying vehemence. It was ‘the new way’, ‘the one way’, the ONLY way to salvation’; everyone who refused it was ‘unsaved’. Everybody was attacked, missionaries followed up the road by teachers yelling after them that they had sins of immorality or others – absolutely unfounded accusations against God’s tried and tested servants. Young ignorant Africans would call at houses, announce that they were saved, in many cases ‘yesterday’, from vile sins, which they insisted on enumerating, and then ‘challenge’ the European or the African to ‘break’ and confess his or hers, there and then. This only was ‘salvation’. A senior police officer told the writer quite recently that they received a mountain of letters complaining, he added with a smile

“This following would like nothing better than to be made martyrs of.”

But when the leader in Uganda introduced nudity as a mark of ‘perfect holiness’, the police made short work of it...^{xxiii} Its meetings were cesspools of filth confessed; as one African clergy of godly life said to them openly:

“You make your meetings into public latrines...”

But the supreme and final test was the Word of God... Perhaps hundreds of times the writer has pleaded, argued, reasoned with these people; to be met by abuse, revilings and anger when the Bible is quoted. The authority of the Word of God is flouted:

“Don’t quote the Bible to me”

“That is only Paul”

“We know that the Bible is good in parts and bad in others”

We want experiences not Bible-talk”

“Confession is SALVATION: YOU NEED TO BE SAVED”.

If you refuse to confess your sins to us, past and present, and to confess them publicly at our meetings, and to keep on confessing them, then you have pride, you have secret sins, you are unsaved. The Bible says:

“Repent; and repentance is what we teach; and Romans 10.10 which you teach confirms it”

In vain we point out that the passage says

“Confess Jesus as Lord”

They will have none of it. Again, “If we walk in the Light” (I John 1.7) interpreted with violent assertion to mean

“Unless you turn yourself inside out to your fellowmen there is no fellowship and no cleansing...”

Why do they quote the Word of God at all? Because Buganda has been taught the Word faithfully and steadily for many years by godly missionaries... and in spite of Rome’s closed Bible, and recent Modernism, a large part of the country still honours, at least in word, the Scriptures. In other places, Ruanda for instance, and some neighbouring countries, heathen men and women who have been taught or learned to read, are herded in by the thousands and reports sent home about the wonderful work. One remembers the saintly missionary, Mr Pitts Pitts... saying, with great anxiety,

“We are rushing around and begging them to read The Bible; they will sing all night, but they will not read the Word of God...”

Imagine what we felt when our work was assailed with incredible bitterness. Our Bible Classes denounced as ‘dope’, our pastors constantly waylaid on the road and told that their leader had no doubt secret sin, and was all wrong. It took time to work, but it did not work; they boasted that they would eventually get all out workers away, and boasted of it with glee; and they very nearly did. The iron entered into our soul! The heart-alienation of those who had once loved and trusted us, the puzzling and incomprehensible difficulties which arose, apparently for no cause, the departure, the almost immediate union with the new movement, the going round the country and abjuring us – ‘we were blind

but now we see' – many a night we 'watered our couch with our tears',,, a letter came the other day from one who had prayed and worked with us in days gone by –

“Your work has all been in vain in the Lord.”

It is a LYING SPIRIT which is at work. Its followers are notoriously untruthful and will deny everything against themselves and their methods. They have many faces and can and do deceive visitors to Africa.

It is an UNCLEAN SPIRIT, delighting in filthy facts, as retailed: in sexual familiarities; in discussing impurities.

It is a CRUEL SPIRIT, accusing the saints of God before God 'day and night'...

Many missionaries do not know their Bibles, and are deeply impressed by the zeal and earnestness shown. But the real reason is further to seek. It is an extremely subtle thing that we have in our midst. It is perfectly Counterfeit. It looks so simple, but in reality it is most intricate. If you seize the head you find that you have the tail, and vice versa. If you use the word 'salvation' now, it means – 'belonging to the sect'; it has become a debased coin. It spreads through the head and heart, like a drug... if there comes 'another Jesus'... another Spirit... or another Gospel... no marvel! For SATAN HIMSELF is transformed into an angel of light. II Corinthians 11.”

But her deepest judgment runs:

“The craze for 'fellowship' will, by the grace of God, run its course in time, and resume its proper place, instead of being a god to be worshipped... If 'our fellowship with The Father and with is Son Jesus Christ'... then WE HAVE fellowship 'one with another'.”

There is an objectivity about the theology of this comment which should please the most catholic or biblical of modern theologians. But it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, however deeply she may have seen into the defects of the Revival movement, her failure to see its virtues was due primarily to the fact that it was not her own child; and it cannot be wholly irrelevant to the secessions of which she complains that, while Mabel Ensor was unquestioned head of Mengo Gospel Church, the Revival was very largely a spontaneous African movement and essentially democratic. There were times (though not all times) when failure to be wholly with Mabel Ensor was interpreted as being against the Lord.

In 1953 she decided her work for Uganda was finished and she left on 1st December, the day of the Kabaka's deportation. The trustees were dissolved, the land given back to its original owners and the Common Seal (bearing the device of an Open Bible) thrown into the sea. But she felt that she had done wrong to leave the people at such a time and returned on 21st April 1954. It was with bitter disappointment that none of her African friends could, or would, give her lodging. Christopher (not Charles) Male, who had stayed with her to the end as a trustee of the church, had joined Kabale at Bumbaja.^{xxiv} Kosea Dumi would have welcomed her, had he the money and the time to build for her a room onto his own house. Robert Muwanga offered her land,^{xxv} if she could find the money to build a house and school. But she felt despised and rejected and, after living in various places and finally with a

missionary friend, she returned on 6th July not only to England but to the Anglican church and worked for a mission to soldiers at Catterick in Yorkshire. She died in her sleep on 23rd December 1954.

The majority of her followers have rejoined the Anglican church, some of them in its Revival wing; her Bible class still continues. She left in Uganda many perplexed men. But the final picture which emerges is of a woman deeply Christian, although in conscious and deliberate schism; greatly loved, even by those who left her or who she had most harshly offended, sensitive, beyond her natural association, in the inner movement of society, though given – perhaps in reaction against the apparent blindness of others – to exaggerations, leaving behind her no established institution but individual lives deeply touched by her influence; important both for those lives, which have largely gone back into the Church, and as a critic whose vision ought still to be taken seriously. Whatever her public reputation, those who knew her best insist that she was among the great and the greatly-loved.

ⁱ *Archives*, County Museum, Armagh; *Dict. Nat. Biography*; Burke's *Landed Gentry*; *The Times*, 19th July 1910; Venn, *Alumni Cantab.*; private communications. I have been considerably embarrassed by the refusal of Miss Ensor's executor to allow me to quote from her *Annual Reports*, which were published regularly but of which he alone holds extant copies. It is they reveal, more clearly than any other source, the vigour and beauty of a personality which has been deeply maligned in Uganda and which this essay – while trying to be objective – will I hope, do something to reinstate. The reading of them has largely directed the questions which I have asked of her associates; but I can honourably quote only that for 1936, which is among the Albert Cook Papers in the Uganda Society, Kampala. For the same reason, it seems best to leave anonymous the many private communications which, mostly in love of her, have been freely given. Her letters to the *Uganda Herald* are for the most part, atypical and written in obvious haste. I have used them only when a parallel quotation from a *Report* was forbidden. The dates are 20th July 1938, 17th October 1945, 29th May, 12th June, 24th July and 31st July 1946, 20th and 29th October 1949, 2nd January and 21st April 1951, 8th and 29th July and 18th November 1952. Her duplicated paper on *The Revival Movement* was widely circulated in both England and Uganda.

ⁱⁱ 20th July 1938: "We need in Buganda a bigamy law which will touch every woman outside the legal wife brought into the home by a married man... If a Muganda maintains he is Christian, he must be made subject to Christian laws." 17th October 1945: "The poor Muganda is an utter slave to his lusts; he needs help. And what help can we give him? I reply in one word – legislation... God has ordained ministers of the Law to restrain evil and to promote the good of all... We thank God for our Law Courts".

ⁱⁱⁱ But she could say of herself "Far be it from me to advocate an ultra-puritan sabbath – 'pull down the blinds and tell the children not to walk'... but the Lord of the Rest Day says: "Keep it holy" which I think throws some light on the games question" (31st July 1946)

^{iv} Cook, *Uganda Memoirs*, p. 309

^v Now Mrs J. F. Robinson

^{vi} The significance of the naming is uncertain. She was later to write (29th October 1949): "I never chose to call myself by a clan name. I was granted it by one of the three rulers of the kingdom who made me a feast of forty-four courses... with a hand-written menu to remember it by. Afterwards I was handed a paper giving me a clan name... followed by a grant of land." There was no further reference to her right of land; and this is almost certainly a misunderstanding.

^{vii} Cook, p. 393

^{viii} With increased wage scales in secular unemployment, this is by no means true today

^{ix} There is some evidence that she was not so successful with African women, perhaps because she knew their weaknesses too well; perhaps because she came to be known in the Household as *Mukade* (Mother) and women found her too much like the proverbial mother-in-law. But this is guess work. One of the Bible Class, who refused to leave the NAC or (later) to join the Revival was Yusufu Mukasa, a dispenser who, still from his base at Nakulabye, Kampala, preaches often in the open air.

^x N. P. Grubb *Christ in Congo Forests*. The Heart of Africa Mission was at work in the Congo

^{xi} Like the Plymouth Brethren, Mengo Gospel Church set much greater store by the weekly Lord's Supper than did the CMS in Buganda.

^{xii} He finally obtained possession of his land after a law-suit against his guardian. “It seems to be a pastime with the Muganda to sell his land to six or seven different people at the same time, and thus obtain large sums of money, which he hides or spends. When found out he goes to prison, but the unfortunate buyers, who have never asked to see the title deeds, are the losers, for only one of them can be the rightful possessor.” Mair (*An African People*) confirms the apparently ambivalent attitude to land – as both an inalienable possession and a source of ready cash.

^{xiii} The school was intended primarily for children but by 1940 was being attended by adult men from Congo

^{xiv} Among them were Mr J. D. Otiende, now assistant manager of the North Nyanza African District Council, and Mr R. Muwanga, now Chief Assistant Secretary in the Buganda Treasury

^{xv} Books known to have been published or considered are: *Mambya*, a magazine started in 1937. The title means ‘Dawn’ though in the *Uganda Herald* 8th July 1952 it is translated ‘The Morning Star’

- 1936 M. Ensor, *The wolves are Out Tonight* – a pamphlet against modernism
- 1937 *Enyimba Ezenjiri* – a book of ‘Gospel Hymns’ translated into Luganda. The preface reads, “Broken Luganda can be no more pleasing to a Muganda than broken English would be to a English person. The first missionaries could not grapple with all these matters; they were too busy dying for their Lord... Small but important details of accent and weak vowels etc., have been adjusted with all possible care, guided by our Pastors with unflagging interest and valuable help.” But the Luganda of this hymn book is not, in fact, very good. Luganda cannot, without gross distortion, be adapted to the rhythms of European hymn tunes
- 1937 A Luganda translation of N. A. E. Earle, *The Misleading of Christendom* – another anti-modernist book.
- 1939 Pastor Ben’s *Parables from Nature* – a reader for use in schools
- 1939 *True Church History* (in Luganda) – based on B.F.C. Atkinson’s *Valiant in Fight*
- 1940 Pastor Peter’s *Errors of Papacy*
- 1941 M. Ensor, a pamphlet *contra* SDA
- 1950 Pastor Kosea, *Anecdotes and Illustrations*; his translation of Cruden’s *Concordance* has been started

^{xvi} Later Bishop of Bangor and considered by many as a deeply spiritual scholar

^{xvii} He had been a salesman for the Uganda Company

^{xviii} The ‘co-respondent’ joined the SDA and later found his way back into the NAC

^{xix} *Uganda Herald* 29th May, 20th and 29th October 1949, 18th November 1952

^{xx} 20th July 1938, 17th October 1945, 2nd January 1951, 8th July and 18th November 1952

^{xxi} A fascinating example of her attitude to the Bible is to be found in *Uganda Herald*, 21st April 1951, where she interprets a report that horsemen had been seen in the communist armies in Korea as a sign of the imminence of God’s final victory.

^{xxii} i.e. the Oxford group

^{xxiii} Bishop C. E. Stuart, at the time Bishop of Uganda, writes with reference to this accusation “I don’t think the police entered into it at all. As far as I recollect I myself had not even heard of it until after it had been put down firmly by the Balokole (Revival) leaders. I think it only lasted a few days”

^{xxiv} The school failed in 1957. Kabale now teaches in an NAC primary school and Male works a storekeeper for the Uganda Company.

^{xxv} A choice of sites at Mutundwe, near Kampala, or at Masaka