

RICHARD EDWARD DENNETT (1857-1921) - A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

The Dennett collection is of special interest because he published numerous books and articles about Congo religion, to which many of his artefacts relate, and because of the part he played in the movement for human rights in the Congo. He was a trader of ivory and other goods, and had a mixed race family (Birkett 1992: xv). His work is frequently referred to, usually in passing, in later and recent works on Congo religion and religious artefacts. He was friendly with Mary Kingsley, the famous Victorian lady traveller in the region, who also studied the religion of the area. They worked and lectured together and she often mentions him in her publications. They had much in common and became firm friends. Both belonged to a social circle which included such prominent figures as Roger Casement, the British Consul who investigated atrocities in the Congo, Alice Stopford Green, the Irish historian and campaigner, and E.D. Morel, the influential human rights campaigner. Dennett is mentioned in passing in Casement's diaries and correspondence and appears in the correspondence of Morel, two men who were largely responsible for bringing King Leopold's rule of terror to the attention of the outside world. These four famous names were part of a circle of people involved in understanding and reforming the Congo at the time. It remains unclear, however, whether Dennett was deeply involved with this circle or whether he remained a marginal figure.

PAST AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The text panel currently on display in the RAMM World Cultures gallery reads: 'Richard E. Dennett was born in 1857 in Valparaiso, the son of Rev. Richard Dennett, Rector of Ashton, near Chudleigh in Devon. He was educated in England, and was employed by the Liverpool firm of Hatton & Cookson in the lower Congo area in 1879. He started a manuscript newspaper called the "Congo Mirror" and was instrumental in the formation of the Congo Reform Association which campaigned against the excesses of Belgian colonial rule in the Congo Free State. He gave a substantial collection of figurines and other objects from the Lower Congo area to the Museum in 1889, via his father. Many of these are on display in the Central Africa case...Dennett later joined the Nigerian Forest Service in 1902. He retired in 1918 and died in 1921'. It also notes that 'he gave a substantial collection of figures and other objects from the Lower Congo area to the Museum in 1889, via his father'.

Prior to the present research project, RAMM already held some information about Dennett, including Who's Who entries, a copy of a 1914 letter to Morel in which he detailed his involvement with the Congo reform movement (the original is held in the London School of Economics' archives: F8-Dennett, 23/12/1914), correspondence with researchers and references to publications, including Kingsley (1897) and Dorson (1968). Sue Andrews, a student researcher, had already contacted Dennett's school, his university and his father's church - only the latter proved fruitful in terms of family history. Former RAMM curator Len Pole had also visited the church. Séamas Ó Síocháin, an Irish academic researching Casement, had provided brief biographical details and a list of Dennett's publications. The museum only had two of Dennett's books (1897 b, 1906). His first book (1887) is very rare and could not be obtained, however photocopies of the most

relevant portions have now been made from the Cambridge University Library, together with photocopies of the numerous articles which he published in scholarly journals (see bibliography). Photocopies have also been made from a number of books which refer to Dennett - books by and about Mary Kingsley, and about Central African religion and folklore. These copies are now on file at RAMM. The following short biography makes use of material already in the RAMM archives, in addition to new research.

During the project, several archives were visited and others were contacted by telephone and email. The Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM) in Oxford holds two artefacts which Dennett presented to the Folklore Society, as well as Folklore Society collection lists which include the Dennett material; it also has Dennett's label for *Mavungu*, Kingsley's power figure or 'nail fetish' which is now on display. The Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) in London holds two boxes of Dennett's lantern slides - one relating to Congo and the other to Nigeria - as well as his membership documents. There is a brief reference to Dennett in the Liverpool Museum archives. Most other UK museums with Central African material were contacted during the project and none appear to hold Dennett material, so it seems highly unlikely that any of their archives contain Dennett references. Six sets of letters to Dennett's main publisher, George MacMillan, have been found in the archives of Reading University. Photocopies of some of these have been made and placed on file at RAMM. The publishers of journals in which Dennett published have not yet been contacted and Sampson Lowe, who published his first book, no longer exist, so their archives may be difficult to track down. Numerous works by and about Kingsley mention Dennett, but Green's archives at the National Library of Ireland have yet to be searched. The Anti-Slavery Society (ASS) archives have been contacted. Their correspondence at Rhodes House Library, Oxford, was searched but no further information was found. A telephone call to the London headquarters of the ASS confirmed that they have nothing. The online National Register of Archives was consulted, but little of interest was found.

Many archival sources with potential information about Dennett remain to be researched. These include the archives of his employers, if any remain – Thomas Wilson Sons & Co, Hatton & Cookson and the Nigeria Forest Service. Séamas Ó Síocháin and Jordan Goodman, both academics who are researching Roger Casement, have been contacted and have provided suggestions of archives to consult. Both are familiar with Casement's and Morel's correspondence, but report only a few brief references to Dennett. Further research needs to be undertaken into the archives of Kingsley, Green, Morel and Casement. In a 1914 letter to Morel on the history of his involvement in the Congo question (F8-Dennett, 23/12/1914), Dennett says that he wrote for the Congo Mirror and African Mail, which also published Morel's letters. He was also involved in 1886 discussions in the Manchester Guardian and the Times. These sources remain to be searched. The Oxford and Cambridge University Libraries and the Anti-Slavery Society do not hold the Congo Mirror, but the British Library has not yet been searched; the ASS headquarters in London hold the African Mail, but this has yet to be consulted. Dennett apparently wrote political articles, but it is not clear without reading them how far they criticised the colonial regime. In his books and articles, Dennett protests against trade barriers, missionaries, colonial officials and Arab slave-traders, but has little to say about

human rights issues in the Congo. It would be interesting to find out whether his journalistic material and letters were more radical.

Dennett's surviving family have yet to be traced - the place to begin this research would be the Family Records Centre in London, which holds birth, marriage and death certificates. The National Archives could also have relevant material. Dennett was a member or fellow of several professional organisations, whose archives who may hold material in their archives. The Manchester Geographical Society and Zoological Society of London have been contacted but have no further information. Ó Síocháin consulted the Folklore Society archives and found nothing, but it may be worth looking again for information about the collections, including Dennett items, which were transferred to the PRM in the late nineteenth century. Further research would be required to discover whether the African Society, which published some of Dennett's papers, and the Balloon Society of Great Britain, with which he had contact through a colleague, still exist.

The biggest significant gap in knowledge about Dennett is the extent of his participation in the human rights movement. His work as an ethnographer, on the other hand, can be understood through his and Kingsley's publications, and through later references to these.

DENNETT - A CHRONOLOGY

BIRTH AND EDUCATION

Dennett was born in Valparaiso in 1857. Valparaiso is in Chile - perhaps his parents were missionaries. He was educated in Marlborough School between 1869-74. Student researcher Sue Andrews contacted the school and notes that Dr. Terry Rogers, the school's Archivist, reported that Dennett's academic record was poor. Rogers 'suggested that he was probably sent to the school because it was set up for the sons of clergy in 1843 and they received preferential rates'.

PARENTS AND FAMILY

Dennett was the son of Reverend R. Dennett MA DCL (1829 to 1908), who was a rector and private patron of Ashton Church near Chudleigh, Devon, for sixteen years from 1881 to 1897. Sue Andrews visited the family grave at Ashton Church and noted that he was interred at Brighton. Len Pole also visited the memorial at the church and noted that Dennett's mother was 'Eleanor, only daughter of E. Garforth & granddaughter of I. Iveson of Headon, Yorkshire' (1828-1882). R.E. Dennett also had two sisters, Ada (1859- 1907) and Constance (1860-1902), who was interred at Kodiakanal, India. Presumably Dennett donated his collection to the Exeter museum because of his local family ties.

PROFESSIONAL LIFE

Dennett worked for Thomas Wilson, Sons & Co., a shipping company based in Kingston-upon-Hull, from 1875 until 1879. He left the UK for Africa in the employment of Hatton

& Cookson, a trading company, in 1879. Who Was Who informs us that in 1886 he 'drew attention to the irregularities in Congo Free State', 'edited a manuscript newspaper called "Congo Mirror" and accused Congo officials of murders and atrocities. With the help of Mr. Eli Sowerbutts, Secretary of the Manchester Geographical Society, Mr. R.C. Phillips of Manchester, and Mr. Lefevre, President of the Balloon Society of Great Britain, he carried on the agitation until the Congo Reform Association was formed', and 'in a series of letters to the African Mail entitled the Lower Congo he pointed out the injustice of the French rule and the concessionaire system in the Congo Francais'. He left the Congo area when he joined the Nigerian Forest Service in 1902, but a letter from Dennett in the Macmillan archives at Reading University suggests that he felt that he did not understand the Nigerian people as he had understood the Congolese.

Between 1886 and 1906, Dennett wrote and published three books and numerous articles in Britain about life in the Congo. Much of this material is ethnographic but other articles discuss trade. Between 1903 and 1916 he published a number of ethnographic articles on Nigerian language and ethnography.

LATER YEARS AND DEATH

Dennett retired to Britain on a pension 1918 and died in 1921, when he must have been 63 or 64 years old. Letters addressed to his publisher, George Macmillan, and held at the Reading University archives, demonstrate that he was still writing and planning further publications at the time of his death. His later letters are written on the headed notepaper of the Mary Kingsley Society. A letter dated 6th January 1921 demonstrates the more esoteric side of his work. It reads 'I enclose a Ms. "The Soul in Sound" which I should like you to publish - it is an attempt to reconcile the order in Creation (Genesis) with the order of the colours in the spectrum, production, propagation and personal pronouns, in the form of an alphabet with the letters in their natural groups...'. His final letter, dated April 23rd 1921, is addressed from a London nursing home and reads, 'as you can see from the above address, I am in a nursing home and with very little chance of living any length of time. I have written a little book called 'Self and Universal Order'. It really sums up the task Mary Kingsley gave me to do and so I have dedicated the work to her memory...I should like to see it through the press if possible'. Neither of these works appear to have been published. The manuscript is not in the Macmillan archives and Dennett's personal papers have yet to be found. However, this poignant letter indicates his devotion to Mary Kingsley and perhaps the influence which she had over him.

DENNETT, CASEMENT, MOREL AND THE CONGO REFORM MOVEMENT

The horrors of Congo colonialism were made famous through Conrad's novel 'Heart of Darkness'. Conrad talks of ivory as the Central African trader's dream product. Dennett himself traded in ivory, but was also involved in the Congo reform movement to improve conditions for indigenous workers. In 1895 he presented two ivory tusks to the Folklore Society, which are now in the collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum - one engraved with his name and the other a classic Laongo 'tourist' piece, carved with figures and scenes.

Dennett's 1914 letter to Morel, mentioned above, details his involvement in the Congo Reform movement, but does not give the impression that he and Morel were close friends or colleagues. Ó Síocháin (personal communication, 2006) notes that Casement's letters mention Dennett, but no evidence has been found that they knew each other well or worked together. Dennett receives a very brief mention in Roger Casement's 1903 Congo diary (Ó Síocháin and O'Sullivan 2003: 196). It reads: 'Friday 17 February... Weather better. Ship going well. Wrote 9 letters home. Ran 247 miles. Wrote F.O. in evening. Also for Burrows' book on Congo - to Farnell & Spicer, Nina, H.W. Kings, Roger Dennett to go by Jebba. Beautiful day'. This is his only reference to Dennett in his published diary or in his reports - a much deeper search of his correspondence would be required to identify further references, and it seems unlikely that anything significant would be found. In his footnote to this diary entry, Ó Síocháin writes: 'R.E. Dennett (1857-1921) was a trader and also a keen ethnographer, with a long list of publications, initially on the Fjort/Fiote of the French Congo and later in Nigeria. He was a strong opponent of the injustices of the colonial system in West Africa. He was an associate of Mary Kingsley and it was he who was to suggest that Casement should contact Alice Stopford Green, who was to become an important mentor of Casement's.' Further research into Green's archives at the National Library of Ireland would be required to find out if she knew Dennett personally, or only through Kingsley - Frank informs us that Green was Kingsley's confidante and 'closest friend (1986: 237)'. In 1897, Kingsley gave numerous lectures at 'such London venues as the Folklore Society, where she spoke on "The Fetish View of the Human Soul"...And at one of these affairs early in 1897, Mary met Alice Stopford Green and thence began what was probably the most important relationship in the coming, crowded years" (ibid: 234). Dennett gave his lecture on 'Death and Burial of the Fiote' on the same occasion, so may well have met Green at the same time that Kingsley did. Frank notes that Green was 'a social presence...among the intellectual elite of the day, and her Kensington House was the centre of a brilliant, heterogeneous salon that regularly drew such figures as...Roger Casement' (ibid: 235). It is therefore possible that Dennett, too, may have attended this *salon*.

DENNETT, KINGSLEY AND AFRICAN FOLKLORE

Kingsley's *Travels in West Africa* (1897), says Frank, included 'most of the lectures on trade and fetish she delivered in 1897 and 1898' (1986: 240). These were the interests which Kingsley shared with Dennett. Kingsley and Dennett also shared a publisher - George Macmillan. Frank explains that Kingsley had a deep belief in the benefits of free trade for Africa but that her 'underlying motive, as always, was the preservation of indigenous African culture, which she felt traders would secure while the Colonial Office would smash the whole show up' (ibid: 221). Both she and Dennett were similarly scathing of missionaries, although she was agnostic (see Kingsley 1897: xvii) and he a Christian. Kingsley 'felt that even more than the Colonial Office, they were out to "murder" African culture, and that far from being the Black Man's "saviour", they were often agents of unalloyed destruction' (Frank 1986: 112). Dennett and Kingsley also shared an interest in 'fetishism' and helped to bring West African religion to light for serious discussion in English academic circles, although their views are now outdated (Shelton 1995: 11-16). They shared a common belief that African traditions held African society together and that free trade was the way of the future, but that missionaries and government intervention destroyed this cohesiveness.

Dennett knew Kingsley as a friend and colleague. He was proud to mention her in his publications and to dedicate his works to her. No book by or about Kingsley is complete without a passing mention of Dennett. Kingsley herself traded, saw trading as a way of integrating with local people and admired traders' involvement in and understanding of local life (Kingsley 1897: 3, 6). For Kingsley, Dennett seems to stand for the archetypical trader (ibid: 4, 8). Dennett and Kingsley published articles together (Dennett 1897 a, Kingsley 1897 b) and she edited his second book (1897 b). He wrote the label for *Mavungu*, the power figure which she collected and which is now on display at the PRM. After her premature death in 1900, he became a founder member of the African Society, which was dedicated to her memory. A letter that he wrote on his deathbed (Macmillan archives, Reading University: 87/75) asks for his last book to be dedicated to her.

Dennett and Kingsley met when she stayed with him at Cabinda in 1895. Frank (1986: 99) describes how Kingsley took an English ship north to Cabinda 'the small coastal Angolan enclave sandwiched in between the Congo Free State and Congo Francais' but she found that she had missed the boat back to England. Frank says that 'Cabinda was, as it turned out, the most fortunate of places in which to be stranded, largely on account of the presence of a remarkable Englishman named R.E. Dennett, a kind of on-the-spot fetish tutor for Mary. Dennett had been in West Africa in the Congo Free State, Cabinda, and Congo Francais for nearly eighteen years as a trader for Hatton and Cookson, the English firm Mary dealt with on both her journeys, bringing in her ivory and rubber to their stores, or 'factories' as they were called, where she exchanged them for beads, cloth, fishhooks and other trade goods. Unlike many traders, who lived only for the day when they could return to Britain or leave for good, Dennett had become intensely interested in the Africans, especially the Fjort he lived among, and had carefully studied both their languages and their folklore. He had already published one book, *Seven Years Among the Fjort*, and several years after their first meeting, Mary contributed an introduction to

his second book, *Folklore of the Fjort*. Dennett taught her a great deal during the short time she stayed with him, but it was his methodology, the way in which he collected and analysed his information, that most impressed her...Dennett installed Mary in a rather run-down but picturesque cottage that Henry Morton Stanley had stayed in while he waiting for a boat to take him home after his first journey across Africa...'. During her stay, 'evenings were usually taken up with meandering conversations with Dennett on fetish and everything else under the sun. Dennett, as Mary put it, was "a dreamer"...he would propose at some point "Let us have a little talk with God. It was not praying, it was a conversation with the Deity, respectful but familiar, and now and then extremely critical' (ibid: 99-100).

Gwynn's biography of Kingsley notes that in Cabinda 'she met also one of the most intellectually gifted among the English traders, Mr. R.E. Dennett, who had written there his book...and to whose later volume...she at the height of her fame contributed an introduction. From this I quote her description of the class to which Mr. Dennett belonged' (1932: 47). Kingsley speaks highly of 'the trader', saying that 'the position of the trader towards the native is such as to make his information and observations particularly valuable to the ethnologist. The trader is not intent on altering the native culture to a European one; but he is intent on understanding the thing as it stands, so that he may keep peace with the natives himself and induce them to keep peace with each other, for on peace depends the prosperity of West African regions in the main...' (ibid: 48).

From Dorson, we learn of Dennett's place in the Folk-Lore Society. In his chapter on 'The Society Folklorists' Dorson notes that in late nineteenth century folklore studies, 'Africa was represented with a reprint of an 1870 treatise by Bishop Henry Callaway, the pioneer collector of Zulu tales...and R.E. Dennett's "Notes on the Folklore of the Fjort", with an introduction by Mary H. Kingsley' (1968: 294). Dennett and Kingsley were thus of primary importance at the beginnings of British study of African folklore. African oral literature had been published in English since the 1850s, but 'one of the strongest links between the newly opening world of African cultures and the aims of The Folk-Lore Society was forged by an intrepid Victorian lady, Mary Henrietta Kingsley'. Kingsley travelled to West Africa in 1893 'ostensibly to pursue her father's interest in primitive religion and tropical fish' (ibid: 360). Other trips followed, resulting in two books that made her famous - through her *Travels in West Africa* (1897), 'the interest in West Africa was awakened, and she found a new power by means of speech and lecture, which she used in making known the trader and the native, their deeds, their spirit, and their true needs' (ibid.). Dorson quotes from Lucy Toulmin Smith's obituary of Kingsley, published in *Folk-Lore, XI* (1900:349): 'In West African Studies (1899) she continued her firsthand examination of the west coast peoples and particularly her over-riding interest in fetish, the native system of magic and religion'. Her books 'earned her enemies as well as friends, for she spoke out sharply against the colonial and missionary policies of State and Church' (Dorson 1968: 360). Although Kingsley became famous and Dennett has remained obscure, they actually made their debut lecturing appearance together at the Folk Lore Society in 1897. In 1898 'Miss Kingsley performed further service for the Society by seeing through the press Richard E. Dennett's Notes on the Folklore of the

Fjort and strengthening it with an astute Introduction. In this work The Folk-Lore Society extended an arm deep into the French Congo to gather in the rough manuscript of Dennett and process it as one of their numbered publications' (ibid: 362). Kingsley 'knew the Fjorts (Fiotes) and had met Dennett, an English trader. In her commentary on the cases of fetish and the Fjort tales compiled by Dennett, Miss Kingsley reaffirmed her confidence in African institutions'; 'believing that most white commentators on Africa suffered from bias, bigotry, and limited information, she favoured individual white traders like Dennett, a different breed from missionaries, civil servants, and company agents. The traders came from the lower working classes of Manchester, Liverpool and other industrial cities to the Gold Coast and the Congo for frankly commercial reasons, and they made the best impression on the Africans' (ibid: 363).

In 1900, the year after their joint presentation, Kingsley died at the age of thirty-eight. Dennett's involvement with the Folk Lore Society continued. From 1901 to 1912, the missionary Reverend J.H. Weeks 'contributed to Folk-Lore a steady stream of papers on rites of passage, fetish practices, and traditional tales' and 'in particular, Weeks concentrated on the *nganga*, a term which, he wrote, "may be variously translated as medicine-man, wizard, with-finder, doctor in the ordinary sense, exorcist, charm-maker..." (Dorson, quoting from Weeks' 'Notes on Some Customs of the Bangala Tribe, Upper Congo', Folk-Lore, XIX (1908), 92-7) (Dorson 1968: 366). When Weeks presented a paper to the FLS in 1910 on 'The Congo Medicine Man and his Black and White Magic', 'Hartland, Tylor, and the Africa trader-folklorist Dennett were among those present who participated in the discussion' (ibid: 367).