

Between Two Fires – The African Saga of Margarete Trappe

By Fiona Claire Capstick

This book is about Africa, about hunting, about war, about history. It is the true story of an extraordinary woman pioneer.

The author is well qualified. With a degree in modern languages, Fiona Capstick was recruited by the SADE, Military Intelligence Division, attaining the rank of major. She married Peter Capstick, the well-known writer on African hunting. After Peter's death in 1996, Fiona co-authored *Winds of Havoc* with Adelino Seras Pires, the ex-Mozambican PH whom she later married. In 2005, her book *The Diana Files*, the first comprehensive history of women hunters, won the CIC Literary Prize.

Margarete Trappe and her husband Ulrich settled in Germany's colony of Tanganyika in 1907. They carved a farm and a life out of wildest Africa, enduring unimaginable hardship and loss. This book also provides a well researched, concise history of German East Africa, starting with the Swahili people and their language; the coming of the white explorers and missionaries; Western Europe's scramble for Africa, Germany's colonisation of Tanganyika, popular uprisings, the *rinderpest*, and more. The Trappes' early settler life, first in tents, then a wooden house, hunting for food, Margarete's becoming a hunting safari guide, and the births of their children, are all woven into the historical record.

Then WWI gripped Africa. The book includes a very competent résumé of the exploits of General Von Lettow-Vorbeck who waged a guerilla war against the British colonial forces. Not being well-versed on German East Africa's history, I was very interested to read of this campaign from a German perspective – including its effect on local civilians of all races. Fascinating details include Von Lettow's recruitment of 100 Pare tribesmen as soldiers in his army – armed with bows and arrows. Also his being the only German commander ever to actually occupy British territory.

Margarete Trappe, a personal friend of Von Lettow-Vorbeck, and an expert horsewoman who spoke local African languages fluently, involved herself in the war as an intelligence agent, used her veterinary knowledge to heal injured army horses, and hunted to feed German troops. An extremely brave woman, she pulled off daring feats. The local tribes people, who all but worshipped her as their healer, benefactor and teacher, constituted the perfect network for her intelligence operations.

When the British moved on territory that included her farm, Margarete took to the saddle, and with a few African herdsman, drove her 1000 cattle to safe ground. The drive took three days, crossing swollen rivers, at night harassed by lions and hyenas, but she delivered the herd to the Schutztruppe. On taking Arusha, the Brits informed Von Lettow they were after the 'German woman' whose reputation had now gone beyond legend. On Von Lettow's advice, she gave herself up, was interned but later allowed to return to her farm, which by then had been ruined by the invasion of the Masai and their cattle.

Penniless, she had no choice but to become a poacher, selling ivory and rhino horn to raise money to start over. She sold lion skins to British officers as souvenirs, buffalo hides to the Masai for their shields, hippo meat and fat to the local Africans. She did the shooting herself, using her 9.3x62 Mauser. She was as much respected by the British as the Germans – General Kitchener asked her to look after his pointer for him. The Brits got her to doctor their horses and guide their hunts.

The Brits never did catch Von Lettow-Vorbeck. On hearing of the armistice in November 1918, he ordered his men to lay down their arms, then he disbanded his army. Technically, therefore, he never surrendered and his was the only German force to remain undefeated in the entire war.

Britain now governed Tanganyika, and in 1920, all German settlers were ordered to leave. All their property and possessions were confiscated without compensation. Margarete lost her farm, 600 cattle, 50 stud horses and 300 small stock. Forced to return to Germany, she was reunited with Ulrich who'd survived PoW camp after being captured and shipped to India.

In 1922, the Trappes accepted a farming job in South Africa and obtained SA passports which enabled them to re-enter Tanganyika. An old friend who had bought a confiscated farm near their old one, embarrassed by the stigma now attached to ownership of 'stolen' property, let them take it over, repaying him as they could. Their previous African staff offered to work for nothing if they could live on the land – such was the esteem in which they held Margarete.

The Trappe marriage now failed. Margarete remained on the farm to become a professional hunter. Her first client, Count Rantzan, was so impressed he returned every year. He told his aristocratic friends, and Margarete's reputation and client list grew as she guided safaris of 100 porters or more into remote wilderness areas. Soon she was reputed to be more competent than most men in that profession.

The narrative now undergoes a subtle change, revealing more of Margarete's personality as it focusses on her hunting adventures. Fiona Capstick displays not only a sound knowledge of hunting and wildlife, but a passion for Africa – its game, its peoples, its mysterious ways, and the spell that it weaves on those who immerse themselves in it. Twenty years ago I visited Lake Manyara, and was enthralled by the primordial atmosphere of the forest with its massively buttressed trees draped in vines and set amid springs and waterfalls. Fiona's descriptive prose paints a perfect Thomas Baines-like picture of this place. Unusual anecdotes – the shocking ferocity and toughness of a honey badger; an elephant tracking (hunting) a human by ground scent – enhance the tale. Also, Fiona's research into the complexities of tribal customs such as burial procedures, female circumcision, the appalling disfigurement of women's lips (to devalue them in the eyes of slave traders) adds great interest.

World War II brought a repeat of the dreadful cycle. Margarete was interned in a camp for two years and four months – her health failed. Again, her farm went to ruin, and again she had to borrow money to start over, this time doing photographic safaris. She lived through the Mau Mau uprising, dying in 1957, mercifully before *Uhuru* brought the nationalization of her farm by the new Marxist regime.

This sensitively-written book enables one to vicariously experience the phenomenal life of Margarete Trappe, and is a graphic glimpse into Africa's colonial past with all its rights and wrongs. For hunters and lovers of Africana, this work, with its historic photographs, is a must. Its presentation manifests all the quality and class we have come to expect from Rowland Ward publications. Price: R400 (standard edition). Phone 011-646-9888 ; email <sales@rowlandward.com>. Also available from Safari Press (USA), <info@safaripress.com>. **Gregor Woods**

