

## BOOKS

## East African alibis

*WHITE MISCHIEF* by James Fox/Cape £8.95 pp300

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sexual charm. His innumerable women were all rich and married. He liked smashing up families and joking about the parental confusion his liaisons occasioned. "Come to Daddy", he once teasingly accosted a bewildered child in the Norfolk Hotel at Nairobi.

Children weren't encouraged in Happy Valley, since they interfered with the jollity. Erroll and Idina did produce a baby, but a glimpse of it dumped like shopping in the back of the Hispano-Suiza seems the only recorded sighting. When their partnership collapsed in a storm of recrimination and bad debts, Erroll found another married heiress to fleece, but his infidelities, and the rate at which he ran through her cash, drove her to despair. The local doctor came across her body one day, covered with heroin abscesses, in a house reeking of champagne and vomit—an aroma Happy Valley GPs must have become adept at identifying.

For viciousness, some of Erroll's neighbours ran him pretty close, as Mr Fox's researches have established. There was Jack Soames, arms smuggler and (like most of the male cast) old Etonian, described by his ex-wife as "a sadist and voyeur of a very low degree" (not, one imagines, a snap judgment, since she had several high degree ones to compare him with); and there was Lord Carbery, a pro-Nazi who specialised in cruelty to animals. He once dropped his wife's pet hen from an aeroplane to see if it would fly, and

span a cat on a mechanical drill till its head split open. Apparently Carbery's mother spotted his propensity early on. One Christmas Day when he was four she begged him to be especially kind to animals to mark the festive season. Obediently Carbery went off and gave the cat the canaries to eat.

Among these sinister humanoids Broughton, the chief suspect, cuts rather a pathetic figure. An elderly man, he had only recently arrived in Kenya to escape the war, bringing a young wife whom Erroll dazzled and bedded within two months of her marriage. Broughton clearly craved affection, and found it hard to get, possibly because he was, in his friends' estimate, dishonest, charmless, morose, cowardly, cruel and impotent. The mystery of whether he killed Erroll still exerts, Mr Fox says, "a strange power over all who come into contact with it". If so, I must be a rare case of total immunity. What with the repulsiveness of almost everyone involved and the tedium of the complex ballistics evidence, the question of who actually put a medium calibre bullet into the Earl's

small calibre brain had become, I found, deeply unurgent well before the book's end.

That's not to say that Mr Fox's obsession proves arid—far from it. He writes with marvellous flair about the African landscapes he travels across in his quest for clues. You soon realise that he is by far the most gifted person in his book, compellingly evocative in his choice of incidentals. He wanders around, disturbing the ghosts, under the jacaranda trees by Lake Naivasha, where Erroll once surveyed hippos and flamingoes from his palatial home. He sniffs up the faded essences of colonialism among the chintz armchairs of Happy Valley's exclusive Muthaiga Club, and watches the midday light flaring off the leaves as bright as crystal. You follow him keenly in his discovery of a new world, and dread his plunging back into the grubby purlieu of the Erroll file.

His colleague in the early stages of his enquiry was Cyril Connolly who, with his mingled awe and hatred of rank, was drawn to the whiff of aristocratic corruption like a truffle-dog to truffles. Together they

tracked down retired colonial civil servants in dim south-coast tea rooms—Hastings, St Leonards—and pumped them for disclosures over the buttered crumpets. In Mombasa Fox found Carbery's daughter Juanita, who told him as they lunched off parrot fish and quails how Broughton had confessed to her, the day after the murder, that he had shot Erroll.

The most bizarre survivor encountered, though, was an old-Harroviaan ex-army officer whom Broughton had employed in insurance swindles. This man described how, acting on instructions, he broke into the Broughton mansions, cut several pictures from their frames, including two Romney portraits, took them to some waste ground, carved them up, and set light to them with petrol. ("You have no idea how *tough* canvas is. I had to chop and chop the beastly things.") This conversation took place in the Ritz, where their informant expressed outrage at the lack of basin-plugs in the washrooms. A concept of civilisation which can accommodate itself to demolishing artworks, but demands proper comfort in hotels, somehow typifies Happy Valley thinking.

Two years after the murder Broughton killed himself by injection. He was found in a hotel room with 14 puncture marks on his body and an empty morphia bottle floating in the lavatory. Quite as expressive as that stark moral tableau are the photos Fox prints of Erroll and his set in their heyday. The gormless faces and grotesque clothes provide a useful antidote to the glammers of myth. Only the close-up of Erroll's head in profile on the mortuary slab, with blood caked around the bullet hole under his ear, has any innocence or gentleness about it—as if he had recovered in death some of the humanity he squandered in life.

EARLY on January 24th, 1941 Josslyn Hay, Earl of Erroll, was discovered on the floor of his Buick some miles outside Nairobi with a bullet through his head. Sir Jock Delves Broughton, whose wife Erroll had seduced, stood trial for the murder, but was acquitted, and the crime remained unsolved. The police enquiries, though, took the lid off Kenya's colonial community, exposing a degree of dissipation among the aristocratic set which the British press found both deplorable and deliciously newsworthy. Most of the suspects had trouble establishing alibis because they were too drunk on the night of the shooting to remember where they were or whom they had slept with. That wealthy expatriates should be living it up like this, and getting themselves murdered, while Britain braved the blitz, was reckoned particularly bad form back home.

The headquarters of Kenyan debauchery it emerged, was a feudal paradise dubbed "Happy Valley" in the White Highlands, to which Lord Erroll had eloped with Lady Idina Gordon in 1924. It attracted a stream of well-born alcoholics, perverts, gigolos, crooks, and drug-addicts, and their revels soon became legendary. The fun, as James Fox describes it in this rapt investigation of the affair, does not sound exactly enthralling. At Erroll's parties the guests had to line up on arrival to watch Lady Idina having her bath—not, surely, the spectacle you'd most relish just before dinner. Later there was obligatory wife-swapping, organised by Idina, who kept a set of numbered keys and locked the fated couples in their bedrooms. An alternative diversion was burning down the houses of the Africans.

Erroll himself, one time member of the British Union of Fascists, was even by white Kenyan standards, rather a stinker, though endowed, his friends insist, with fabulous