

Eva Stuart Watt (1891–1959): Irish Initiatives in Africa

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Eva Stuart Watt, from an Irish family, grew up in Kenya until age ten, before going to boarding school in England. This article looks at her family background and her connections with Africa over four decades. In her twenties and thirties, Eva was engaged in initiatives in Kenya, including climbing Kilimanjaro, one of the first women to do so. Subsequently she worked for the Sudan United Mission, based in Ireland, which involved travelling in Ireland and Africa. She became a sought-after writer. Among her writings were her outstanding *Africa's Dome of Mystery* (1929), *A flame for God*, *Floods on Dry Ground*, and *Dynamite in Europe*. Each was either published or became widely known in 1940. In 1949, after the Second World War, she wrote *God at the Cross-Roads of Europe*. This had a Foreword by Pastor Niemöller of the Confessing Church, who had opposed the Nazi regime.¹ Two years later, *The Quest of Souls in Qua Iboe* was published. She was also a painter, studying at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art, and had displays of her paintings in the Hibernian Academy.² Her last book, *Ireland Awakening*, was about an initiative she took in forming Young Ireland for Christ.³ Her life and work have not previously been the subject of study. What is presented here is the Africa section of her life and work.

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Family Background and Early Experiences

Eva's mother, Rachel Eva Harris was born in 1862 in the north of Ireland. She—like Eva later—was a writer. An account by Rachel of her experiences in Africa was seen in 1913 by a contributor to the *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society* as offering an outline by which progress in African countries could be assessed.⁴ It is a substantial book.⁵ The Harris family was Presbyterian, but Rachel's experience lacked a personal spiritual life.

When she was about sixteen, however, as she wrestled with spiritual issues, she met Stuart Watt (1861–1914), and through his testimony she came to know Christ as Saviour. Stuart had attended meetings in Belfast held by the American evangelist Dwight L. Moody (1837–1899), and hearing some passages of Scripture, such as John 3:16, Stuart made a response. As he was leaving, Stuart met Moody, who immediately asked if he had “accepted Christ tonight.”⁶ He affirmed that he had done so.

Rachel and Stuart married, and increasingly they discussed the possibility of service overseas. The Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) accepted an application from them to serve, and they were appointed to CMS work in East Africa.⁷ Their destination was German East Africa (Tanganyika). The work they undertook was

of a pioneering nature. In view of debilitating health issues which emerged, however, the medical verdict was that they should move to a healthier climate. In 1888 they left their CMS work, settling in Australia. Eva was born there in 1891.⁸ Recovery of health took place, and the family moved to Ireland, before returning to East Africa. An article by Christine Nicholls, in *Old Africa: Stories from East Africa's Past*, described the arrival of this “eccentric missionary.”⁹ The return to Africa was as independent missionaries, no longer with CMS.¹⁰

On their arrival at Fort Smith, a British outpost near present-day Nairobi, Frank Hall, who was in charge, told Watt that his plan to continue inland was foolish and dangerous. In a letter to Watt in December 1893, Hall declined “to be in any way responsible for the safety of the lives and property of your party once out of rifle range of this fort.”¹¹ Eric Smith (from whom the fort took its name) apparently described Watt in terms that were “anything but scripturally expressed.”¹² Despite these personality tensions, the Watt family spent Christmas 1893 at Fort Smith. John Ainsworth (1864–1946), at another nearby fort, was in favour of missionary activity¹³ and allowed the Watts to go eight miles north into Wakamba country. They established a mission at Ngelani. Most of Eva's life in these years was with Africans, although there were some visitors from Europe, such as Count and Countess Schiebler who came from Italy on a lion-hunting expedition.¹⁴ The Watt children (there were five) went for secondary education to England. But her early African experiences shaped Eva's life.

Pursuing a Calling

Eva and one of her sisters, Martha, were placed in a school for the daughters of missionaries at Walthamstow Hall, Sevenoaks, Kent.¹⁵ It was in this period that Eva came to personal faith in Christ. Change was to take place for the whole family. The farming had been successful and Stuart swept the board for prizes in the early twentieth century in Nairobi's Agricultural Show, gaining firsts for apples, apricots, grapes and mangoes, and second for a native bull.¹⁶ In 1908, however, there was a press report that “owing to failing health and the necessity of providing a home for their family, most of whom are at school, Mr. and Mrs. Watt have been obliged to give up their work in Africa.” The Watts' Ngelani Mission and farm were reportedly sold to the American part of the Africa Inland Mission.¹⁷ Finance from the farming initiatives was to prove crucial.¹⁸

After Eva's Walthamstow Hall years, a time marked by spiritual advance and also creativity, for example in her drawing, Eva worked as a nursery governess in the Church of England rectory in Cullompton, Devon. The Watts as a family were meanwhile based in Branksome Park, Bournemouth, as shown in the 1911 British census. Clara, the sister who would be very close to Eva, was then thirteen. Increasingly, Eva was not content to be in England, and in 1913 she decided her calling was in Africa. This inspired Stuart and Rachel with fresh courage to return. The family now engaged in fresh mission, to the Kikuyu tribe. Over time, local men and women

made commitments to Christ. They evidenced such transformation that Rachel and Eva, who worked especially with women, felt they had met few women, even among well-established European Christians, who were more faithful followers of Jesus.¹⁹

When the weather was favourable, many outreach meetings were held in the open air. Often Eva was the main musician, leading the singing. Several Muslims, among others, joined in, since the Uganda railway had been constructed and many travelled to and from the area in their trading activities. Most travellers spoke the Swahili language of the Coast, with which the Watts were quite familiar. As Eva listened to the stories told by travellers, she was learning how to chronicle events. She also became expert at taking fine photographs. However, in the midst of all this activity, family tragedies struck. There were two heartbreaking bereavements, which Eva wrote about: the death through fever of her father, and her brother, aged twenty-five. To add to these great losses, a fire burned many of their belongings. Eva wrote a moving letter to Clara about the death of their father.

"My Darling Clara," she wrote: "On Friday mother took ill with fever, and the next Monday father was laid low with it too; they gradually got worse and worse, till I was absolutely worn out nursing them, for I could get very few hours' sleep, and no time at all to sit down to meals." There was some help: "During those critical days we had with us a lady missionary, Mrs. Rampley, who was a great help and very good to father." But the end for Stuart was approaching: "We did not realize he was going until midday, Saturday, when Mr. Rampley came, and Mrs. Rampley went back to her station; so we prayed and prayed with Mr. Rampley that God might spare our dear father to us, and then while I was kneeling on the rough floor of our shed beside mother we were led to give him willingly to Jesus should the summons come . . . At seven o'clock that night, 25th April, 1914, father closed his eyes in sleep."²⁰ What had seemed a family calling to Africa was in question.

Africa's Dome of Mystery

Rachel and Eva, with Clara who had now joined them, gradually came to the point where they decided to stay in Africa, and Eva found herself drawn to the populous slopes of Kilimanjaro. In 1924, the three women arrived at Nar Moshi, which had the largest population of the area. After only two months, they seemed to be part of Moshi, knowing Africans, Indian shopkeepers, and government officials. However, the vision was Kilimanjaro, and there was a property available, extending over seven acres, in Marangu. They had enough money from the earlier farming to purchase the land and a bungalow that had been occupied by Radcliffe Holmes (c. 1878–1962), who had been taking photographs of the region.²¹ Eva thought the property resembled a miniature Italian fort. It was in poor condition, but they were able to install furniture and managed to source a piano! For travel, the women had the loan of a car.

Some income was received because people began to come to the Watts for medical help and made small payments. Eva's personality made an impact, and locals gave her the name *Bibi Simba*, the Lioness. The Watts found, as they engaged in Christian witness, that the Wachagga appreciated what had been done by previous German Lutheran missions, who had left as a result of the First World War. Eva's

book, *Africa's Dome of Mystery*, although its focus is Kilimanjaro, is widely accepted as an early and important descriptive history of the Wachagga. A preface was written by Rear Admiral Sir A. H. Stileman, KBE (1860–1938).²² There had been a publication, *Kilimanjaro and its People* (1924) by Sir Charles Dundas (1884–1956), Senior Commissioner of the Tanganyika Territory (now Tanzania).²³ Eva's book on her experience of the mountain and knowledge of its people (of 214 pages and 36 pictures) was the first by a woman.²⁴

Her book has vivid descriptions of her major Kilimanjaro expedition. The usual rations of maize, beef, and cornmeal were supplemented by homemade bread and Chagga butter, tea and coffee, dried bananas, and a little brandy. Her outfit consisted of "warm woollen clothing, fur gloves, alpine footwear, dark glasses, a helmet, and tam-o'-shanter, a spiked walking stick and a couple of cameras." The flannel cover of their piano, with some bamboo poles, served as a tent. A light camp mattress, "over which were sewn two camel-hair rugs and two eider-downs," made a sleeping bag. The six porters were singing: one was a cantor and the others joined in a refrain: "*Kilima! Kilima! The mountain! The mountain!*"²⁵ They had learned a Swahili version of a Belfast chorus, "Down in the dumps I'll never go. That's where the devil keeps me low!"²⁶ Rachel, Eva's mother, wanted to experience the mountain and was carried part way up on an improvised sedan chair. It was, however, a strain on Rachel's heart to be at that altitude. She returned to Marangu, while Eva continued on.

Some climbers—including Professor Charles Hedley (1852–1926), Scientific Assistant at the Australian Museum,²⁷ with whom Eva had got as far as Peter's Hut a year before in 1925—chose to ride mules partway up the mountain, but Eva resolved to go on foot, with a guide named Jonathan and porters. A mule could not be employed for the last and most strenuous part of the climb; and to ride for three successive days on a mule, and, then dismount with stiff limbs and a dizzy head for the final ascent, seemed to Eva a real disadvantage. As they pushed through the wet undergrowth on the first day, they heard wild boar, hornbills, orioles, monkeys, and tree frogs. They spotted a herd of eland just before arriving at Bismarck's Hut, their stop for the night.²⁸ On their second day, the scenery grew wilder. After five hours of hiking, they reached Peter's Hut (11,500 feet); as the sun set, they got a clear view of "Kibo." She stood "wonderful, dignified and pure in her freezing whiteness." Chagga hearts echoed silently, "God Almighty!"²⁹

Having reached the Hut, Eva was excited: "Only one more day—and then, should He permit us, we were to stand within the very gates of His lofty temple." She rose before dawn, struggling to get the porters to move out of the camp. They complained, until Eva "dealt out to each a little brandy and water."³⁰ Later, as they crossed the Saddle, a high-altitude plateau, the porters felt the bitterness of the cold and threw down their loads in despair. Eva roused them by asking for a photograph and saying, "Now, men, smile like heroes of the mountain and we can show your comrades this picture."³¹ At 2:00 p.m. they reached the caves at 15,000 feet and had tea and bread and butter around a campfire. The big cave was known in Swahili as *Chumba cha Mungu*, "God's Room."

At 3:00 a.m. on 12 September 1926, Eva roused the porters, calling to them: "*Haya watu, knoo! Chai tayari! Tufunge safari!*" ("Come along men! Tea is ready! Let us be off on the march!")³² They left

items deemed unnecessary (field glasses, a sunshade, a second camera) and revived themselves by nibbling Cadbury chocolate. Near the top they spotted the leopard carcass, found and made famous earlier that year by Dr. Donald Latham, of the Government Agricultural Department of Tanganyika.³³ At one o'clock the group gathered under a boiling sun on the eastern edge of the crater rim, at 19,000 feet. They had a magnificent view of the hollow from whose centre had issued smoke and molten lava, but which was cold and mute. One of the party suddenly said, "This is indeed the HOUSE OF GOD." Eva was thrilled by these spontaneous words. She had, at last, reached the goal of the ancestors of the Chagga people, one of the first women to do so.³⁴

After the Climb

Writing up *Africa's Dome of Mystery* took time. It was scholarly work.³⁵ For her initiative in exploration, Eva was made a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society (FRGS). In the book she thanked Denys Finch-Hatton for permission to reproduce a remarkable photo of a wild elephant. Books mentioned for their help were Hans Meyer's *Across East African Glaciers*, Sir Harry Johnston's *Kilimanjaro Expedition*, and Professor H. D. Drummond's *Tropical Africa*. She thanked "my friend Nathaniel (Nahamind), a government clerk whose Swahili documents were placed at my disposal."³⁶ Eva had received information on historical events from Johannes Rebmann of the CMS (1820–1876) and from Johann Ludwig Krapf (1810–1881), whose valuable work, she said, received recognition only in Paris, through the silver medal of the *Société de Géographie* of Paris. Eva worked with international networks.

As part of her local mission, she explored what local people thought of Europeans, and she questioned Africans about white men they had known. "Many *wazungu* [white men]," they said, "came to our land but we cannot remember their names." They had guns and ammunition. One man they remembered who had no gun but, they said, "only a book and an umbrella," was Anglican Bishop and martyr, James Hannington (1847–1885).³⁷ Eva traced how German missionaries were forced to leave as a result of the War, and Chagga teachers carried out ministerial and educational duties, while also praying for their old missionaries to return. When the Germans came back, people flocked for baptism. Eva attended a baptism. The (large) church building could not accommodate the crowds. She was also present when the Marangu Teachers' Training School and Seminary, which had functioned before the War, was re-opened.³⁸ Germans, British, Russians, Americans, Poles, Swedes, and Czechoslovakians were present. The students were from different parts of Tanganyika and had teaching in Swahili.

For many months Eva followed with great interest this "powerhouse of Kilimanjaro" as she called the school. The principal asked Eva to help with teaching. Late one evening, Eva was gathering wild botanical specimens on the hillside for the next day's drawing lesson when a Pare (Bantu) student offered to carry them and accompanied Eva home. He explained the Pare word for every plant and their medical use. Eva realised that her companion was a "professor" in his own "art of the wild." She asked him what had made him leave home for study and he explained that as a boy he had been coaxed one Sunday into a mission church. He heard the words "God is in this house," was terrified, and vowed never to go to church

again. But later he was persuaded to return and he sat through the "mysterious" hymns and prayers. A preacher spoke about how God loved the world, from John 3:16, and he received the wonder of that message. He had since come to the school to "get wisdom." His hope was to return to his home area to teach his own people, so that their hearts too might "throb" with the love of God. This inspired Eva.

Eva Stuart Watt was a faithful Christian servant with a wide range of gifts as is evident in this introduction to her African initiatives.

Africa with the Sudan United Mission

The prospects had looked favourable for continued work in Africa by Eva and Clara, but a doctor advised that they should take account of their mother's health and return to Europe. This was not, however, the end of Eva's connection with Africa. On her return to Ireland, Eva was appointed Deputation Secretary for Ireland for the interdenominational Sudan United Mission (SUM). Much of her way of approaching her work can be gleaned from SUM newsletters and from a book, *Thirsting for God*, which she was asked to write about the SUM in Nigeria. The newsletter was *The Lightbearer*, which came out bi-monthly. In 1928, SUM had twenty-one mission stations in Nigeria, two in Northern French Cameroon, one in French Equatorial Africa, and four in Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. The SUM news also covered work in Nigeria under the auspices of other missions—in total 560 missionary staff. These reports, therefore, had an ecumenical perspective.³⁹

It was in the autumn 1931 issue of *The Lightbearer* that a report noted Eva Stuart Watt's appointment to SUM in Ireland. The report explained that she had "seen missionary service in East Africa," was the author of *Africa's Dome of Mystery*, and her writings could be found in the evangelical weekly connected with the Keswick Convention, *The Life of Faith*. She fulfilled what was a new role within SUM, seeking to widen interest in work in Sudan and Nigeria among Christians in Ireland, where SUM had "already so many good friends."⁴⁰ It was clear that SUM wanted to utilise Eva's gifts. *The Lightbearer* relayed a suggestion in 1933 that Eva "should visit the field in Northern Nigeria," so that she would "get first-hand knowledge of the work" and write about it. SUM believed such an experience "would greatly help her in putting the claims and needs of the mission before the Christian public."⁴¹

Accordingly, Eva set sail from Britain on 14 November 1934. There was coverage of each stage of her journey in issues of *The Lightbearer* in 1934–35. The committee members of SUM were fully behind what she was doing. One outcome of her visit, they were convinced, would be to help missionaries to renew their vision. Towards the end of her time, she wrote a long report, much of which was included in the book produced in 1936, *Thirsting for God*.⁴² This would go through several reprintings and be sold internationally. One reader proposed that anyone who had gained benefit from the book could order seven copies to send to friends as gifts. A letter was printed in *The Lightbearer* from Helen Murray, a sister of the late Andrew Murray (1828–1917),

an influential minister, writer, and Keswick Convention speaker from South Africa. Eva's book was one of the most outstanding missionary books Helen Murray knew. She had already given away many copies and had read her own copy three times. It was, she stated, "a revelation."⁴³ The comments highlight Eva's power as a writer. While the scope of her writing was extensive, Africa predominated.

Conclusion

Eva Stuart Watt was closely connected with Africa—through her early years before boarding school in England, her time in East Africa leading up to the 1920s, her noteworthy climbing of Kilimanjaro,

and her work with SUM. However, it seems likely that there were eventually too many demands on her, especially over the decade of the 1930s. Although she enjoyed her writing and was delighted to be able to contribute to stimulating Irish interest in Africa, she did not want organisational efforts to dominate her time and energy. *The Lightbearer* announced, with regret, the resignation of Eva in 1938, and wrote about a growing conviction she had felt for some time that there would be a change: "She has a call now for other forms of service."⁴⁴ This would mean more writing, and new ministry in Dublin, along with Clara. Eva Stuart Watt was a faithful Christian servant with a wide range of gifts as is evident in this introduction to her African initiatives.

Notes

1. Eva Stuart Watt, *God at the Crossroads of Europe* (Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1949).
2. Royal Hibernian Academy of Arts, 15 Ely Place, Dublin. See <https://artnet.com/artists/eva-stuart-watt/>.
3. Eva Stuart Watt, *Ireland Awakening* (Moody, 1952). I am grateful to a close friend, Peter Conlan, whose early life was in Ireland, for encouragement to write about Eva Stuart Watt.
4. Robert M. Brown, *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society* 45/12 (1913) 936.
5. For her story and the family see Rachel Watt, *In the Heart of Savagedom* (Pickering and Inglis, 1913). She wrote that although the terms "savage/native" were used in this book, to her and her husband there was no insulting meaning; they were friends.
6. For this period, see Rachel Watt, *In the Heart*, 16–21.
7. CMS correspondence is held in the Birmingham University archives.
8. She was always known as Eva. She took Stuart into her name from her father.
9. Christine Nicholls, *Old Africa: Stories from East Africa's Past*, 17 April 2014 and 19 May 2014. OldAfricaMagazine.com.
10. Christine Nicholls, "Stuart Watt, Eccentric Missionary at Machakos," *Old Africa: Stories from East Africa's Past* 17 (Apr 2014 and 19 May 2014), <https://OldAfricaMagazine.com>.
11. Nicholls, *Old Africa*, citing Frank Hall's Diary, Rhodes House Library, University of Oxford.
12. Hall's Diary, 14 Jan 1994, held in Rhodes House, Oxford.
13. See Robert L. Tignor, *Colonial Transformation of Kenya: The Kamba, Kikuyu, and Maasai from 1900–1939* (Princeton University Press, 2015).
14. The Countess was the second European lady, after Rachel, to enter the region. One visitor to the Watt family, Bishop A. R. Tucker, wrote about his East African experiences: *Eighteen Years in Uganda and East Africa* (Edward Arnold, 1911). See Watt, *In the Heart*, 292–93.
15. I am grateful to the Walthamstow Hall Lead Librarian and School Archivist, Mrs. Sam Hickman, for her help in an email to me of 9 June 2025.
16. See for example *Kenya Gazette* (1 Jan 1903).
17. *Advertiser of East Africa* (24 Apr 1908).
18. For more on the contribution of Stuart Watt: <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/bc019796-af6c-4a6f-bbbc-21e8b0bba72d/content/u8995e09.htm>.
19. For the wider background, see John Lonsdale, "Kikuyu Christianities," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 29/2 (May 1999) 206–29.
20. Eva Stuart Watt to Clara Watt, 3 May 1914.
21. See his book: Radcliffe Holmes, *Through Wildest Africa* (G. Bles, 1925).
22. Eva Stuart Watt, *Africa's Dome of Mystery* (Marshall, Morgan & Scott, Ltd., 1929). This section of the article draws from the book.
23. Charles Dundas, *Kilimanjaro and Its People: A History of the Wachagga, their Laws, Customs, and Legends, Together with Some Account of the Highest Mountain in Africa* (H. F. & G. Witherby).
24. For photos, see <https://teamwilsun.com/2017/03/tanzania-tuesday-28-eva-stuart-watt.html>.
25. For this section see Eva Stuart Watt, *Africa's Dome of Mystery*, 173–174.
26. Eva Stuart Watt, *Africa's Dome of Mystery*, 177.
27. "Charles Hedley (1862–1926)," *Proceedings of the Linnean Society of New South Wales* 61 (1936).
28. This continued to be a landmark for climbers. See this 1959 account: <https://nigel-roberts.info/kilimanjaro-1959.htm>.
29. For this see Eva Stuart Watt, *Africa's Dome of Mystery*, 182–184.
30. Eva Stuart Watt, *Africa's Dome of Mystery*, 184–185.
31. Eva Stuart Watt, *Africa's Dome of Mystery*, 185.
32. Eva Stuart Watt, *Africa's Dome of Mystery*, 185–186.
33. G. and M. Latham, *Kilimanjaro Tales* (Radcliffe, 1995), about Donald Latham as a young doctor in the 1920s and 1930s.
34. There is uncertainty; more than one woman is called the first to have climbed. See Sheila MacDonald: <https://muchbetteradventures.com/magazine/history-books-first-woman-climb-kilimanjaro-sheila-macdonald/>. For Gertrude Benham: [https://footslopestours.com/blog/first-woman-to-summit-mount-kilimanjaro#:~:text=First%20Woman%20To%20Summit%20Mount%20Kilimanjaro%3A%20Gertrude%20Benham&text=Benham%20also%20drew%20as%20she,250%20British%20pounds%20a%20year](https://footslopestours.com/blog/first-woman-to-summit-mount-kilimanjaro#:~:text=First%20Woman%20To%20Summit%20Mount%20Kilimanjaro%3A%20Gertrude%20Benham&text=Benham%20also%20drew%20as%20she,250%20British%20pounds%20a%20year.). Also German women, starting in 1934. <https://germanologyunlocked.com/ancestor-first-german-woman-climb-mount-kilimanjaro/>.
35. It was positively reviewed in, for example, the *Scottish Geographical Magazine* in 1931.
36. Eva Stuart Watt, *Africa's Dome of Mystery*, Foreword.
37. See later, Joyce Reason's book, *Bishop Jim: The story of James Hannington* (James Clark, 1955).
38. This institution still operates.
39. *The Lightbearer* 26/4 (1930) 18, 67.
40. *The Lightbearer* 27/5 (1931) 99.
41. *The Lightbearer* 29/5 (1933) 99, 120–21.
42. Eva Stuart Watt, *Thirsting for God* (Marshall, Morgan and Scott).
43. *The Lightbearer* 33/2 (1937) 29; 33/4 (1937) 52; 33/5 (1937) 116.
44. *The Lightbearer* 34/1 (1938) 11.



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