



Rose-lipt Maidens

“I had a farm in Africa.” This is the opening line of *Out of Africa*, the memoir by the Danish writer Karen Blixen.

I have seen the film a couple of times and have just finished reading the book. As usual, there are things in one that were not in the other. In the movie, the director, Sydney Pollack, tells a love story set in Kenya in the early twentieth century. It stars Meryl Streep as Baroness Blixen and Robert Redford as the English safari guide Denys Finch Hatton. In a couple of scenes, glasses are raised, and a toast is made “To rose-lipt maidens.” The response is “To lightfoot lads.” What are they talking about?

These are quotes from a poem by the English poet A.E. Housman (1859-1936) that appeared in his book *A Shropshire Lad*, published in 1896:

With rue my heart is laden
For golden friends I had,
For many a rose-lipt maiden
And many a lightfoot lad

By brooks too broad for leaping
The lightfoot lads are laid;
The rose-lipt girls are sleeping
In fields where roses fade

Housman wrote many poems in this general vein, holding a candle to youth and beauty in scenarios muted by the shadow of early death. The spare brevity of his verse somehow amplified a romantic sense of impending tragedy that resonated among young people at the time, on the eve of the First World War. In fact, many starry-eyed officers went to war with a book of Housman’s poems in their uniform jacket pocket, to read in the trenches and dream of England.

Karen Blixen, who wrote her memoir under her pen name Isak Dinesen, did indeed have a farm in Africa. Actually, a

coffee plantation, six thousand feet up in the hills about 15 miles west of Nairobi, in Kenya. She arrived in 1914 and lived there for seventeen years. After she and her husband separated and he left, she stayed on to run the farm with a native cook, houseboys, and her Somali male servant. That arrangement was no doubt considered scandalous at the time; it must have been the topic on everyone’s lips among the expat British community in town. But she was quite unconcerned. Comparing life in Kenya to life back in Denmark, she said: “Here at long last one was in a position not to give a damn for all conventions, here was a new kind of freedom which until then one had only found in dreams!”

Her account of her farm and the Kikuyu people who live and work on it is engrossing, and her descriptions of the surrounding landscape are quite lyrical. She gains the trust of the native people, forging close relationships with some of them and with the Masai across the river, who are known for their reserve. She is a good shot and shoots lions when they threaten the villagers and their herds. Her story about the arrival of Europeans—farmers, soldiers, adventurers, hunters, and so on—provides a sense of how that migration affected the native populations. A sophisticated, turn-of-the-century European culture descended on people whose lifestyle had not changed much since the Stone Age, thousands of years ago. The ensuing interactions had a profound impact on both of them.

The farmhouse is portrayed in book and film as the centre of a small group consisting of Blixen and some of her close friends, mainly two charming young aristocratic Englishmen, free spirits like her, who would arrive unannounced and keep her company for a few days. The evenings were long, languorous affairs: candle-lit dinners served on white linen tablecloths, then lounging on cushions by the fire, reading aloud, telling stories, drinking wine, listening to music. It was a time when people still committed a poet’s words to memory and recited them at the drop of a hat. The “Housman toast” most likely originated in England, became popular in fashionable circles, and then spread to British communities in Kenya and the rest of the world. Some poetry fan probably raised a glass and, quite spontaneously, said: “To rose-lipt maidens!” The response, from similarly well-read companions, was immediate: “To lightfoot lads!” And, just like that, a tradition was born.