

Black Swans

Nineteenth-century women travel the world

It is at these times that you realize the blessings of a good thick skirt.

Mary Kingsley (1862-1900) on travelling Africa

In general, we are quite able to assess living conditions of the past. What already existed in former times, what was typical for a certain period and culture – and therefore, we are quite able to assess what is credible in historical fiction and what seems to be anachronistic.

But sometimes, our perspective on past times resembles the existence of white and black swans. Just because on our lakes, our rivers white swans are such a common view, we cannot conclude that there are only white swans in this world.

The existence of only one single black swan is enough to falsify our assumption of swans always being white.



Lincoln Cathedral, ca. 1900

The same principle applies to historical (or psychological) credibility.

As soon as I dig up only one singular documented case that is strikingly different from the usual pattern, this case is a source credible enough for me as fundamental for my storyline or as an inspiration for a similar story.

Because it really happened, at least that singular time. Which supports the conclusion that there might be more of these cases, if not documented or at any rate not in any record surviving.

For when we see somewhere one black swan, chances are high there might be another one, a third, maybe even a lot of them.



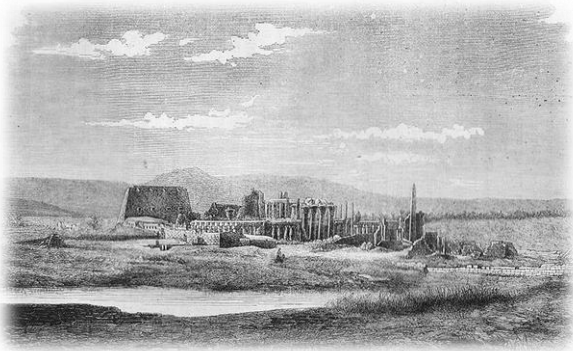
Boats on the Nile, ca. 1895

Grace Norbury is such a black swan.

Grace, whose journey actually starts at her visit with Jeremy's mother Sarah in Lincoln. Her journey afterwards, to Cairo and down the Nile, was definitely not ordinary in 1887, but nevertheless not improbable.

To travel farther south however, to Sudan ...

As far as we know, no woman set out to Sudan in the 1880s in search for her missing lover – for that reason alone that the men missing after the battles of the Mahdist Revolt were few; after the Battle of Abu Klea, there were indeed only three men whose fates still remain unknown today.



Karnak, 1876



Kom Ombo, 1879

Apart from that, there were indeed some women in the nineteenth century who proved courage and an adventurous spirit by packing their bags and leaving for foreign countries, under partly incredible conditions and in dangerous territories.

Just because they were curious and fond of traveling, because they were attracted to foreign lands and wanted to experience adventures.

Pure wanderlust propelled Ida Pfeiffer, born in Vienna as Ida Reyer in 1797, into the world. After the death of her husband (a marriage out of mere reason) and after her two sons had spread their wings, she made use of her inheritance and set out to Palestine and Egypt in 1842. After a shorter trip to Scandinavia, she set herself more far-reaching goals: via Brazil and Tahiti she travelled to China and India, to Mesopotamia and Persia and via Armenia and Georgia back to Europe.

In 1851, her travel bug became once more virulent: via South Africa, she visited what is Indonesia today and North and South America.



Ida Pfeiffer



Mary Kingsley

Australia was her next destination in 1856, but on her journey, she had caught malaria and had to turn around on Madagascar.

Back at home in Vienna, she died of the long-term effects of malaria in October 1858.

A passion for discovery and the urge to explore were the incentive of Mary Kingsley to reach the interior of Africa, just as was the case with May French, born in Pennsylvania in 1847, later known under her married name Sheldon.

Art was the reason Marianne North, born in Hastings, England, in 1830, travelled the world. In order to paint the flora of foreign countries, she went to Canada and the USA and Jamaica and spent one year in Brazil.

She brought home drawings and watercolors from Japan, Borneo, Ceylon and India, from Australia and New Zealand before she died in Gloucestershire in 1890.



Marianne North

Even more restless was Isabella Bird, later Isabella Bishop, born in 1831.

Between 1872 and 1904, she travelled to Australia and Hawaii, lived for some time in Colorado and then visited Japan, China, Vietnam und Malaysia, before she went to India, Tibet, Persia, Kurdistan and Turkey. For a second time, she travelled to China and afterwards to Korea and Morocco.



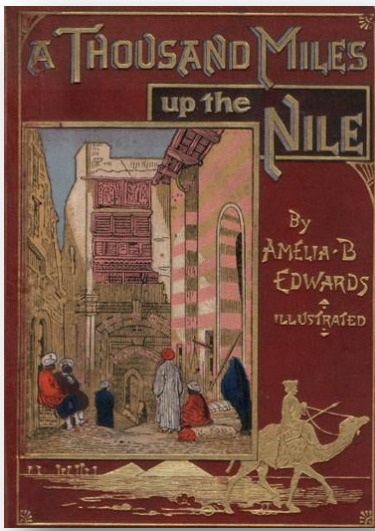
Isabella Bird

In geographical proximity to Grace was Ida von Hahn-Hahn. Born in 1805, she not only divorced her husband (outrageous in those days), but also set out to the Orient, to Constantinople, Smyrna, Damascus and Beirut, down to Cairo and Luxor.

Lucie, Lady Duff-Gordon, born in 1821 (not to be confused with Lucy, Lady Duff-Gordon, born in 1863, who built herself a reputation as fashion designer and survived the sinking of the *Titanic*), suffered from tuberculosis and hoped to recover first in South Africa and eleven years later in Egypt.

A journey along the Nile in 1873/74 had its effects on the life of the English writer Amelia Edwards: from then on, she supported the excavation and conservation of ancient Egyptian structures and artifacts, returning several times to Egypt.





Published travel account of Amelia Edwards, 1891

Like out of an adventure novel appears the life of eccentric and legendary Hester Stanhope, daughter of a prestigious noble family, born in 1776. After travelling Asia Minor, she settled in the Druze mountains of Libanon, where she reigned like a queen over a self-defined "realm" surrounding the antique monastery where she lived until her death in 1839.

How dangerous travels to the north of Africa could be even in times of peace is illustrated by the fate of Alexandrine (Alexine) Tinne, a rich Dutch heiress, born in 1835.

Together with her mother and her aunt she set out to Egypt, among other reasons in

order to find – like so many other travelers of that period – the sources of the Nile. At the same time, she committed herself against the slave trade; everywhere she went, she bought slave from their owners and set them free. Her pathway led her to Sudan, in the then barely charted province of Bahr el-Ghazal, a journey that cost her mother's and aunt's lives: they succumbed to a fever.



Afterwards, Alexine Tinne lived in Cairo, then in Algiers, until she conceived the bold plan to become the first European to cross the Sahara. Underway though her camel drivers started to quarrel; trying to intervene, Alexine was attacked and fatally wounded.

She died in the desert, not quite thirty-five years old.

Ten women travelling the world in the nineteenth century – at a time when women were supposed to be the "Angel in the House", a term coined by British poet and literary critic Coventry Patmore. A time in which the overwhelming majority of women lived accordingly, because there was hardly any choice.



Lady Hester Stanhope

This list of travelling women is far from complete, only a small selection of names, of biographies recorded.

Women accompanying her husbands on their journeys through the world, like for instance Isabel Burton, Florence Baker or Fanny Stevenson, not included.



Alexine Tinne

Another woman has also to be mentioned: Isabel Godin des Odonais.

Born Isabel Gramesón in September 1728 in present-day Ecuador, in those days Spanish territory, she married the naturalist and cartographer Jean Godin des Odonais in December 1741 – at age thirteen (not that unusual in South America in the eighteenth century).

In 1749, Jean Godin des Odonais decided to travel to Europe with his wife and children. To clarify if the route to the nearest port was safe for his family, he at first set out alone.

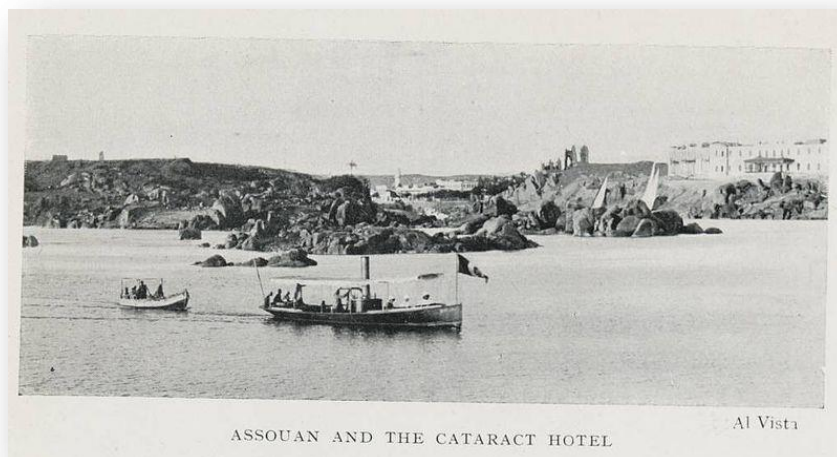
Of no fault of his own, he got entangled in the territorial conflicts between the Spanish, the Portuguese and the French in South America and was trapped in Cayenne for the following twenty years.

In 1769, Isabel embarked on the difficult journey to Cayenne – across the Andes and the Amazon basin. A dangerous route: Isabel was the only survivor after a rest of several days on the banks of the river, wandering around the jungle for nine days, finding the way to Cayenne only with the help of natives – and finally got reunited with Jean.

Especially this record was an inspiration for Grace's story.

When researching and writing this novel, I had Isabel Godin des Odonais in mind, Ida von Hahn-Hahn, Amelia Edwards, Alexine Tinne and some other travelling women.

They were the models Grace and her journey are based on – black swans, all of them.



ASSOUAN AND THE CATARACT HOTEL

Al Vista

Assuan, 1906

Literature:

Barbara Hodgson: *No Place for a Lady: Tales of Adventurous Women Travelers*
Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, 2002.

Julia Keay: *With Passport and Parasol*
BBC Books, London, 1989.

Alexandria Lapierre: *Women Travelers: A Century of Trailblazing Adventures 1850-1950*
Flammarion, 2007.

Robert Whitaker: *The Mapmaker's Wife: A True Tale of Love, Murder, and Survival in the Amazon*
Bantam Books, New York City, 2005.

Image sources: p. 1, p. 2 above: Author's collection/Jörg Brochhausen; p. 2 center and below, p. 3, p. 5:
Wikimedia Commons