



SPECIAL REVIEW

African Diary

Jonathan Spencer Jones

African Diary, by Bill Bryson. London: Doubleday, 2002. Pp 63. Price R110.00. ISBN 0385 605145.

The activities of an aid organisation in East Africa might seem an unlikely topic for writer Bill Bryson, best known for his trenchant and humorous travelogues on the US, Europe and Australia. But when independent humanitarian agency CARE International invited him to visit and write on some of their projects in Kenya he felt, he tells us, that with a knowledge of Africa based largely on the 'Jungle Jim' movies of his childhood with an ageing Johnny Weissmuller, there were some gaps in his knowledge that could usefully be filled in, and so he agreed.

And the resultant *African Diary* is classic Bryson, with his characteristic wry and somewhat self-deprecating observations and commentary on his daily doings and the people and places that he encounters.

The 'adventure' starts at CARE International's London office, where he is briefed on tropical diseases, bandits, dangerous drivers and trains with failing brakes, among other things that he can expect to face. And then in a magazine on the plane to Nairobi he learns that a begging child might smear dung in one's face if not given money — all of which gives him plenty to worry about.

But Bryson's first experience of Nairobi is hardly welcoming, and he admits to being disappointed that the 'sunny little

Jonathan Spencer Jones is involved in publications on energy, mining and metering in Africa and South America. His leisure reading embraces subjects as diverse as travel, biography, history and science and technology, and he is a long-time, but not slavish, fan of Bill Bryson. He is a former SAMJ news editor.

country town' depicted in *Out of Africa* has been replaced by 'Omaha, of all things'. However he later travels to a suburban area more reminiscent of rural Surrey than Africa, where he also encounters his first Maasai: 'What's he doing here?' asks a bemused Bryson.

Visits include the Nairobi shanty town of Kibera — 'whatever is the most awful place you have ever experienced, Kibera is worse' — and the National Museum and Rift Valley

to view some of the early human relics and the site of their discovery, before taking an overnight train to Mombasa and thence to Malindi and a small plane flight to Dadaab to visit CARE's refugee camp there. Then on the flight back to Nairobi his worst nightmare comes true, when a storm is encountered just as the plane is due to land.

The final couple of days are spent visiting CARE projects at Kisumu and the Lambwe Valley, where among others he meets farmer William Gumbo, a recipient of CARE's aid, who previously scratched a living raising maize and millet and a few chickens but now runs a model farm of fruit and vegetables on four acres. And he finds Gumbo an inspiration:

'William Gumbo is a happy man and he has a future. Surely every human being is entitled to at least that much.'

Though the commentary is largely lighthearted the intent is serious — to give some insights into the work of CARE International and how the provision of facilities and services that many of us take for granted, such as the availability of water, can improve the lives of impoverished communities immeasurably.

Moreover, all royalties and profits from the book are being donated to the organisation. Writes Bryson: 'In acquiring this slender volume you didn't actually buy a book. You made a generous donation to a worthy cause and got a free book in return, which isn't quite the same thing. It's much nobler.'

Such a donation is highly recommended!

