

HENDRINA HOLMAN BENTLEY

(1855-1928)

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Hendrina Holman Bentley (nee Kloekers) was a Victorian missionary in The Congo. In her obituary she was described as a 'woman of wide interests, great strength of character and complete devotion, one well fitted for the life of a pioneer'.

EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

Hendrina was born in China in 1885 to Dutch parents who worked as missionaries. Educated in England, she wished to follow in her parents' footsteps and become a missionary but, as a single woman, was prevented from doing so.

ACHIEVEMENTS

A chance meeting with William Holman Bentley, a British Baptist Society missionary, led to the couple falling in love and marrying. A year later, in 1886, they set sail for The Congo, a land described as 'broken by many steep-sided valleys, covered with dense vegetation. Grass grew to 18 feet high. Missionaries had to hire local carriers whom they normally paid in yards of calico cloth'. Diseases faced by the missionaries included malaria, blackwater fever and dysentery, and cannibalism was rife. A quote from The Baptist Quarterly states, 'One can only marvel at the heroism of the many volunteers who came forward for missionary service in the Congo, knowing it was likely to be a one-way ticket to an early grave'.

Hendrina, however, took to the life and became the first Western woman to learn the Kikongo language. She and her husband produced a dictionary, grammar and a translation of the New Testament, although it should be noted that he alone is credited with these works! The couple had two children, and Hendrina went on to found and run a school at Wathen Baptist Missionary station in Tumba, South Congo. In 1904 the couple settled in Bristol where Holman Bentley fell ill (a legacy of fever he contracted while abroad) and died suddenly, after which Hendrina and her daughter moved to College Road, Eastbourne until her death at the age of 83.

RESEARCHER'S VIEW

As a 21st century woman I found myself fascinated by Hendrina's courage and dedication. Reading about what conditions in the Congo were like at the time I found it extremely hard to comprehend that anyone, not least a Victorian woman, should be able to adapt so readily to such a hostile environment and achieve so much for the good of others.