

Travel Account Essay
Behind God's Back by Negley Farson
Published in 1941 by Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York

HIST 808
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Behind God's Back is Negley Farson's account of his overland journey across the African continent in the years before World War II. Although he completed this trip with his wife Eve, the travel account is written solely from his eyes and is influenced by his prior life experiences.

Opening paragraph should be more substantial + should highlight key ideas.

During his seventy-year life (1890-1960), Farson was a foreign correspondent for the *Chicago Daily News* and wrote several books including his autobiography *The Way of a Transgressor*. He also participated in the Russian revolution, fought for the British in World War I, witnessed Gandhi's arrest, and worked as an oil salesman in the United States. Until the trip described in *Behind God's Back*, Farson's experiences in Africa were limited to Egypt where he worked as a pilot.

Before beginning the account of his African journey, Farson expresses his opinions about colonialism, Britain, and Africa in a short prologue. He categorizes British involvement in Africa as an attempt to civilize and improve the 'natives' by bringing progress to the continent. Although the word "native" is considered inappropriate today, ^{within an African context} at the time of his travels it was an accepted and common way to refer to indigenous peoples. Compared to descriptive words used by other authors writing during this time – including "savages," "brutes," and "niggers" – "natives" is fairly benign. The title of the work itself is not so harmless however. It is the natives who are behind God, "waiting for the brave new world" (vii) that is being delivered by Britain. This title ignores precolonial history and suggests that African society begins with the British. Farson is decidedly pro-British and sees this country's work as superior to ^{that of} other European countries. Although he was American by birth, and the grandson of a Union Civil War general, he emigrated to Britain while a young man.

Farson's travel account began in Southwest Africa and ^{when?} from there, he and his wife traveled by boat to Dar es Salaam, the 'Haven of Peace.' This city was the beginning of their

cross-continental journey that took them north to Kenya and then west through Uganda, the Congo, and eventually to the Gold Coast. Farson adamantly states that this book presents the Africa that he saw rather than a glossed-over description that would please his critics. He also suggests that its importance lies in the fact that his account of the continent is the last one given before the outbreak of World War II. In this sense, this book provides a useful glimpse of colonial Africa before many independence movements took shape. Its use is limited, however, by its emphasis on Europeans in Africa rather than the Africans encountered by Europeans. Regardless of any limitations, Farson offers interesting looks at African landscapes, particularly the urban and social landscapes of Nairobi, Kenya and Kampala, Uganda.

Physical Landscapes

Farson devotes two chapters to his experiences in Nairobi and Kampala. He spends time discussing both the physical landscapes – meaning the streets and buildings – and the social landscapes – meaning the people inhabiting these places. The physical landscapes of these two cities are almost total opposites of each other. These differences can largely be attributed to each colony's place in the British Empire. Kenya was utilized as a settler colony because of the mild climate in its highlands, which were both agriculturally productive and free from malaria and other tropical diseases. Uganda, on the other hand, was not home to large numbers of Europeans. Instead, it served as a model for the system of indirect rule, in which Britain primarily used members of the Baganda ethnic group, to rule the colony.

Owing to the large population of Europeans in Kenya, Farson's descriptions of Nairobi seem like they could be referring to any number of cities outside of Africa. He calls it the "Paris of the East African coast" (285), which conjures up images in my mind of expansive boulevards,

obscenely large and ornate buildings, and modernity in the form of banks, shops filled with fashionable clothes, and expensive cars parked in front of the best restaurants.

The main boulevard visited by Farson – Delamere Avenue – seems reminiscent of the Champs Elysees yet in my mind I know that Nairobi looks nothing like Paris. From studying its urban geography in scholarly and literary sources, I have read about its preponderance of slums, raw sewage in the streets, and rampant unemployment. Still Farson is offering a first-hand account of the Nairobi he visited, which was likely far removed from the Nairobi experienced by Kenyans.

time shift
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In his view? Delamere Avenue is wide, divided by grassy expanses, and lined with cafes and shops that seem imported. Large glass windows cover the storefronts, which look like they belong on Fifth Avenue or Piccadilly Street. Food and drink appear to play a large role in the lives of Europeans in Nairobi, seen through the cafes serving alcohol beginning in the early hours of the day and the prominent location of the town's only chic restaurant. Interestingly, this restaurant has a French name. Farson comments that the people you meet while walking along this street are the same that you would meet in the fashionable shopping districts of New York or London. *footnote*

In describing these areas, the existence of a comparable area for Africans is implied. These neighborhoods would house the daily markets selling everything from produce to meat to used clothing to toothpicks. These Kenyans would drink home-brewed alcohol in cafes and frequent restaurants with less than chic names. Yet these places are totally absent from Farson's Nairobi. He makes no mention of any physical structures catering to a non-white population.

Kampala's urban landscape offers a stark contrast to that of Nairobi. As the native capital and commercial center of Uganda, it is described in less grandiose terms. Even though Kampala has a hotel and a European newspaper, Farson describes it as a "Baganda cosmopolis in

which the English are shop or bank employees" (332). The Baganda people were chosen to serve as colonial authorities in part because they had an advanced system of political rule and practiced Christianity before colonialism. They did not surrender their hold on Kampala to the Europeans and still treated the town as theirs. The British were instead relegated to Entebbe, a small city in close proximity to Kampala. The descriptions of Entebbe mimic those of Nairobi with its expansive green spaces. *Farson's?*

Kampala is nothing like Nairobi. Farson describes it as confusing, owing to the fact that the town was built on the tops of seven hills. The main, unnamed street is ^{"described as"} called both cement and strange as opposed to the wide Delamere Avenue with grassy islands. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of his description covers the myriad of businesses along this cement street. It is home to both European and African enterprises. Farson suggests that it houses the obligatory European places: British banks, a post office, and a Scottish druggist. The remainder of the street is occupied by what are termed "wooden native emporiums" (333). No mention is given to what these shops sell. In Kampala, Farson is exposed to Uganda, unlike his time in Nairobi, which resembled a vacation in Paris.

Social Landscapes

The way in which Farson describes the people he encountered in Nairobi and Kampala is particularly interesting. One of the most noticeable omissions to these landscapes is the lack of presence of his wife Eve. He makes no effort to hide the fact that they completed this cross-continental trek together yet her point of view is never expressed. Not only is his wife absent throughout his urban experiences, women in general are often missing. In Nairobi, it is suggested that European women spend their days shopping while their husbands spend their time

in cafes drinking "gin-and-Its" (286). Even though Farson explores this shopping district, he never describes seeing or talking to a single woman.

In Kampala, however, women are extremely visible and Farson describes them in vivid detail. He seems obsessed with their style of clothing, suggesting that they are the best-dressed women in Africa and look like they are going to balls. His descriptions of these women account for the most sensual descriptions in the book: their fabrics rustle, their shoulders are soft and satiny, and their breasts are firm. Although women are present in Uganda, they are described as ^{footnote} things of beauty to be admired rather than as people to interact with.

African men are largely ignored in Farson's descriptions of social landscapes. In Nairobi there is only passing mention of 'boys,' young men that serve as errand-runners and car-watchers while their 'masters' are getting drunk in the cafes. Since colonialism largely served as a source for economic development in Europe, it is likely that men spent most of their time working on farms rather than on the streets of Nairobi. In Uganda, Baganda men probably served as the [?] bosses of European shop employees but they are never mentioned. ^{? evidence}

Behind God's Back offers a glimpse into colonial Africa that focuses on the divisions between Europeans and Africans. It is disappointing that African points of view are excluded but this omission gives insight into the landscapes Farson describes. Europeans in Nairobi lived a life separate from African residents on streets that mimicked their homes. ^{in Europe} Colonists in Kampala were outnumbered by natives but still managed to lead lives with only minimal social interaction with Africans. This social separation is ironic given the fact that Europeans experienced Ugandan physical landscapes on a daily basis and probably worked alongside natives. Farson's account of his journey shows the Africa that he observed and he cannot be faulted for experiencing landscapes created by other Europeans.

how is it used as a historical document?

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Overcoming an understated beginning, the essay offers some good observations on physical and social landscapes. It would have helped to engage directly with Wineburg's idea of thinking historically since the sense of time in this paper is very flat. It is clearly written, but some claims need to be substantiated with precise citations. The biographical material on the author is useful in understanding his perspective. Overall, it is clearly written.