

Reporting Britain's atrocities in Kenya

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It has taken 60 years for the Kenyan victims of torture and ill treatment in detention camps of the 1950s to have their cases heard in London's high court (Report, 18 July) and for the stories told by Gitu wa Kahengeri and Jane Muthoni Mara to be aired this week on Channel 4, supported by a former colonial officer, John Nottingham.

Prof Caroline Elkins, who spoke on that programme, deserves much credit for stubbornly digging in the British archives and insisting in her book that deaths of camp detainees were much higher than admitted. But your paper should take some credit also for publishing stories in 1963 of the atrocities committed during the Mau Mau emergency.

One story I wrote as the paper's Africa correspondent alleged that members of the Kenya Regiment drove a truck full of captured forest fighters out on a remote road and summarily executed them. I was at once invited by the minister of Karen Church, who was also the regiment's chaplain, to meet the colonel and adjutant. After an hour's interrogation in the rectory of my knowledge by the colonel, he finally said: "I am afraid our people were a little less than kind." The leaders of Moral Rearmament threatened to sue the Guardian for another story I wrote about how MRA had hired and paraded prostitutes outside the wire of a detention camp, to remind the detainees of the joys they were foregoing. After checking the truth of the story, they withdrew the suit.

My main source for such stories was the selfsame John Nottingham, now in London with the Kenyans. In the mid-1950s he was district officer in North Tetu, in the thick of the Kikuyu uprising, and when asked to serve in a detention camp he firmly refused. He shared his house in days before independence for a time with Josiah Mwangi Kariuki, who had been held in 14 detention camps and who became the author of *Mau Mau Detainee* (Oxford University Press, Nairobi, 1963); and John was obviously the book's midwife. Josiah became an independent Kanu MP after uhuru – too independent, for his body was found executed in the Ngong Hills. John also authored, with Carl Rosberg, an American professor, *The Myth of Mau Mau* (Praeger, New York, 1966), a refutation of many of the wilder assertions made about the nationalist movement in Kenya.

A modest man, Nottingham can take some satisfaction that his friends' case is at last being more widely heard.

Clyde Sanger
Ottawa, Canada

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