Mary Kingsley—African adventurer

Mary Kingsley was born in London on 13 November 1862.

Her mother, Mary, was a gentle anxious woman, while her father, Dr George Henry Kingsley, was a selfish, brilliant man, passionately devoted to travel. He was absent every year for months at a time.

Mary did not attend school but she read voraciously.* She loved her father's exciting travel letters and stories.

Much later, when her parents became old and ill, Mary nursed them at home until 1892, when they both died. Mary was thirty years old—shy, quiet and unworlly.

Then her life changed dramatically. In 1893 she planned the first of two travels to the most dangerous part of West Africa to study native customs and collect insect specimens for the British Museum.

In Africa Mary became a bold adventurer, although she always dressed primly in her long skirt and blouse.

She learnt to handle canoes. Once a crocodile grabbed at her. Mary hit him on the snout with a paddle and rowed on.

She lived with naked cannibals of the savage Fan tribe for weeks, unfazed. One night a trapped leopard cried so pitifully that Mary hurried out and loosened some of the stakes. In a rush the animal broke free and moved towards her. Mary stood quietly, looked it in the eye and said firmly, "Go home, you fool!" It went. It was no wonder that some watching tribemen thought she had magical powers.

When Mary returned to England in 1895 she quickly made a name for herself. Thousands read her books and flocked to her lectures. Government officials asked for her advice about Africa.

In 1900 she decided to nurse soldiers during the Boer War. Hundreds were dying of enteric fever and conditions were unbearable. Mary worked night and day but she, too, died of enteric fever on June 3 1900. She was 38 years old.

All England mourned her loss. In those eight years since her parents' death she had won fame and power, which she used to influence the lives of millions of Africans.

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Writer's Challenge A life summary

This biography provides many details about Mary Kingsley. Imagine that you are a reporter. You have been asked to summarise Mary’s life in 4 lines. What details would you include? Write your summary below.

1. Mary Kingsley was born in London on 13 November 1862.
2. She was a gentle anxious woman, while her father, Dr George Henry Kingsley, was a selfish, brilliant man.
3. She did not attend school but she read voraciously and loved her father's travel letters.
4. She became a bold adventurer, travelling to West Africa to study native customs and collect insect specimens for the British Museum.

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Write a biography

A local hero

Choose a local person who has done a lot to help your community. Conduct interviews with the person and with friends and neighbours. Take photos. What was he/she like as a child? What did he/she do for the community?

Structure

Title
Name of person
Introduction
Include where and when born

Life details
Write about the life of the person in chronological order
Early life
Later life

Conclusion

More to do

Find examples of famous people (sportspeople, writers, actors) whose children followed in their footsteps, e.g. Australian writer Helen Garner and her daughter Alice, also a writer. What would be the advantages and disadvantages of being the son or daughter of a famous person?