

The Nigerian Writer, Flora Nwapa



Photo: Dotun Okubanjo

The Way We Once Were

Helen Fallon

As a child growing up in rural Nigeria in the 1930's, Flora Nwapa listened to the stories exchanged in her mother's sewing shop. Later her uncle introduced her to the world of books; including those of George Bernard Shaw. At school she studied novels by English and American writers; there were no books by African writers available.

She was one of the few Nigerian women at that time to go to university. She studied at the University of Ibadan and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1957. The following year she added a diploma in education from Edinburgh University to her achievements.

While teaching English and Geography in Nigeria she began to write, drawing on the stories she had heard her mother's customers share in the sewing shop. Her first novel *Efuru* is about a beautiful and prosperous young woman. The man she loves cannot afford the bride price required by her family. Independent and brave, *Efuru* elopes. Sadly her only child dies in infancy and she seems destined to remain childless because a local river goddess has chosen her as companion.

TRAIL-BLAZER

When she completed her manuscript Flora had no idea what to do with it. The few books that were published in Nigeria were mainly schooltexts; there was no publisher to take and assess a novel. She sent her manuscript to a fellow Nigerian, Chinua Achebe. He sent it back to her with a guinea to cover the cost of posting the manuscript to London to the publishers Heinemann, who had recently initiated an African Writers Series (they had published Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as the first novel in the series). The book was accepted and Flora became the first West

African woman to have a novel published. Another Nigerian, Buchi Emecheta (featured in the November 2004 issue of *Africa*) was to later draw support and encouragement from Flora's example.

Flora's parents were Christians and her grandmother became a Christian in old age, but traditional beliefs were still very much part of life. When she was growing up Flora spent some time living with her grandmother, one of seven wives to her grandfather. Both *Efuru* and her second novel *Idu* draw heavily on traditional Igbo mythology and folklore to address the issues women face in traditional societies and present an interesting picture of the daily lives of rural women in precolonial times.

Flora went on to write other novels which address both the traditional aspects of Igbo society and the changes that took place before and after Independence. She was particularly concerned about how those changes affected women.

In *One is Enough*, after six years of marriage, Amaka's husband, Obiora, takes another wife, a woman who has already borne him two sons in secret. "Well, what was I to do? Remain childless because my wife is barren," he enquires. Amaka asks herself, "Was she useless to society if she was not a mother? Was she useless to the world if she were unmarried?" Rather than stay with a co-wife, Amaka makes the decision to go to Lagos to try to make a fresh start.

After Nigeria gained independence many people moved from the country to the city in search of a better way of life. Nwapa writes about the mass movement of people from their secure villages to the comparative insecurity of the city, about corruption in the newly independent country and also the effects of war.



WOMEN AND WAR

She had lived through the Biafran War. In *Wives at War and Other Stories* the major adjustments that women had to make during that war are explored. She saw the war as a changing point for Nigerian society and Nigerian women. In an interview she remarked: "During the war, women saw themselves playing roles that they never thought they would play. They saw themselves going across the enemy lines, trying to trade, trying to feed their husbands. At the end of the war you could not restrict them any more. They started enjoying their economic independence."

After the collapse of Biafra in 1970, she served as a cabinet minister in her devastated home region. It was

not easy to combine a career, a family and writing. She encouraged her sons to help with the housework, much to the disgust of her mother-in-law who reprimanded one of her grandsons for working in the kitchen! The young boy replied that as their cook was a man why should he not also cook and clean.

Flora Nwapa has tried to convey in her writing that whatever happens in a woman's life "marriage is not the end of the world, childlessness is not the end of the world. You must survive one way or another, and there are a hundred and one things to make you happy apart from marriage and children."

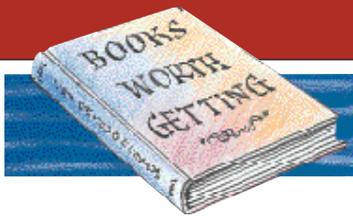
Flora Nwapa died in 1993. ■

Helen Fallon is Deputy Librarian at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth.

She has taught at the University of Sierra Leone.

Efuru and *Idu* are published by Heinemann.

One is Enough and *Wives At War And Other Stories* are published by Africa World Press.



No Earthly Estate: God and Patrick Kavanagh – An Anthology

Tom Stack

Patrick Kavanagh was one of the great poets of the twentieth century but, like many men of genius, hardly appreciated by his contemporaries. However, with the passing years, his poetry and prose have generated a popularity and warmth in the hearts of Irish folk everywhere; possibly because we find a reflection of ourselves in his lines.

While his poetry is by no means religious, there are explicitly religious themes and references to Christian faith in more than half of his two hundred and fifty three known poems. Tom Stack reflects on their spiritual content and theological implications and places them in context – something that Kavanagh would have taken for granted in another age.

Perhaps the success of this book springs from the contrast between the two men. Father Stack, raised on the rich alluvial soil of the Shannon estuary, a distinguished pastor in Dublin, the urbane radio and television presenter. Kavanagh, son of the drumlin soil of Monaghan, wrestling with nature and what

the Lord sent, translated to but never really rooted in the city scene; his life-style precarious, his voice as gravelly as his Iniskeen fields.

With a light but erudite touch Stack pursues the many moods of the poet from playfulness to ridicule. But there is always a noble spirituality; in the blessing on the man spraying potatoes, the knapsack chafing his shoulder; in the imagery of the three whin bushes on the horizon – the three Wise Men; in the insight of a hole in Heaven's gable.

Fr Stack delves deep into the three long poems. In Lough Derg, the characters on the penitential island: some seeking, others exorcising, maybe, personal demons and finally accepting forgiveness, "the day of a poor soul freed / to a marvellous beauty above its head."

In the monumental *Great Hunger*, there is the tragic figure of Patrick Maguire, symbolising and in a sense expurgating Kavanagh's own anger and frustration. And the complex ministry of the rural parish priest is described in *Father Mat*; rough-hewn, perhaps, but always that great intimacy with his people: "he was a part of the place / natural as a round stone in a grass field."

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St Patrick Father Leo Sheridan has for many years been a contributor to Africa and other journals.