

For release, June 2016

# Letters from Nigeria

A young American observes a newly independent country 1961-62

By Gretel Clark

Visit the website: [www.LettersFromNigeriaBook.com](http://www.LettersFromNigeriaBook.com)

Watch the video book trailer on the PERPublisher channel on YouTube!

Impressions and images of a young American couple going to live and work for the government with economist Wolfgang Stolper in West Africa sixty years ago

- 48 letters detailing the experiences of a young couple exploring a newly independent Nigeria
- 200 full color photographs document the Clarks' amazing experience and bring the vibrant Nigerian culture alive with images of life among British civil servants, daily interactions with the Nigerian people, catamaran sailing, local art, wildlife and more

A young American joins her husband on a pre-Peace Corps mission to **newly independent Nigeria**: she to work in the **Ministry of Education**, while he joins a team of economists sent by the **Ford Foundation**. Gretel's letters home give an inside view of the fledgling government. **Full-color slides** bring alive the vibrant cultures of the new nation. Included in Clark's anthropological musings, and economic development theories, is the **birth of her first child** in a West African government hospital.

Praise for *Letters from Nigeria*

**“Letters from Nigeria is a delight.** Nigeria, brash and proud, was brand-new in 1961. So were Gretel and Peter Clark, engaged as wide-eyed expatriates in novel, unpredictable, immersive explorations of their host nation and themselves. These infectiously charming letters home provide an unexpectedly telling, immediate, commentary on Africa's largest country before it lapsed into cynicism, corruption, and civil war. Clark writes of a Lagos, which will never be recaptured.”

— **Robert I. Rotberg, Harvard Kennedy School, author of *Africa Emerges***

**“These letters, and the striking photos that accompany them, provide a sympathetic view of Nigeria before the discovery of huge petroleum deposits** that paved the way for macrocorruption, civil war and now Boko-Haram terrorism.”

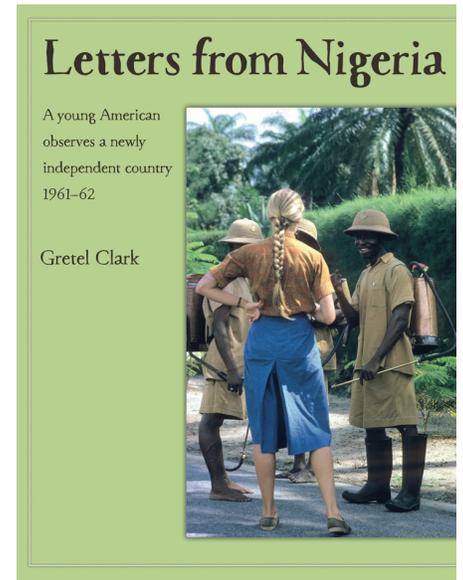
— **Clive Gray, retired Fellow, Harvard Institute for International Development, and editor of *Inside Independent Nigeria, Diaries of Wolfgang Stolper, 1960-62***

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ISBN 13# 978-1-942155-13-3



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## Praise for *Letters from Nigeria* (continued)

“The Introduction and Afterword frame the experience in terms of the motivations, hopes, and longer-term careers of these extraordinary young people. The letters to home, accompanied by a wealth of photographs, offer an immediate response to the experience of living in a very different culture and environment, of the swirling ideological currents in a young country casting off imperialism, but being enmeshed in cold-war rivalries of the international system. The insights into international aid, diplomatic, and non-governmental programs, organizations, rivalries, and effectiveness are insightful and immediate.

The other side is the intensely personal discoveries of a new and unfamiliar culture. The interplay between the various expatriate communities is fascinating, and the clash of cultures between Colonial Civil Servants, international actors, foundations, and the arrival of the Peace Corps is described in immediate detail....

This book should be must reading for those of us who shared in the excitement of trying to facilitate development in the newly-independent countries in those heady days. **It should also be must reading for the next generation of young people who want to be involved and make a difference in the developing world.** The frequently frustrating conflict between aspirations and hopes and reality are laid bare, yet an underlying optimism and belief that progress has been made persists. I couldn't put the book down until the very last paragraph.”

— **John R. Harris, Professor of Economics and former Director of the African Studies Center, Boston University.**

“**This material is truly well-written and unique.** Even though from the echo of many years, there is youthful joy and enthusiasm in every word. It will especially relate to women . . . reading about this 8+ month pregnant young woman racing her catamaran in Lagos Harbor. Her style is engaging, creating a desire to read more with every page.”

— **Annette V. Janes, former director, Hamilton Public Library, & reviewer, *Library Journal***

## About the Author

GRETEL CLARK - has a BA from Vassar College, an MA from University of Michigan, and MA/CAS from Harvard University. She has taught on four continents and raised four children while serving the Massachusetts State Department of Education for fifteen years as Bilingual Specialist for its northeast region. She led her town to create the first weekly curbside composting program east of Michigan, and has been a long time beekeeper in her hometown, Hamilton, Massachusetts.

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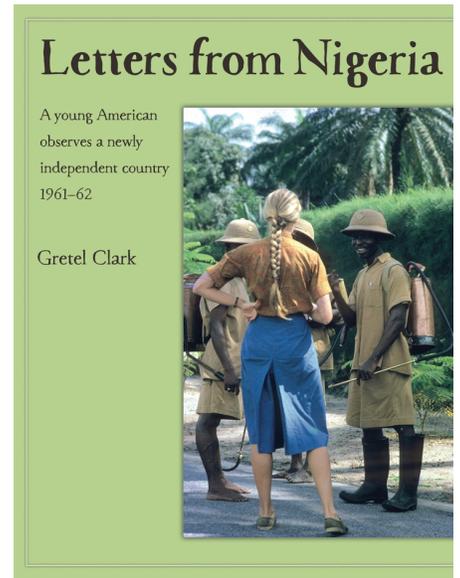
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## Q & A with Gretel Clark, author

**PERP:** It's striking how much your letters home focused on the work you were doing and the country of Nigeria. Even in your early twenties you were looking outward, not in. Were you really that focused? How did you decide which letters to make public?

**GRETEL CLARK:**

The book is a transcription of every single letter (all 48) exactly as they were written, week after week for a year and a half, more than half a century ago. They are, in effect, a slice of ethnography, a picture taken at a specific point in time in the context of one culture's view of another.

You also ask, was I "really that focused?" I grew up in an internationally oriented family, and had majored in Political Science while at Vassar College. My senior year I took the U.S. Foreign Service Exams with the aim of serving overseas in some capacity. My marriage put that off for a year or so. Both my husband and I, in the context of the Cold War, came to the conclusion that we wanted to play a constructive part in the third world. At the time "developing countries" were seen as potential pawns in the U.S. vs. Russia struggle.

**PERP:** It was amazing to read how you met with John F. Kennedy in 1960 and pitched him on the idea of a "peace army." And then with the Peace Corps he did it! What was that meeting like? Where does a 24-year-old get the chutzpah to pitch something so radical to the leader of the free world?

**GRETEL CLARK:**

When we met Kennedy, he was a presidential candidate, not "Leader of the World." And it wasn't just I, but I and my husband and the group of graduate students we were working with who had the opportunity to present our idea for peaceful rather than military service to our country and to the world.

**PERP:** Did emphasizing America's shared colonial struggles against the British score you any points?

**GRETEL CLARK:**

When the 4<sup>th</sup> of July came around we took great pleasure in pointing out to our Nigerian friends that we had *to fight a war* to gain our independence from the British. Theirs was given to them.

**PERP:** Many people try to make a difference, but you and Peter both seemed remarkably prepared to do so. Could you talk about the advice the director of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) gave you prior to going? How can people—either in school or nearing retirement—prepare themselves for work in international peace and development in a way that will actually benefit the people who need assistance?

**GRETEL CLARK:**

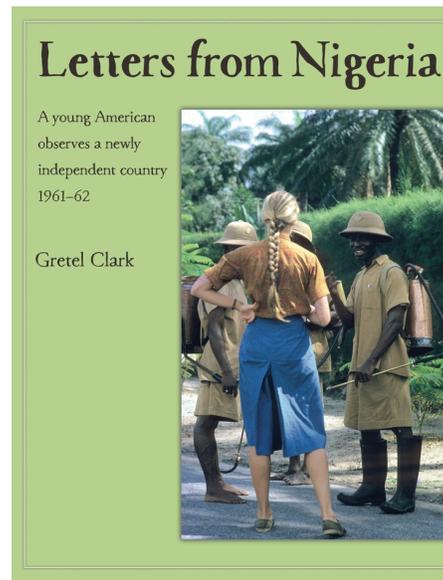
I would say that the advice we were given was good advice—to get graduate degrees in areas that would equip us with skills that would be needed by our host countries. Taking three years off, we did that. Even later in life, as an experienced beekeeper, I went to Kenya to work with subsistence level farmers in the bush. My presence was instrumental and appreciated because of my skills.

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**PERP:** What do you hope Nigerians will come away with from reading your book?

**GRETEL CLARK:**

My hope is that this book will, perhaps, provide some uncelebrated steps that were a part of Nigeria's development. In the aftermath of Nigeria's discovery of oil, I suspect that a balanced, deliberate approach to their national planning became somewhat distorted and thwarted by civil unrest and corruption.

On the other hand, at that time, the rural charm of the countryside, the romance of the traditional villages, the scenes of Muslims, Christians, tribal customs visible side by side, the graceful beauty of both children and adults caught in the context of their everyday lives as we travelled from Lagos (then the Federal capitol) through the Western, Eastern and Northern Regions of the country . . . we hope it will give pleasure to Nigerians of any age, but especially those who may have been alive in those days of great promise and hope.

**PERP:** What led to your decision to give birth in a Nigerian hospital instead of the special hospital for foreigners, let alone coming back to the states? Did your mother think you'd gone crazy?

**GRETEL CLARK:**

I don't think I wrote home about that decision because I was keeping my pregnancy a secret as long as I could. But when my mother wrote saying she wanted to visit, I had to spill the beans. She would have been arriving at the time of the expected birth.

**PERP:** You credit much of your understanding of Nigeria to your housekeeper, Columbus, and his willingness to talk candidly about traditional and tribal cultural life at the time. Could you talk about how he tutored you and Peter on the realities of the post-colonial world, or Nigeria specifically?

**GRETEL CLARK:**

At the time, Nigeria wasn't more than a few months into her independence, and that is much of the focus of my letters . . . the grinding work of visiting economists attempting to do national economic, multisectoral analyses and come up with a National Plan when there were few systematic records from which to draw information.

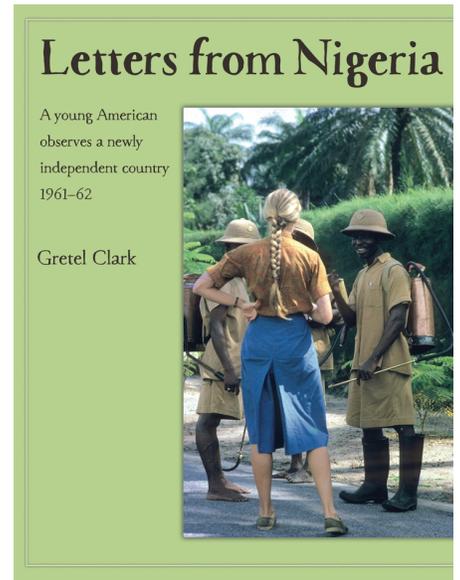
But in the course of everyday life with Columbus, whose English was fluent enough, we could have a constant flow of conversation about everything that came along. Columbus had previously worked for a Dutchman, and before that probably an English family. We were his first American employers, and he was also just a few years older than we. But I think he knew that we adored him. We were, of course, not used to having someone wait on us hand and foot, and probably treated him with much more respect than he had had from previous colonial masters and "Madams". He also came to know that we were fascinated to learn as much as we could of traditional tribal life and customs. As a student, I had read about other cultures in texts by Herskovits, Ward, Dean, Malinowski, etc, and those studies had always fascinated me.

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**PERP:** Let's talk about the elephant in the room—the blonde in Africa. This is right after the British departed, apartheid was still being practiced in South Africa, plus Civil Rights marchers were being attacked on TV in America. How did you handle the obvious barriers of racial and class resentment, particularly when you stood out so dramatically?

**GRETEL CLARK:**

We were often embarrassed by what we experienced as reverse racism. I write about this in the Letters. For example, whenever I went to stand in line for a permit, Nigerians would insist that I go to the head of the line! When travelling through the countryside, children would yell out “Oyinbo” (white person) and come running not only to see me, but touch me, touch my hair. Never did I feel “resentment.” Then, at night, after a day surrounded by black faces, and I mean BLACK faces, I would be startled by my white face in the mirror. I could understand why they were so surprised to see me.

**PERP:** There are some great pictures of the harbor and sailing in your book. Can you talk about the role sailing played in your life and among the foreign community in general in Nigeria?

**GRETEL CLARK:**

Sailing, and especially racing, was our means of recreation, our escape -- albeit an intense one. As Peter wrote in a letter to his family, “The water is our means of finding refuge from the heat and humidity.” It was also, by the way, the venue for our connection to the British community. With races twice a week and the opportunity to escape Lagos for Tarkwa Bay on the ocean side of the harbor, it gave us an ideal outlet.

When not racing, we were fine tuning the boat, adjusting stays, raking the mast forward or aft, sanding and varnishing rudders, tightening down cleats, etc. To be candid, my Dad was a sailor and I had sailed Lightnings and Comets as a child on a Connecticut lake with my brother, Hans. As a teenager, I spent two summers on Martha's Vineyard at Vineyard Sailing Camp. There we sailed Menemshas in the ocean with a full time curriculum of sailboat racing.

**PERP:** You describe British civil servants in the country who'd never interacted with Nigerians socially until Americans hosted parties with both groups. Did the British do anything right?

**GRETEL CLARK:**

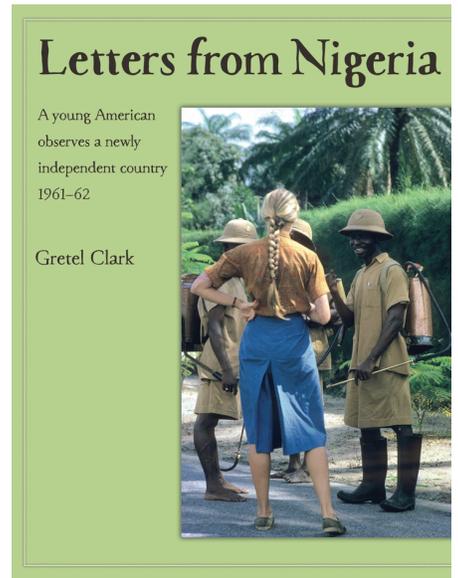
Oh my, yes! We came away from our experience with a healthy respect for what the British had accomplished in that part of Africa. Roads had been built uniting vast regions of the country. People could travel from one tribal area to another without fear of being attacked; a significant change from earlier times. (Remember there were over 300 different languages!) A democratic system with elected representatives to a central government was in place, especially in the south, and to a lesser extent in the North (due to the strong traditional Muslim rule that the British never really penetrated.) English had become something of a lingua franca nationwide and was being successfully spoken by school children wherever there were schools. A legal system was in place with courts that handled both traditional and modern law. There was a national health program functioning, custom services were strong. I could go on and on.

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Midwest Book Review

Reviewer's Bookwatch: June 2016

Margaret's Bookshelf

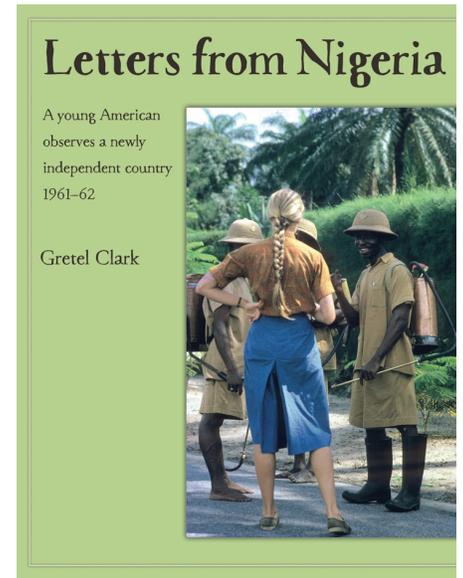
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**Synopsis:** Today Gretel Clark has a BA from Vassar College, an MA from University of Michigan, and CAS from Harvard University. She has taught on four continents, raised four children, and is currently a beekeeper in Hamilton, Massachusetts. Back when she was a young American joining her husband on a pre-Peace Corps mission to newly independent Nigeria, Gretel worked in the Ministry of Education, while her husband joined a team of economists sent by the Ford Foundation. Gretel wrote a series of letters home from 1961 to 1962 that provide a uniquely inside view of the fledgling Nigerian government. It is that correspondence that now comprises "Letters from Nigeria", enhanced with a profusion of full-color photographs that bring alive the vibrant cultures of the then new African nation. "Letters from Nigeria" touches upon life among British civil servants, visiting foreign diplomats and speculators, and at the heart of it all, her daily interactions with the Nigerian people. Included in "Letters from Nigeria" are Gretel's anthropological musings, economic development theories, and the birth of her first child in a West African government hospital.

**Critique:** Informative, extraordinary, insightful, compelling, "Letters from Nigeria" is impressively well written and illustrated from beginning to end, making it very highly recommended, especially for community and academic library American Biography collections in general, and Nigerian History supplemental studies reading lists in particular.

Margaret Lane, Reviewer

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