Some months back, in the upper-crusty British magazine, Harper's and Queen, I came across a feature celebrating those places around the globe where expats continue to uphold the standards of "gracious colonial living." Hong Kong and Singapore were named, as was Dubai, but Kenya held pride of place. There, we are told, it is still possible to live in dashing style if certain details are attended to:

**Servants:** Kikuyu cooks and houseboys are the cleverest, but Luos ensure a more peaceful (if less well-run) establishment. The dream is still of the handsome Somalis who always ran the grandest houses.

**Key lingo:** *Lete*-bring (as in "Lete gin and tonic"); *Mbwa kali*-fierce dog.

**Essential reading:** James Fox, Baroness Blixen, Elspeth Huxley.

**Essential viewing:** The Flame Trees of Thika.

By now the list should be amended to include, as obligatory viewing, Sydney Pollack's *Out of Africa* which this April won the Academy Award for best picture.

The trumpeting of imperial triumph, though never exactly stilled, did for a while grow muffled. Between 1947 and 1980, forty-nine British territories became independent. And by the eighties, the once-sprawling British empire had been whittled down—if one excepts the five million or so inhabitants of Hong Kong—to one hundred fifty thousand colonial subjects dotted about on some two hundred islands. Gibraltar, St. Helena, Bermuda, Cayman Islands, Turks & Caicos Islands, Ascension Island, the Falklands...the merest confetti of empire. During the era of decolonization, history which had hitherto been
told from the standpoint of the victors began to be retold from that of the (not altogether) vanquished. New international voices were heard. Aimé Césaire, C.L.R. James, Basil Davidson, Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, Walter Rodney, Eric Williams and others started to put together remedial histories chronicling the plunder.

But now the redressing of history is itself being redressed, and imperial chic threatens to leave no room for imperial shame. More concertedly than ever, the British are recalling that they were formerly great and seeing to it, on TV, in film and in print, that the dulled image of empire is burnished once more. India was conscripted first for the restored empire of the imagination: in A Passage to India, Gandhi, The Jewel in the Crown, The Far Pavilions, Mountbatten, Viceroy of India. But the brassy tones of Harper's and Queen foretold what Out of Africa was to make obvious: Kenya (alias“Africa”) now too has been pressed into the ranks of a rehabilitated empire.

If America has today stepped into Britain's imperial shoes and is walking abroad more confidently than ever, it still lacks a strong national image of empire and is borrowing from a presently enfeebled Britain the glorious style that once went with possession of the earth. In Out of Africa that identification is less vicarious and moves closer to something more openly American. Pollack's Out of Africa, while feeding off a tradition of Anglophilia, is less wholeheartedly British than any of the Indian endeavors.

Out of Africa is at first glance an improbable commercial success. A somewhat obscure Danish writer who ran a failed coffee farm in East Africa in the 1920s seems a scarcely powerful enough subject for a film that would gross $27 million in its first three weeks. And one that would bring in its train a retinue of titles: a combined edition of Out of Africa and Shadows on the Grass, Blixen's Letters from Africa, Judith Thurman's biography, a Sierra Club pictorial edition—Isak Dinesen's Africa: Images of the Wild Continent from the Writer's Life and Words—and Errol Trzebinski's Silence Will Speak, the story of Denys Finch Hatton's life, centered on his romance with Blixen. But the plangent "I had a farm in Africa" that opens
Pollack's film resonates with a fine aristocracy of the imagination that is the film's style and its allure. Pollack's empire, like Blixen's, is one of taste, graced with a visual and a spiritual largesse.

In East Africa, Finch Hatton and Bror Blixen were two of the greatest white hunters of their era. While this passion for hunting was admired and shared by Karen Blixen, it was imperative to her that husband and lover were not merely adventurers but aristocrats to the core. She was obsessed with "brilliant breeding" and the style that went with it, and her unalloyedly aristocratic values provide the key both to her choice in male companionship and to her attitudes to the Africans and the continent itself. In the film, as in the memoirs, the Africa "she knew" takes the fanciful shape of an ally in her battle against the corrupting of the patrician spirit.

Resigned to her unrequited passion for Bror's brother, Blixen embarked in 1914 for "parts unknown." She was aware that in marrying Bror on arrival in Kenya she would be trading her money for a title and a man she could not love. But she so reviled the bourgeoisie that the exchange seemed a fair one. Likewise, at her divorce from Bror, it was the possibility of having to forgo the Baroness in her name that caused Blixen the greatest dismay.

On her view, the frank materialism of Europe's merchant class had cramped the more high-minded ways of the upper-class elite. This bourgeois encroachment was far less advanced in Kenya, but she recoiled from every sign of it. If sectors of settler society ostracized her (particularly during the First World War) because they doubted her loyalty to the British Crown, Blixen, for her part, kept aloof from the "small" settlers, the shopkeepers and the clerks of empire. Property—as an expression of spirit—was to take precedence over profit. She scraped together a sense of belonging by holding to an aristocratic idea of Africa, with her farm, elevated in altitude and spirit, as the distilled essence of that idea. Her coffee estate was a financial calamity partly through ill luck, but also, it must be said, because she was at heart a good aristocrat and a poor entrepreneur.

Blixen was won over to Kenya because it had the power to palliate her ache for a vanishing aristocratic age. For
her, Africa was an escape from modern Europe and, paradoxically, for that very reason, she was blind to it as anything more than a stage of European history. It was a vast game reserve where the values of the ancien régime could live on. The aristocratic inhabitants of this world were not only the imported ears and baronesses but the Africans themselves: "Here were Lord Delamere and Hassan, Berkeley Cole and Jama, Denys Finch Hatton and Bilea, and I myself and Farah. We were the people who, wherever we went, were followed, at a distance of five feet, by those noble, vigilant and mysterious shadows."

Compared to most settlers, Blixen treated the Africans on her 4,500-acre plantation with largesse. She protested the heavy taxes exacted from them and the pass system which controlled their movements; she allowed them to cultivate crops in corners of the plantation; and, when the farm was sold, secured a piece of reserve land large enough to ensure that "her" people, some two hundred families, were not hopelessly dispersed. But the problem with Blixen's relatively benevolent attentions, and with her regard for Africans in general, is that she perceived her relation to them as a species of philanthropic feudalism, with her at the center exercising noblesse oblige and anticipating a deferential loyalty in return. It is this spirit that informs some of her most discomfiting writing. Of Kamante Gatura (the youth with the infected leg in the film), she observes:

He stuck to the maizecobs of his fathers. Here even his intelligence sometimes failed him, and he came and offered me a Kikuyu delicacy, a roasted sweet potato or

* An illuminating comparison can be made with Evelyn Waugh, who visited Kenya in 1931—the very year Blixen's sojourn in the colony was to end. Waugh anticipates Out of Africa by characterizing the settlers "as fellow-victims of the megapolitan culture of Northern Europe" and shows abundant sympathy for the attempt "to recreate Barsetshire on the equator," to revive a withering English squirearchy by transplanting it to African soil. Blixen's writing came to echo this elegiac note, but she was more selectively sympathetic toward the settlers, scorned Waugh's style of jingoism and, with it, his almost exhibitionist racism. His prejudices were too fierce and direct for him to take Blixen's improbable course of enlisting native Kenyans in the battle to keep mercantile values at bay.

[219]
a lump of sheep’s fat—as even a civilized dog, that has lived for a long time with people, will place a bone on the floor before you, as a present.

Indeed, what is most startling about the entire *Out of Africa* enterprise—books and film—is the general readiness to take Blixen’s Kenya at face value. Reviewers and commentators have been single-mindedly inquisitive about imagining how a reverse angle on Kenya, a few shots from an indigenous perspective, might look. Judith Thurman, for instance, in her eloquent and deeply researched biography, falls under the spell of Blixen’s feudal habits of mind when she drowsily ventriloquizes her subject’s opinion that

[Kenya’s] inhabitants take their places in the hierarchy according to the degree of pride they manifest, with the Africans—mystically forbearing and amused—at the top. The European aristocrats—the great atavisms like Denys, Berkeley, and the narrator—defer to them, but just slightly and in the same spirit a gentleman feels himself to be morally inferior to a lady.

The *New York Times* was also bewitched. The Travel Section offered a special four-page feature on Kenya to coincide with the film’s release. There was a long piece on game viewing; a guide to restaurants; an essay by Trzebinski, herself a Kenyan settler, on relics from the Blixen era (the old farmhouse, Finch Hatton’s grave, a millstone Blixen once fashioned into a table). And a concluding article, “Kenya through the eyes of writers it inspired,” announced that “when viewed through some of its great memoirists, Kenya reveals its intimate self.” “Inspired,” presumably, was the cue that only white colonial authors were to be expected. Blixen was cited, along with the aviatrix Beryl Markham, and Elspeth Huxley, doyenne of Kenyan racists and author of thirty-five books of bottomless settler jingoism. (Huxley’s novel, *The Flame Trees of Thika*, was one of imperial nostalgia’s quieter successes in the BBC/PBS version of two or three years back.) None of Kenya’s black authors was to get a word in. The framing of this article to exclude them suggests an impatience with rival perspectives, a sentiment once expressed most

[220]
candidly by an American reviewer of Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*:

Perhaps no Nigerian at the present state of his culture and ours can tell us what we need to know about that country, in a way that is available to our understanding. . . . in the way W. H. Hudson made South America real to us, or T. E. Lawrence brought Arabia to life.

All in all, the *Times* feature succeeded in capturing "the spirit of place," in a manner deferential to the mood of the film, by a sustained bit of abracadabra that whisked all native Kenyans from sight.

But the fata morgana onto which the film's director and the critics hold most steadfastly is that image of Kenya as paradise or Arcady evoked by some of Blixen's most transporting prose. Robert Langbaum is surely correct in describing *Out of Africa* as "perhaps the best prose pastoral of our time." But as the British literary scholar Raymond Williams has underscored, some of the best pastoral commits the most extravagant vanishing acts, the genteel myth of a spontaneously providential Nature hiding from view many hired hands and landless peasants. Certainly the pastoral resonance in Blixen's writings is no stronger than her faith in Africa as a pure and bountiful beginning, a faith expressed most rapturously in the description of her maiden flight with Finch Hatton:

The language is short of words for the experiences of flying, and will have to invent new words with time. When you have flown over the Rift Valley and the volcanoes of Suswa and Longonot, you have travelled far and have been to the lands on the other side of the moon. You may at other times fly low enough to see the animals on the plains and to feel towards them as God did when he had just created them, and before he commissioned Adam to give them names.

The image of such a free and original space is hard to resist. Pollack, steeped in Blixen's prose, recalls moments when, sitting in front of a tent on a Kenyan night in the '80s, "you realized this is where it all started. If there was a Garden of Eden, this was it." And speaking of the im-
mense challenge of hazarding the film, he reflects on how “you have to re-create the paradise to feel the loss.”

Others, however, have stayed with the metaphor in order to topple it. Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Kenya’s foremost writer, and one of Africa’s two or three most influential writers, ranks Blixen among the “parasites in paradise.” Ngugi has long quarreled with her vision of Kenya and the undue attention it has received. One can only wonder what he thinks of the film, but in essay after essay in Homecoming, Writers in Politics and Detained, he has inveighed against her as an example of someone who “by setting foot on Kenyan soil at Mombasa was instantly transformed into a blue-blooded aristocrat.”

Blixen is certainly, at times, so intoxicated by her quest for a pure Africa, for the unadulterated soul of the continent, that she seems oblivious to her soaring romanticism’s capacity to drag racism in its wake. Ngugi has an eye for such passages, the sort which Thurman’s biography judiciously skirts:

When you have caught the rhythm of Africa, you find that it is the same in all her music. What I learnt from the game of the country was useful to me in my dealings with Africans.

And again,

The Natives were Africa in flesh and blood. The tall extinct volcano of Longonot that rises above the Rift Valley, the broad Mimosa trees along rivers, the Elephant and the Giraffe, were not more truly Africa than the Natives were . . . All were different expressions of one idea, variations upon the same theme.

Such passages are doubly disquieting when coupled to recent photographs of Maasais grouped under a sultry Kenyan sky, as in the Sierra Club’s Isak Dinesen’s Africa.

In the hullabaloo surrounding the film, the only glimpse of a Kenyan perspective came in one very brief, very gruff report in People magazine that the Nairobi newspapers had “tried to stir up trouble” by questioning the
value of glamorizing Blixen's Kenya. To gauge why this lionizing (as it were) of the settler days should so rankle with black Kenyans, one has to bring into focus a little of the history that passes hazily beneath both Blixen's prose and Pollack's cameras.

At issue is whether the paradise of the 1910s and '20s was the fruit of divine providence or the product of colonial social engineering. As in most pioneer societies, any number of scribblers-cum-adventurers testified that "this place was empty of men, awaiting the coming of white settlers." One reads of "a howling wilderness that no one wanted," of European blood, toil, sweat and tears, and finally, of a "flourishing concern."

But the settlers did not stint themselves in insuring that paradise was enlarged. A few years before Blixen disembarked at Mombasa in 1914, the governor of the territory had written home:

Your lordship has opened this Protectorate to white immigration and colonization, and I think it well that in confidential correspondence at least, we should face the undoubted issue—viz., that white mates black in a very few moves.... There can be no doubt that the Masai and many other tribes must go under. It is a prospect which I view with equanimity and a clear conscience.

Those "very few moves" were as follows. To break the back of the flourishing peasant agriculture, African lands were seized and the inhabitants crammed into reserves. By 1915, a year after Blixen's arrival, over four and a half million acres of African land had been turned over to about one thousand white farmers in this manner. The purpose was not only to extend the borders of paradise by clearing the land, but to drive Africans into wage labor. By removing the peasants' land with one hand and imposing leaden taxes (Europeans were tax-exempt) and a "pass" system of surveillance with the other, the authorities succeeded in herding the Africans toward the white plantations. And neither Africans nor Asians were permitted to hold land in the White Highlands, the territory's horn of plenty, while, in a gesture of apocalyptic hubris, whites were granted 999-year leases from the Crown.
Africans also were barred from cultivating the most lucrative crops such as coffee and cotton.

Lord Delamere, the silver-haired leader of the settlers in the film, was a great champion of these methods and, at the least sign that Africans were becoming self-supporting again, he would urge that their reserve lands be cut back further. Delamere himself came to hoard a million acres. "Possess" would be quite the wrong word, for he was at least as intent on withholding this land from the Africans as he was on keeping it to himself, cultivating only a fraction of it. So much for the colonists' reasoning that, even if the land had not been empty in the strictest sense, it could be justifiably appropriated because the peasants had not realized its full potential.

In this way the Kenyan settlers were blessed with an ample and inexpensive body of labor. By the twenties, they boasted, it was probably the cheapest in the world. And so too the African population, laid waste by famine and disease in congested reserves, dwindled from four million in 1902 to two and a half million in 1921. Ever eager to give their actions a humanitarian veneer, the settlers continued to argue that their arrival had rescued the Africans from the ravages of intertribal warfare. Yet the 47,000 black Kenyans who died after being press-ganged into the Europeans' First "World" War far outnumbered those killed in generations of intertribal feuding.

Blixen was both a beneficiary of these colonial policies and an opponent of some of them. Though not as heartless as most settlers, she did nonetheless gain from the squatter system which, having stripped the Africans of their land, permitted them to leave their allotted reserves and live on the white estates only in exchange for a given quota of labor days per year.

By brushing Kenyan history against the colonial grain, so to speak, one may hope to disturb the film's roseate image of a world pristine in its rugged luxury, in which duress, when it intrudes, is inevitably that of the settlers. And one where, apart from Kamante's gammy leg and the servants' sorrow at their mistress's departure, Blixen is granted a monopoly over pain. A film that so tidily
sharpens a tragedy of lost settler love with a tragedy of lost settler land cannot afford to glimpse, far less face, landless sufferings which would dwarf and trivialize its central action.

If the colonials could spirit away the land issue and busy themselves with their own problems, it was otherwise with the Kenyans. As one of them remarked:

When someone steals your ox, it is killed and roasted and eaten. One can forget. When someone steals your land, especially if nearby, one can never forget. It is always there, its trees which were dear friends, its little streams. It is a bitter presence.

Doubly so if you are forced to work that land for others. This bitterness came to a head with the Mau Mau revolt from 1952 to 1958, fully twenty years after Blixen had returned to Denmark. It is, more than anything, the events and literature of Mau Mau which explain why Pollack's celebration of the "glory-days" of settlerdom rankles so badly with Kenyans today.

Mau Mau, though it helped clear the way for independence, was not a nationalist struggle. Quite simply, peasants sought to reclaim the arable land monopolized by white farmers. But rumors of blacks banding together and taking traditional oaths in the forest, along with sporadic attacks on the estates, were sufficient to allow whatever racial hysteria the settlers had held down to burst to the surface. Rumors about the most barbarous voodoo rites sent shudders all the way to London, where the Colonial Secretary, in the safety of his office, wrote: "I would suddenly see a shadow fall across the page—the horned shadow of the Devil."

The settlers intuited that paradise was closing down. And their rage was unbridled. Huxley, Robert Ruark, C. T. Stoneham, C. Wilson, C. Lander, Stuart Cloete, M. M. Kaye, Neil Sheraton... a throng of settler writers and settler sympathizers poured out a mixed brew of fiction, "history," "anthropology," and "ethnopsychology," that for its venom is almost without equal in the annals of twentieth-century colonialism.
In the African make-up there is really no such thing as love, kindness, or gratitude, as we know them, because they have lived all their lives, and their ancestors' lives, in an atmosphere of terror and violence. There is no proper "love" between man and woman, because the woman is bought for goats and is used as a beast of burden. There is no gratitude, because it would never occur to them to give anything to anybody else, and so they have no way of appreciating kindness or gifts from others. They lie habitually, because to lie is the correct procedure, or else some enemy might find a way to do them damage if they tell the truth. They have no sensitivity about inflicting pain, or receiving pain, because their whole religion is based on blood and torture of animals and each other.

These insights from Peter McKenzie, the hero of Ruark's *Something of Value*, are a far from eccentric expression of white hysteria.

When the dust had settled on the six-year revolt, one million peasants had been confined to "fortified villages," 90,000 sent to detention camps, and there were somewhere over 13,000 dead. Of those killed, 11,500 were alleged Mau Mau members, along with 1,800 Africans accused by Mau Maus of collaborating with the settlers. Yet only sixty-three white soldiers and thirty-two white civilians died.

The outcry in the Kenyan press at Pollack's glossy revival of the proprietary-settler look was partly touched off by the memory of those Mau Mau battles to reclaim the land. But to some Western intellectuals such protests smack, in Conor Cruise O'Brien's phrase, of "historical infantilism." In an Observer column entitled "Why the Wailing Ought to Stop," O'Brien vilified those he considers belatedly afflicted by "the collective self-pity of former subject peoples." This reprimand was occasioned by the Anglo-Indian novelist Salman Rushdie's masterly dismembering of the whole phenomenon of Raj nostalgia. But O'Brien's point was a more general one. Third Worlders should recognize that colonialism was back then, a different generation's affair. Finally, let bygones be bygones.

To subscribe to O'Brien's quietism would be to shrug off colonial nostalgia as an innocent, if sentimental, recol-
lection of things past. But paradoxically, the real focus of nostalgia is never so much then as it is now. The current interest in a redecorated imperial past fits snugly with a time when America (selectively defined) feels good about itself and flaunts its right to step abroad from a position of unaccommodating strength. And, on the opposite shore, it befits the era of a Prime Minister Thatcher bent on browbeating her country into believing that the “sturdier” values of Victorian (and high imperial) times can lead Britain back to greatness.

Yet there is a difference between the two. The British empire is in a state of rigor mortis, with the “Falklands spirit” the last twitchings of the corpse. America, on the other hand, after a post-Vietnam lull, has a revived faith in its military might and in its prerogative to intervene around the globe—in Grenada, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Angola, Lebanon. But this “imperialism with colonies,” to borrow Harry Magdoff’s phrase, is also an imperialism without a style of its own. No matter how much Reagan may enjoy bandying phrases like “overt covert aid,” the day is past when an empire can brazenly announce itself as such. The closest it can come is to don the clothes of a bygone power.

The popularity of an antique British look to match a new American mood is nowhere more flagrant than in the Banana Republic stores. There is in all this an elegant variant of the new Cold War jingoism, of Rambo, the blue collar hero for whom patriotism means acting before you can doubt. The refined adventurism of Out of Africa and the Banana Republic offers an image that is more delicately imperial. In a rhapsodic review of the film for Time commending Pollack for “the unspeakably gallant act” of matching Blixen’s romantic idealism with a romantic idealism of his own, Richard Schickel unwittingly says it all:

Out of Africa is, at last, the free-spirited, fullhearted gesture that everyone has been waiting for the movies to make all decade long. It reclaims the emotional territory that is rightfully theirs.