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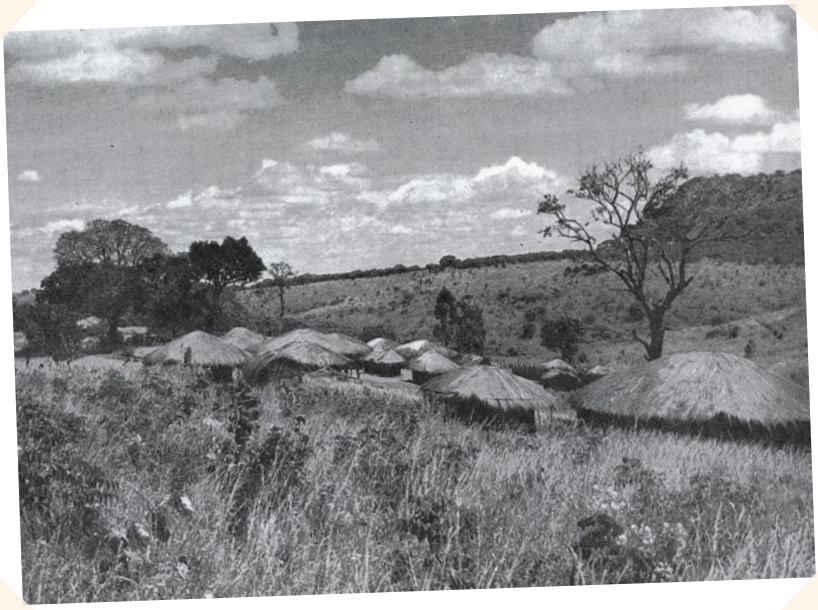
World Environmental History

AN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY OF SOUTHERN MALAWI

Land and People of the Shire Highlands



Brian Morris

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An Environmental History of Southern Malawi

Land and People of the Shire Highlands

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Cover image © Typical village in Southern Malawi: set in a clearing within Brachystegia woodland circa 1950. Source: D. Arnall, Nyasaland Information Department.

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To those pioneers of environmental anthropology: Roy Ellen and Tim Ingold.

Preface

I first came to Malawi—then Nyasaland—in February 1958, sitting with my rucksack in the back of a pick-up truck as it passed through Fort Manning (Mchinji) customs post. I had spent the previous four months hitch-hiking around southern and central Africa, mostly sleeping rough. During that time I encountered no other hitch-hiker and very few tarred roads, and the only place I met tourists was at the Victoria Falls. I was however, so attracted to Malawi and its people that I decided to give up my nomadic existence. I was fortunate to find a job working as a tea planter for Blantyre and East Africa Ltd, an old Scottish company founded by Robert Hynde and Ross Stark around the turn of the century. This company had earlier been an integral part—as discussed in the book—of the history of colonial Malawi, for the company had pioneered the growing of fire-cured tobacco through tenant farming as well as the production of tea in both the Thyolo and Mulanje district. I was to spend over seven years (1958–1965) as a tea planter working in the Thyolo (Zoa estate) and Mulanje (Limbuli estate) districts. I spent much of my spare time in natural history pursuits, my primary interests being small mammals (especially mice), the flora of Mulanje Mountain, and the epiphytic orchids of the Shire Highlands. I formed close friendships with many well-known naturalists, such as Arthur Westrop, Rodney Wood, 'G-D' Hayes, Peter Hanney and Geoff Harrison, as well as with botanists and foresters such as Jim Chapman, George Welsh and Dave Cornelius. I also spent many, many hours digging up mice with local Africans, or climbing into the hills on botanical expeditions, either with my wife Jacqui or with an African companion. I still have the fondest memories of these companions, men

such as Jimu Bomani, Benson Zuwani and Nyalugwe Chibati. As I was then only in my early twenties all these men were much older than myself. My close friend Arthur Westrop in fact, whom I accompanied on many natural history excursions—he was an accomplished and pioneer wildlife film-maker—was some 43 years my senior! My spare-time natural history pursuits led to the publication of many articles—on the ecology, habits and folk knowledge of small mammals, on the wild flowers of Mulanje Mountain, and on the epiphytic orchids of the Shire Highlands, as well as a book on the latter subject (Morris 1964, 1970, 2009).

In 1979–1980 I returned to Malawi after qualifying as a teacher at Brighton College of Education and studying anthropology at the London School of Economics. Based at Makwawa near Domasi, the year was spent engaged in ethno-botanical researches, and I travelled widely throughout the Shire Highlands, usually accompanied by a local herbalist. With my companions and informants I spent many hours studying plants and their medicinal uses in the Brachystegia woodlands, or accompanying a group of women collecting edible fungi in the same woodland setting. I became particularly well acquainted with the Chinyenyedi valley near Zoa tea estate, the foothills of Malosa Mountain, and the evergreen forests of Soche and Ndirande Mountains.

Again, I continue to have warm memories of my woodland companions—my mentors in the local culture—and may I mention in particular Salimu Chinyangala, Pilato Mbasa, Chijonijazi Shumba, Efie Ncharawati, Jafali Zomba, Nitta Sulemani, Rosebey Mponda and Samson Waiti. My ethno-botanical researches were published in many articles and books—on the sociology of herbalism, folk classifications, medicinal plants, weeds and edible fungi (Morris 1984, 1987, 1996a, 2009; Banda and Morris 1986).

In the year 1990–1991 I again renewed my interest in Malawi, and returned to the Shire Highlands to undertake research studies in human–animal relationships, specifically people's relations to mammalian life. Again based at Makwawa near Domasi, I travelled widely throughout the year, but nevertheless spent many weeks exploring Machemba hill near Migowi, and the nearby Mchese and Mulanje Mountains, invariably accompanied by a local hunter. At this period I was deeply indebted to the support and help of several friends and informants—especially Paul Kotokwa, Wyson Bowa, Heronimo Luke, Davison Potani and Ganda Makalani. My researches led to publication of several articles and books on the history and cultural aspects of the mammals of Malawi (Morris 1998, 2000, 2006A, 2009: 169–311).

My researches during the year 2000–2001 were in a sense a follow up of my earlier animal studies, but they focussed specifically on the anthropology of insect life. This time I was based at Kapalasa farm near Namadzi, and although I travelled widely throughout Malawi I spent much time in the Shire Highlands. This was particularly so with respect to studies of bee-keeping (at Zoa estate), insects as a food resource (Kapalasa farm and the surrounding villages), agricultural pests (Makoka research station) and with regard to the insect pests of coffee and tea (Mulanje). My researches I wrote up as a comprehensive ethnographic study of insect life in Malawi (Morris 2004).

Finally, I returned to Malawi in 2009 (January—June) mainly to study subsistence agriculture and to undertake archival research with respect to the present study.

From the above reflections it may be recognized that I have spent more than a decade of my life, living, working and researching in the Shire Highlands. In fact I have spent more than a year residing in four separate rural locations—Domasi, Namadzi, Thyolo and Mulanje. I have climbed and explored almost every hill and mountain in the Shire Highlands, usually with a Malawian as my companion, guide and mentor—looking for birds, mammals, medicinal plants, epiphytic orchids, fungi or insects (especially edible caterpillars and cicadas)—whichever was my current interest. Some of my most memorable life experiences have therefore been in Malawi, and many of most closest and cherished friendships have been with Malawians or with 'expatriates' who have spent their lives in Malawi.

All the above experiences constitute a real preface to the present study, for the Shire Highlands landscape and its people have long been inextricably linked to my own life and to my vocation as a university teacher in anthropology.

With respect to the present book I would like to thank in particular the following who have long given me friendship, support and hospitality: Father Claude Boucher, Shay Busman, Janet and the late Les Doran, Cornell Dudley, Vera and the late Rev. Peter Garland, John Kajalwiche, the late Colin Lees, John and Anne Killick, Martin Ott, Kings Phiri, Hassam Patel, Frances and Annabel Shaxson, June and the late Brian Walker, the late Jessie Williamson and John and Fumiyo Wilson.

With regard to my more recent researches in Malawi I would very much like to thank Carl Bruessow and Mike Bamford of the Society of Malawi, Paul Kishindo and Paul Kakhongwe of the Centre for Social Research,

Chancellor College, Joel Thaulo and Zione Banda at the National Archives, Dilys and Paul Taylor, and Angela Travis for all their help and support.

Finally, I should like to express my thanks to my family and to my colleagues at Goldsmiths College for continuing support, and to my friend Sheila Camfield for kindly typing up the manuscript.

April 2, 2015 Brian Morris
London, UK

Acknowledgment

To commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the Chilembwe Rebellion against the colonial state in January 1915 an earlier version of Chapter Six was published in The Society of Malawi journal, volume 68/1: 20–52.

Contents

Glossary

A short glossary of some important terms in the Chinyanja language for kin and kinship relations; social-structuring objects, places, rituals and relationships; large-scale environmental factors (climate, landscape); and materials. Terms in Chinyanja and other languages of the region for plants and animals; domestic, agricultural and manufacturing objects and activities; detailed social structures and relationships; nicknames and titles of groups and individuals; and many other matters will be found throughout the text.

ambuye	grandparents
banja	family, home, household
bwalo	cleared space in centre of village
chibale	kinship, friendship
chilimwe	dry season
chinamwali	general term for initiation rites
chirombo	wild animal; useless or obnoxious organism
chirope	blood, ailment associated with hunting, ritual eating of meat
chizimba	activating medicine
chulu	termite mound
dambo	marsh, valley glades/ grassland
dimba	valley gardens
dothe	soil
dziko	country land
dzinja	rainy season

jando	boys' circumcision ritual among the Yao
kachisi	small hut or shrine where sacrificial offerings are made to the spirits
lupanda	boys' initiation rite among Yao
makhalidwe	disposition, nature, character
maliro	funerary rites
malume	maternal uncle
manda	forested graveyard
mankhwala	medicinal substances
mathuthu	mound
matsenga	sorcery, trick, mysterious happening
matsoka	ill-luck, misfortunes
maula	divination
mbumba	matrilineal or sorority group
mfiti	witch
mfumu	chief or village headman
mkamwini	in-marrying male affine, son-in-law
mlamu	affine of own generation (pl. *alamu*)
m'michira	ritual specialist or healer (who possesses medicine tail, *mchira*)
moto	fire
mowa	beer
mudzi	village
mulungu	common name for the divinity
munda	upland garden
munthu	person
mvula	rain
mwali	initiate
mwambo	tradition
mwayi	good fortune, luck
mwezi	moon, month, menstruation
mwini	owner, guardian
mzimu	spirit (of the ancestors) (pl. mizimu)
mzinda	large village
namkungwi	ritual leader at initiation rites or in spirit rituals
ndiwo	relish
ngaliba	circumcision in Yao boys' initiation
nganjo	iron furnace
nsembe	offerings to the spirits of the ancestors or the divinities

nyama	wild game, meat
nyau	ritual fraternity among men, masked dancers or initiation rites
nyengo	season
nyumba	house, home
phiri	hill, mountain
tchire	woodland, usually regenerate bush
thangata	a system of labour rent
thengo	woodland
visoso	shifting cultivation

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: An Environmental History of Malawi

Situated in Southern Malawi, to the east of the Great Rift Valley and the river Shire, the Shire Highlands form a 'plateau' region, as the missionary-explorer David Livingstone described it, mainly at an elevation of between 2000 and 3500 feet (610–1067 m). Hailed as a well-watered and 'delightful country' by his compatriot John Buchanan (1885: 41), the plateau is surrounded by a range of hills and high mountains that form a crescent to the west and south of the Lake Chilwa basin, which itself lies on the plateau of 2000 ft.

Although archaeological evidence has indicated that the Shire Highlands has been inhabited by humans from the very earliest times, when Buchanan and other Europeans settled in the highlands towards the end of the nineteenth century—for it was deemed to be a healthy landscape for Europeans—it was described as 'well-wooded' and as largely 'unoccupied'.

This book aims to provide a history of the people of the Shire Highlands—both Africans and Europeans—from the late nineteenth century until the end of the colonial period. Written from an anthropological perspective, the study is offered as a contribution to environmental history, in that it seeks to explore the inter-relationship between the people of the Shire Highlands and the natural world.

When in 1980 I gave a talk on 'Changing Views of Nature' to the Wildlife Society of Malawi (Morris 1996b [1982]: 25–36) the number

B. Morris, *An Environmental History of Southern Malawi*,
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of books then available that dealt specifically with people's conceptions of nature (or wildlife) could almost be counted on the fingers of one hand, and environmental history had hardly emerged as a field of study (but see Collingwood 1945; Glacken 1967; Nash 1967; Barbour 1973). The famous introduction to history by Edward Carr, *What is History?* (1964) hardly mentions the natural world, and the same could be said for many introductions to social anthropology available when I was a student. As far as most philosophers, anthropologists and historians were concerned, nature was simply the existential backcloth that could be safely ignored in studies of the human life. There were, of course, notable and important exceptions. The geographer Clarence Glacken (1967), for example, wrote a superb historical account of changing attitudes towards nature—specifically the earth as the 'abode' of humans—within Western culture from the ancient Greeks to the end of the eighteenth century. The *Annales* school of French historiography, associated with such pioneer scholars as Lucien Febvre, Fernand Braudel and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, stressed the crucial importance of the natural environment—particularly with respect to landscapes, climate and disease epidemics—in understanding the vicissitudes of human life (Braudel 1980; Worster 1988: 291; Burke 1990). Likewise, in the United States, what has been described as the frontier and Western school of American historiography—scholars such as Frederick Jackson Turner, Walter Prescott Webb and James Malin—explored the impact of human settlement on the Great Plains of North America. They thereby initiated an ecological approach to history (Worster 1988: 291; Hughes 2006: 35).

Within anthropology, the pioneer figure is Julian Steward—whose work often tends to be ignored by environmental historians. Steward's cultural ecology sought to explore the adaptation of human cultures to their natural environments and to advance a theory of multilinear cultural evolution (Steward 1955; Kerns 2003). Nor must we forget the illuminating studies of urban life by Patrick Geddes and Lewis Mumford which came to encapsulate an ecological approach to human life. As Mumford famously expressed it: 'All thinking worthy of the name must be ecological.' Their approach came to be known as social ecology; an approach further developed by the eco-socialist Murray Bookchin and the microbiologist René Dubos. Although both these scholars were seminal figures in the development of the environmental movement in the 1970s, they also tend to be by-passed by environmental historians (Mumford 1970: 393; Morris 2012; cf. Hughes 2006; Radkau 2014).

During the 1970s a growing awareness of an impending ecological crisis—deforestation, the adverse impact of industrial farming, global warming, the pollution of rivers, oceans and the atmosphere, the wanton destruction of wildlife and the loss of biodiversity—led to the emergence of a world-wide and diverse 'environmental movement' (Radkau 2014). Significantly, it was also during this period that environmental history emerged and blossomed as a field of academic study, and the writings of the following scholars (among many others) are particularly noteworthy: Carl Sauer, Donald Worster, Alfred Crosby, William Cronan, Roderick Nash, William Beinart, Carolyn Merchant and Richard Grove (Worster 1988; Hughes 2006).

It is common for such environmental historians to take a global perspective, and to specifically focus on such important environmental factors (or issues) as climate change, deforestation, famines, fire, or the impact of infectious diseases on human social life. In this study, however, I shall adopt a much more modest approach. Although we shall touch upon or explore several of the above topics, the study will be concerned only with one particular region—the Shire Highlands—and will focus specifically on people's relationship to the land—its soils, its vegetation and its wildlife. We shall thus be centrally concerned with the nature and changing dynamics of the region's agrarian economy, and especially the complex and changing relationships between the colonial state, European planters and African subsistence farmers with respect to land issues in the Shire Highlands. Throughout the study I try not to lose sight of the fact that people in the Shire Highlands, along with their societies and culture, are an integral part of a wider ecological system—a natural world that is complex, diverse and continually undergoing change.

As with my other studies, this book, and my researches, is based upon and informed by a philosophy of evolutionary (or historical) naturalism. I thus reject the nihilistic ethos of postmodernism and the neo-Kantian idealism that pervades much of contemporary scholarship, and affirm a realist metaphysics—an understanding that the natural world *exists* independently of human cognition; an ontology that can be described either as emergent materialism (Bunge 2001: 73) or dialectical naturalism (Bookchin 1990: 29–30); and an epistemology that expresses both an ecological sensibility and the salience of human agency. I fully endorse, then, the 'dual heritage' of anthropology in combining hermeneutics—the interpretive *understanding* (*verstehen*) of cultural phenomena, and empirical science in seeking to *explain* socio-cultural life through causal (historical) analysis.

I therefore reject the two extremes—'textualism' (postmodernism) that denies any empirical science and tends to completely by-pass the integrity and agency of the natural world, and 'positivism' or reductive materialism which tends to oblate or downplay cultural meanings and human values. Thus, like Franz Boas, I conceive of anthropology as a historical science, concerned not only with understanding the meaning of social–cultural phenomena—past and present—but also seeking to know, through causal analysis, 'how it came into being' (Boas 1940: 305; Morris 2000: 2–13, 2014 [1997]: 26–56).

In his seminal studies of the agrarian history of the Lower Shire Valley in Malawi, which the present study complements, Elias Mandala (1990, 2005) suggests, following the palaeontologist Stephen Jay Gould, a dialectic between two district conceptions of time. These are: 'cyclical time', which is reflected in recurring seasonal events and the agricultural cycle, which Mandala felt was the dominant conception in the lives of the peasants of the Lower Shire Valley; and linear time, 'time's arrow', reflected in conceptions of time as an irreversible sequence of unique events—such as a particular famine (2005: 15). Both conceptions of time, of course, are expressed in all human communities, as well as in the present study. Time, as many scholars have stressed, is a relative concept, and only has meaning in relation to specific material entities or events—whether natural or social (Bunge 2001: 10).

In this book I focus neither on cyclic nor on linear time, but rather on 'time as history', on socio-cultural evolution as envisaged by Steward and Bruce Trigger (1998) and on time as involving historical processes. I thus explore the development of specific social institutions—the origins and evolution of the colonial state and the plantation economy, particularly the development of the *thangata* system, tobacco farming and the tea industry, and thus the subsequent decline of the ivory and slave trade and the power of the Yao chiefdoms. I also discuss the Chilembwe rising of 1915, and offer reflections on the various causes of the rebellion—psychological, social and economic. Finally, I explore the emergence of a conservation ethic in colonial Malawi—relating to wildlife, forests (Brachystegia woodland) and soil conservation—and the eventual eruption in the 1950s of a peasant resistance movement against both the *thangata* system (of labour rent) and the state-imposed conservation projects.

The Shire Highlands has always been of key significance in the history of Malawi. Highlighted by David Livingstone during the era of the slave trade, Zomba in the highlands was selected by Harry Johnston to be the

capital of the colonial state—initially known as British Central Africa, then, in 1907, as the Nyasaland protectorate. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century there was a large influx of Yao and Lomwe people from Mozambique into the highlands and, as we explore below, it was in the Shire Highlands that a plantation economy developed. This involved the alienation of large tracts of land to European companies and settlers, the imposition of the *thangata* system and the cultivation of coffee, cotton, tobacco and tea, mainly employing tenant labour. Significant, too, was the fact that the Church of Scotland mission was established in Blantyre in 1876, and that the township that formed subsequently became the commercial capital of the protectorate. The Shire Highlands was thus always at the centre of events—whether economic or political—involving the colonial state and the complex relationships between colonial officials, the European planting community and African subsistence farmers throughout the colonial period.

It is worth making a note here on the geographical coverage and the naming of the Shire Highlands.

Although professional biologists, ever eager to find endemic species, often describe Mulanje Mountain or the Lake Chilwa basin as if they were not a part of the Shire Highlands, it is worth emphasizing that geologically, ecologically—in respect to flora and fauna—and in terms of social history, the districts (and mountains) of Zomba, Blantyre, Thyolo and Mulanje as well as the Lake Chilwa basin and the Phalombe plain all form a part of the Shire Highlands as a plateau region. This was certainly how the early writers Buchanan (1885) and Harry Johnston (see map 1897: 188) envisaged the Shire Highlands—as a unique highland landscape. This accords with my own conception.

For some reason, perhaps to affirm his political radicalism, or his sympathy with the people of the Lower Shire Valley—his original home—Elias Mandala insists on employing the Mang'anja name *Tchiri* instead of Shire, as no villager, he tells us, would recognize the latter term (2005: 25). By the same logic English-speakers should write Praha instead of Prague, and Malawians (including Mandala) should refrain from writing *Kherekhe* (Clegg), *tchalitchi* (church) and *kalabu* (club)! The anglicized 'Shire' is the term generally employed to refer both to the river and the highlands, and it is even doubtful if it was ever a local name. *Tchiri* is not to be found in any Nyanja/Mang'anja dictionary, and according to David Clement Scott (1929) *chiri* originally meant a steep embankment, while *tchire* is commonly used to refer to the 'bush', that is, regenerate Brachystegia

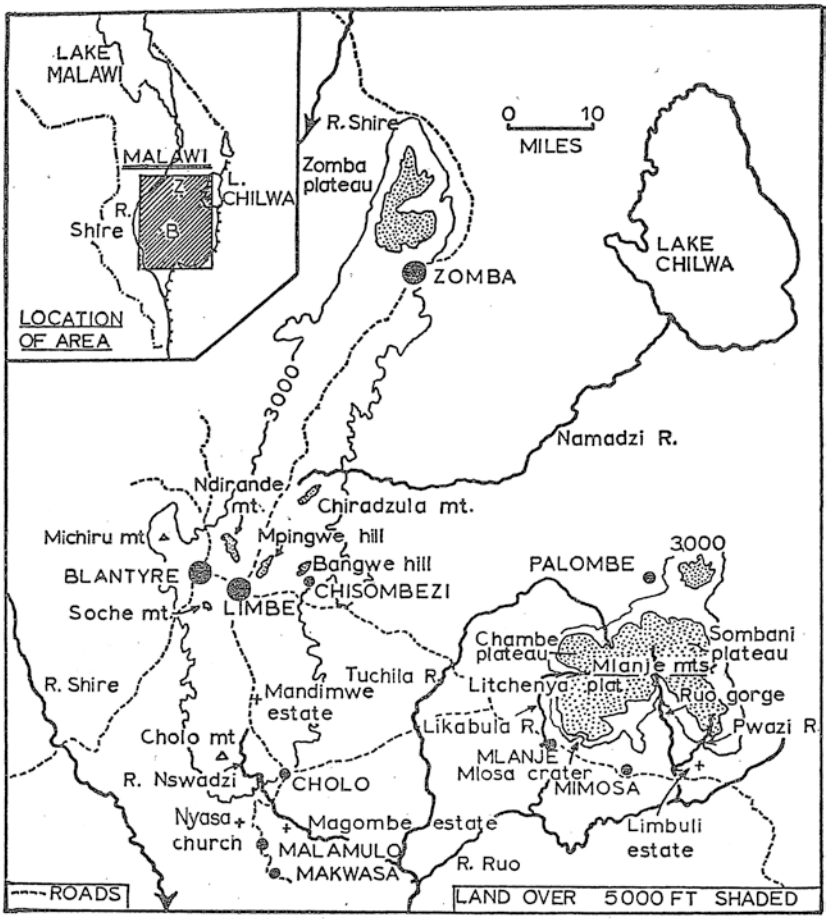

Fig. 1.1 Map of the Shire Highlands
Source: Brian Morris, *The Epiphytic Orchids of Malawi* (Blantyre: Society of Malawi Library, 1970). Reproduced with kind permission from the Society of Malawi

woodland, as distinct from the more mature woodland *m'thengo*. Any extensive body of water, whether a large river like the Shire or a lake is usually known as *Nyanja*. As my book is written in the English language I shall use the common term 'Shire' to describe the highlands (on the term 'shire', see Price 1966).

As with my earlier studies, research data for the present book was gathered by myself from a wide range of sources—the accounts of early European travellers (such as those of Livingstone, Buchanan and members of the ill-fated Universities Mission to Central Africa), ethnographic and historical studies written during the early colonial period (especially by African scholars), the history seminar papers by Chancellor College students, and diverse archival material—newspaper reports, government papers, the annual reports (especially) of the agricultural and forest departments, ecological surveys, letters and correspondences and various collections of oral traditions.

But an important debt, and also an invaluable source of ideas and data, has been the writings of many scholars who have pioneered Malawian historiography over the past forty years. Indeed Malawi has been particularly well-blessed by a coterie (if that is the right word) of historians who have produced a wide range of excellent and insightful studies on the history of the country. Especially noteworthy are: Leroy Vail, Kings Phiri, Colin Baker, Bob Boeder, Megan Vaughan, Owen Kalinga, Matthew Schoffeleers, Elias Mandala, Martin Chanock, Wapu Mulwafu, Robin Palmer and Landeg White. When I was engaged in ethnobiological studies in 1979–1980 and 1990–1991 I often attended the research seminars of the Department of History at Chancellor College and always found them stimulating. But one scholar deserves particular mention in the present context, and that is John McCracken. For almost forty years McCracken has been publishing seminal and engaging articles on the history of Malawi, many within the genre of environmental history. His *History of Malawi* (2012) is a truly magisterial work of scholarship and an important source of reference. In fact, I consider this present book to be an offshoot—a rhizomatic development—of his work, exploring in much greater depth the history of one particular region of Malawi—while focussing specifically on environmental issues, especially on the relationship between the people of the highlands and the natural landscape.

One final point. As again with my earlier studies, I have not written this book specifically for academic specialists, but rather as a contribution to the environmental history of Malawi that will appeal to a wide range of people: scholars, students and laypersons alike, but especially Malawians. Although a work of scholarship (I trust) I have thus attempted to keep it free of academic jargon and academic pretensions, and to write in a style that is both lucid and readable. All references to source material are indicated clearly in the text, rather than hidden among a hundred pages of abstruse footnotes.

The study consists of eight substantive chapters, arranged roughly in chronological order, and a brief summary is offered here of each chapter.

Chapter 2 gives as account of the natural landscape and the early history of the Shire Highlands, and thus provides essential background material to the study. After outlining the geomorphology and climate of the highlands I discuss the various vegetation types that characterize the plateau: the Brachystegia woodland (which we emphasize is an anthropogenic plant formation), the evergreen forests that clothe the higher mountains of Zomba, Chiradzulu, Soche, Thyolo and Mulanje, and the Acacia–Combretum woodland—a dry savanna—that once covered much of the Phalombe plain. We then discuss the wildlife of the Shire Highlands—focussing on mammals, birds and snakes—and end the chapter with a discussion of the early inhabitants of the highlands, the Batwa hunter-gatherers and the Iron Age peoples.

Chapter 3 begins, as it were, by setting the historical scene, with a description of David Livingstone's journey into the Shire Highlands in 1859. This led to the establishment of the Blantyre Mission and John Buchanan's pioneering agricultural ventures. I then briefly outline the early history of northern Zambezia, the rise of so-called Maravi states and the main ethnic communities associated with the Shire Highalnds—the Maravi cluster (Nyanja/Mang'anja), the Yao and the Lomwe. I provide a description—from rather scant sources—of the socio-economic life of the people of the Shire Highlands prior to the establishment of the colonial state, going on to discuss their primary mode of production—shifting agriculture, their various craft industries—focussed especially around cotton and iron—and conclude the chapter with an account of communal land tenure, the main forms of social organization found in the Shire Highlands, and their relationship to land.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century the Shire Highlands was described as a land of turmoil—for this period was characterized by economic insecurity and political unrest (McCracken 2012: 25–37). But Chap. 4 attends less to these 'cycles of violence' than to two other, interrelated topics: the rise and fall of the Yao chiefdoms, which were specifically focussed on the slave trade and the hunting of elephants for ivory; and the foundation of the colonial state under Harry Johnston's administration in the last decade of the nineteenth century. It was during this decade that large tracts of land in the Shire Highlands were alienated to European settlers, amounting to around half the land area of the Shire Highlands—some 1458 square miles (378,000 ha). I conclude the chapter with a discussion

of two of Johnston's pet projects, both of which had important economic implications—the establishment of a modern road system and the Zomba Botanic garden.

Chapter 5 focusses specifically on the European plantation economy that developed in the Shire Highlands in the early years of the twentieth century. After an initial discussion of the early export trade—specifically ivory and coffee—I discuss the dilemma facing the colonial state in its support of three conflicting economic strategies—encouraging the supply of labour to the South African mines, peasant agriculture, or the plantation economy. I then turn to discuss two important factors that in a sense enabled the development of the plantation economy—the influx of large numbers of Lomwe people into the Shire Highlands from Mozambique, and the consolidation of the system of forced labour-rent, *thangata*. The chapter concludes with a discussion of two important plantation crops in the early colonial period—cotton and tobacco.

In Chap. 6 I offer a critical account of what came to be described as the 'Chilembwe rising', the rebellion of John Chilembwe that took place in January 1915, and was famously described by Shepperson and Price in their classic study *Independent African* (1958). After initially discussing Chilembwe's early life and his relationship with his mentor, the Baptist Missionary Joseph Booth, the chapter is devoted to three essential themes: the situation on Magomera Estate and the degree to which Chilembwe identified with the Lomwe tenants who were experiencing the *thangata* system in its most oppressive form; Chilembwe's relationship with an emerging class of African planters who were among the ringleaders of the revolt; and, finally, a discussion of the rebellion itself, and of the many interpretations of it that have been proposed. My essential aim is to emphasize the close relationship of the revolt to land issues in the Shire Highlands.

In Chap. 7 I offer a wide-ranging account of the history of the tea estates in the Thyolo and Mulanje districts in the early decades of the twentieth century. But the chapter is prefaced by two related topics; the building of the trans-Zambezi railway, which greatly facilitated the export of commercial crops, and the re-affirmation of the *thangata* system after the Chilembwe rising. I then discuss the early history of tea planting in the Mulanje district and the development of the tea industry in the Thyolo district during the 1930s, and conclude the chapter with an outline of the ecology and production of tea in colonial Nyasaland.

Chapter 8 is devoted to a discussion of what historians have described as 'conservation mania' on the part of the colonial administration. This relates to the deep concern that the government of Nyasaland expressed with regard to the conservation of natural resources during the inter-war years. Such conservation efforts focussed on three concerns, and a discussion of these forms the substance of the chapter. The first concern was the conservation of wildlife—essentially the larger game animals. I discuss the decline of wild mammals in the early decades of the twentieth century, and the efforts made by the colonial government to preserve wildlife, essentially restricting, through the game regulations, the hunting of larger game animals to Europeans. With the rise of a conservation ethic in Nyasaland in the 1930s, the second concern was forest conservation, and this led to the creation of forest reserves and village forest areas. The final part of the chapter is devoted to a discussion of the third concern which, in the aftermath of the 'dust bowl' phenomenon in the United States, involved a veritable crusade by the colonial government to promote soil conservation. This laid the seeds for the *Nkhonda ya mitumbira*—the 'war of the ridges'—in the 1950s.

The final substantive chapter describes the eventful post-war years. Heralded as an 'age of development' in Nyasaland, it involved the transformation of the agrarian economy. The first part of the chapter outlines this agricultural transformation, which centred on the increased productivity and marketing of three crops: tobacco, maize and groundnuts, as well as the expansion of the tea industry. It was hailed as a 'cash crop boom'. After then discussing the serious famine of 1949, the chapter outlines the various 'land acquisitions' secured by the colonial government in the wake of the Abrahams Report of 1947—the buying of private estate land in an attempt to alleviate the 'land problem' by various resettlement schemes. We conclude the chapter and the body of the book with a focus on the general unrest and discontent expressed by rural people in the Shire Highlands throughout the post-war years. This unrest centred almost exclusively on land issues, specifically people's opposition to the *thangata* system and their resentment against the soil conservation measures which were being imposed in almost draconian fashion by the colonial state throughout the 1950s. I discuss in some detail the 1953 'disturbances' that erupted in both the Thyolo and Domasi districts.

Overall, in this book, following in the footsteps of Donald Worster and other environmental historians, I have attempted to portray the relationship between the people of the Shire Highlands, specifically Europeans

and Africans, and the natural world in all its complexity and diversity. In particular I have focussed on issues around land—its soil, its vegetation and its wildlife, for, as the Nyanja saying goes, '*dziko ndi anthu*'—the land (country) is its people.

CHAPTER 2

The Natural History of the Shire Highlands

1 Prologue

This first substantive chapter aims to provide, in broad outline, an account of the natural landscape (and early history) of the Shire Highlands, which inevitably forms the essential background to all human activities. After an initial discussion of the geology, soils and climate (Sect. 2), I examine in some detail the main vegetation types to be found in the highlands. There are descriptions of the nature and ecology of the anthropogenic Brachystegia woodlands—a moist savanna—that once clothed much of the Shire Highland; the evergreen forests that are to be found on the main mountain and hill ranges—Zomba Mountain, the Blantyre hills, Thyolo Mountain and Mulanje Mountain—along with their associated vegetation—the montane grassland and bracken-briar; and finally, the vegetation of the Lake Chilwa basin and the Phalombe plain. The latter is essentially a type of dry savanna, an Acacia–Combretum woodland.

We then discuss (Sect. 4) the wildlife of the Shire Highlands—its fauna—focussing on the larger mammals, the avifauna and the snakes, for these tend to have a particular salience for local African people.

In the final section I describe the early inhabitants of the Shire Highlands, the Batwa hunter-gatherers and the red schematic rock paintings with which they are associated, and conclude with a brief sketch of the pre-colonial history of Malawi.

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