

# Guide to the Mary Henrietta Kingsley Papers

MS 1485



compiled by Carol King and Randall D. Law

July 1993

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## Collection Overview

**REPOSITORY:** Manuscripts and Archives  
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**CALL NUMBER:** MS 1485

**CREATOR:** Kingsley, Mary Henrietta, 1862-1900

**TITLE:** Mary Henrietta Kingsley papers

**DATES:** 1897-1900

**PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:** 0.5 linear feet

**LANGUAGE:** English

**SUMMARY:** The papers consist of letters written by Mary Kingsley to English merchant John Holt and his wife. Among the topics discussed are British government policy in West Africa, treatment of Africans, the behavior of missionaries, the interests of the trading community, and public opinion in England. The letters were written during the period between Kingsley's return from her West African travels and before going to South Africa during the Boer War.

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## Requesting Instructions

To request items from this collection for use in the Manuscripts and Archives reading room, please use the request links in the HTML version of this finding aid, available at <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/mssa.ms.1485>.

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Key to the container abbreviations used in the PDF finding aid:

b.      box  
f.      folder

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## Administrative Information

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### Immediate Source of Acquisition

Transferred from the African Collection, 1988.

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## Conditions Governing Access

The materials are open for research.

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## Conditions Governing Use

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## Preferred Citation

Mary Henrietta Kingsley Papers (MS 1485). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

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## Biographical / Historical

Mary Henrietta Kingsley was born on October 13, 1862, to George Henry and Mary Bailey Kingsley in Islington, England. Kingsley's father was a doctor, although he primarily devoted himself to traveling and writing. Despite a lack of any formal education except a few German lessons, Mary Kingsley clearly possessed a great thirst for knowledge, which was evidenced in her youth by her love of reading, particularly of scientific subjects. During her first thirty years, Kingsley lived the quiet life of an undistinguished Victorian woman, tending the house and caring for her bedridden mother.

Shortly after the death of both of her parents in 1892, however, Kingsley made a brief trip to the Canary Islands. During the next eight years, she returned many times and traveled extensively throughout West Africa, principally Cameroon and Gabon. During her explorations of the previously charted, yet dimly understood, hinterland of West Africa, Kingsley collected artifacts and zoological specimens. Her greatest interests, though, were in African culture and religion. Kingsley wrote several detailed books on her travels and on ethnology: *Travels in West Africa* (1897), *West African Studies* (1899), and *The Story of West Africa* (1900).

In England, Kingsley gained renown through her many lectures on Africa and her behind-the-scenes politicking on several major issues affecting British colonial affairs. In general, Kingsley opposed those measures which proceeded from an ignorance of African culture or which threatened to unduly disrupt native life. For example, she favored the influence of traders, who wished to work with the natives, over missionaries, who sought to drastically transform the local culture. Despite these relatively progressive beliefs, Kingsley apparently viewed the British as the natural rulers of Africa and espoused her own brand of economic imperialism.

In addition to her significance as an explorer and anthropologist, Kingsley provides a valuable portrait of British values during the era of colonialism. And as recent biographers have shown, she also serves as an excellent example of a woman alternately freed from and constrained by the limitations of the Victorian age.

Mary Kingsley died of typhoid on June 3, 1900, while a nurse in South Africa during the Boer War.

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## Scope and Contents

The Mary Henrietta Kingsley Papers consists of approximately 120 letters to John Holt and twelve letters to his wife, written between late 1897 and shortly before Kingsley's death in 1900. John Holt (1841-1915) was a prominent and outspoken British trader and businessman. Holt and Kingsley met in March 1896

at one of her lectures. He was most likely attracted to her by her position regarding British commercial interests in West Africa. The two became close friends following the publication of Kingsley's first book and her emergence as a political force and a celebrity. During the brief, yet active, period remaining before her death, Holt was Kingsley's primary political confidant.

## Collection Contents

Outgoing correspondence		
b. 1, f. 1	Holt, John	1897 November 27-December 12
b. 1, f. 2	Holt, John	1898 January 23-June 28
b. 1, f. 3	Holt, John	1898 July 2-October 31
b. 1, f. 4	Holt, John	1898 November 2-December 30
b. 1, f. 5	Holt, John	1899 January 7-April 19
b. 1, f. 6	Holt, John	1899 May 5-August 28
b. 1, f. 7	Holt, John	1899 September-1900 March 6
b. 1, f. 8	Holt, John	undated
b. 1, f. 9	Holt, Mrs. John	1897 March 14-1900 January 10, undated
Incoming correspondence		
b. 1, f. 10	Unidentified	undated

## **Selected Search Terms**

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

### **Subjects**

Missionaries -- Africa

### **Geographic Names**

Africa, West -- Colonial influence

Great Britain -- Colonies -- Administration

### **Names**

Kingsley, Mary Henrietta, 1862-1900