

“The Land  
Always Calls to  
Its Own”:  
The Inglis Fletcher  
Papers

by Maurice C. York

Inglis Fletcher’s 12 Carolina Series novels remain her most lasting legacy. Published between 1940 and 1964, they have collectively sold tens of millions of copies and have been translated into eight languages. But a careful survey of the Inglis Fletcher Papers, housed at East Carolina University, reveals that Fletcher – who adopted North Carolina as her home in 1944 – successfully pursued a variety of interests: writing film scenarios, promoting the careers of noted explorers, trekking through the African bush, and preserving the literary and cultural heritage of North Carolina.

The papers, some 15,000 items filed in slim, gray boxes, bear silent testimony to the romantic and adventurous spirit of one of North Carolina’s most successful literary figures. Broad in scope and rich in content, the collection is readily accessible for literary or historical research. It spans the period between 1883 and 1964, detailing Fletcher’s literary career, her involvement in historical organizations, and her personal life. Included are correspondence, six diaries, drafts and galley proofs of some of her books, research notes, financial records and contracts, drawings, photographs, newspaper clippings, and publications. The papers also shed light on her creative process and her literary ambitions, and they reveal much about her

character, especially her zestful approach to life.

It was an interesting life. She was born in Alton, Illinois, in 1879, the first of three children of Maurice William and Flora Chapman Clark, and christened Minna Towner Inglis. Minna, who became known as Peggy to her friends, grew up in nearby Edwardsville, where African-American women employed by her family kindled her interest in Africa. When she visited the local library, young Peggy sometimes selected books about the pursuits of English explorers in Africa. She also developed a fondness for the fine arts; after high school, she studied art at Washington University in St. Louis. Instead of a career as an artist, however, Peggy chose marriage. When she and mining engineer John George Fletcher exchanged vows in 1902, Peggy began the first of her many exciting experiences.

She followed Jack Fletcher as he worked in mining camps in California, Oregon, and Alaska. Their first home was a modest cabin in Kennet, California, located in a wild but beautiful area of mountains north of San Francisco. The Fletchers brought many of their wedding gifts to this remote location, but they probably seemed out of place among the miners, rattlesnakes, and wild animals. A more substantial residence in Shasta, California, appealed to the young couple until they encountered the ghost of a Chinese man there. Some 20 moves during their first decade of marriage prompted the Fletchers to seek a more settled life.

Jack Fletcher’s acceptance in 1914 of a sales position with Standard Oil Company of California led the Fletchers first to Riverside, California, then to Spokane, Washington. In Spokane, Peggy Fletcher blossomed. She worked for the Junior Red Cross and, with help from the Palmer Photoplay

Corporation, tried her hand at writing screenplays. Success came in 1920, when Robertson-Cole Studios paid her \$1,000 for “The Western Gate,” a scenario describing a man’s dream of growing wheat and the conflict this dream creates between him and his wife. “This has been the greatest year of my life,” Fletcher wrote in her diary, but more excitement lay ahead.

The 1920s found Peggy Fletcher working closely with explorers and preparing for an adventure of her own. She developed a lasting friendship with Arctic explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson and assisted him with some of his writing projects, including a book, *The Adventure of Wrangel Island* (1925). In this book, Fletcher’s character sketch of Ada Blackjack, an Eskimo woman, was published under the name of Inglis Fletcher. (This work may mark the first time Fletcher used the name Inglis in print.) Fletcher also helped Stefansson arrange some of his West Coast lectures. An encounter with naturalist Rodney C. Wood in 1924 ignited her desire to write about Africa, so she drew upon her experience arranging Stefansson’s lectures to raise money for a trip to visit Wood in Nyasaland, British Central Africa. With the money she earned helping to arrange a lecture series that featured Lowell Thomas, Roy Chapman Andrews, and other celebrities, she sailed for Africa in April 1928.

Fletcher arrived in Nyasaland in July amid international newspaper reports of her intention to dine in evening dresses during her *ulendo* (safari); her formal attire was actually reserved for dinners with the British. Far from such niceties, Rodney Wood gave Fletcher a taste of real life in the African bush. They hunted game together and quietly watched as members of the Ma-Nganja tribe performed ceremonial dances seldom seen by whites. Fletcher took extensive notes on drum beats