

# Alice Seeley Harris: Bringing Horror To Life In Images

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**Abstract:**

*This text looks at how, with a camera and her proximity to the population, one woman was able to make a crucial contribution to denouncing the atrocities committed in the Independent State of Congo. She succeeded in humanizing the written word, and better still, putting faces and stories to these crimes. These actions led to a strong international mobilization, culminating in the recapture of the Congo by Belgium. This text also discusses the role of the Congolese resistance, whose actions also contributed to this movement of denunciation.*

**Methods:** *In this research we used a qualitative methodological approach based on documentary analysis, these methods was very useful to us.*

**Conclusion:** *We conclude this contribution by insisting on the fact that the atrocities that took place in the Congo during the EIC are a human tragedy on a massive scale that can be qualified as genocide. The actions that led to the denunciation of these acts must not be forgotten, and must be revisited. The people who participated in these denunciations also deserve to be known. A woman who, at the end of the 19th century, took up her camera and decided to document crimes, not without risk, deserves not to be forgotten by history. Alice Seeley Harris, through her actions, remains an enduring part of the history of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The fact that these accounts and photographs mention the Congolese who came to her to denounce the crimes of which they were victims, so that she could document them, proves that the history of violence in the Congo is still an open field of research in many respects.*

**Keyword:** *Congo; EIC; Violence; Congo Reform Association; Genocide.*

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## I. Introduction

John Boyd Dunlop's invention in 1887 of what can only be described as an inner tube for wheels, would lead to one of the worst atrocities in human history in the Congo. And in 1970, when Alice Seeley Harris died at the age of almost 100, the world and the Congo had just lost the first person to document in images the atrocities suffered by the working inhabitants of the Independent State of the Congo, forced to harvest astronomical quantities of rubber sap on behalf of Leopold II, King of the Belgians, at the risk of having their hands cut off.

At the beginning of the 20th century, it seemed that the EIC was a lawless area where many crimes were committed. So how could international opinion be alerted to the atrocities committed in the Congo? Some people began to write (Conrad, 1902; Twain, 1905), but that didn't seem to be enough and more force was needed. It was at this precise moment that Alice Seeley Harris stepped in, bringing a human touch to impersonal writings with her Kodak camera. Through her photographs, this human touch contributed to the fight for justice and the law led by figures such as Edmund Morel, and enabled the Congolese to denounce the barbaric acts committed against them.

Our contribution is entitled Alice Seeley Harris: The Pictorialization of Horror, and it is not our intention to rewrite the history of the colonization of the Congo, or the history of atrocities in the Congo, as several authors have done (Vangroenweghe, 1986, 2006; Hochschild, 1998, 2005; Nzongola, 2007; Van Reybrouck, 2014; Wiltz, 2015; Ewans, 2017; Stapleton, 2017;;Sealy, 2019; Rutz, 2018). Rather, it is about presenting the action of a woman who helped to publicize the crimes that were taking place in the Congo.

Who was Alice Seeley Harris? How did she end up in the Congo ? And above all, how did she end up taking photographs ? We can already say that the impact of her work is visible, as the outcry generated by her pictures is a historical fact. A qualitative methodological approach based on documentary analysis was used for this research.

## II. From London To The Congo

Of the birth of Alice Seeley Harris and her coming to the Congo Jack Thompson (2002:146) writes:

*« Alice Seely was born in 1870 and married John Harris in 1898, just before both of them departed from England as missionaries to the Congo ».*

Her first job was in the British civil service. However, from an early age she demonstrated a passion for missionary work. And according to Erika Nimis (2020:78), she met John Harris in 1894 and married him in 1897. Together, the couple arrived in the Congo in 1898. Her arrival in the Congo coincided with the emergence in Europe and North America of rumors of violence in the Independent State of Congo.

Assigned with her husband to the north-west of Congo, precisely to Baringa, in the Befale territory of the Tshuapa district. Alice Seeley Harris is a schoolteacher like her husband, and her daily life is dictated by the teachings and catechism she imparts to the Congolese people. It was in the course of her activities that she came into contact with the Congolese population and discovered the extent of the atrocities committed at the instigation of Leopold II, by imposing quotas for rubber tree cultivation, Leopold II opened the door to a catastrophic practice that involved killing, rape, imprisonment, mutilation and deportation. The people mutilated were sometimes very young, even children, all in the name of rubber.

## III. One Of The World's First Human Rights Activists

When Mark Twain wrote King Leopold's Soliloquy: A Defense of His Congo Rule in 1905, as if to imagine the torments of the Belgian monarch, torments caused in part by the actions of the Congo Reform Association and, above all, by photographic evidence, he could hardly have imagined the collapse of the E.I.C. Yet this collapse was to happen, not least because, thanks to Alice Seeley Harris, the crimes, atrocities and murders could be seen beyond reading.

In 1902, the term "whistle-blower" didn't yet exist, but in fact that's what Alice Seeley was. When she came to the Congo, she took her Kodak Brownie camera with her. And when she arrived, she photographed everything she could. According to Daniel Foliard, Alice Seeley sometimes used her camera for teaching purposes in her capacity as a schoolteacher. This British European of the Victorian era, who wanted to experience the exotic joys of being in Africa, became a spectator and photographer of horror. Thanks to the camera she took with her from London, she began to photograph the various acts of abuse she witnessed, documenting the crimes she had witnessed. The execrable situation at the EIC scandalized the couple, who witnessed the sad fate reserved for the people, and resolved to take up the cause of protest, joining forces with the Congo Reform Association.

On their return to England, the Harris couple were keen to inform the world of the outrages they had seen and photographed, and then decided to approach and work with the Congo Reform Association (Sealey, 2019:17). This association, founded in 1904, whose members included Henry Grattan Guinness, Roger Casement, Edmund Morel, Mark Twain, etc., aimed to expose to the world the abuses and atrocities committed in the Congo by EIC officials.

In their quest, the Congo Reform Association (CRA) and the HARRISES were to highlight to the international community the cruelty and inhumanity experienced by the Congolese people in the EIC. Together, the CRA and the Harris couple led conferences and actions to denounce these crimes. In 1906, they held a series of conferences in the United States and England, featuring the projection of images taken by the couple, principally Alice Seeley Harris, who succeeded in putting faces to the horror.

She also distinguished herself by the fact that, in addition to putting images and faces to the horror, her proximity to the population, due to her profession, also enabled her to put stories and names behind both the photos and the crimes. This further humanized the tragedy unfolding in the Congo. The ensuing outcry would sway Leopold II and precipitate his downfall.

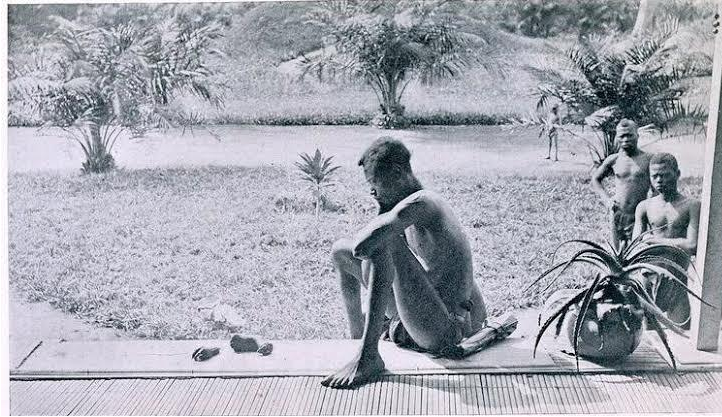
## IV. The Visualization Of Horror

This photo is famous for being so representative of the crimes committed by Leopold II's regime. This photo is also the one that comes to mind when we think of the atrocities of the EIC, and this photo is the one that appears when we do a search on severed hands in the Congo in a search engine. And this photo was taken by Alice Seeley Harris, and how she tells the story in an interview :

*« One Sunday morning, May 14, 1904, I was alone and my boy came to warn me that a native was waiting for me at the back of the mission carrying with him the hand and foot of a little girl wrapped in a banana leaf. I sat him down at the top of the veranda steps and he opened the banana leaf and I took a photo. There they were, right in front of my eyes, this little girl's hand and foot. The dismembered girl's name was Boali, and she was only five years old. I wanted to provide proof," he explains<sup>1</sup> ».*

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<sup>1</sup> [https://youtu.be/rstFCn3r1BE?si=mOh1NVVT5Qf\\_nta1](https://youtu.be/rstFCn3r1BE?si=mOh1NVVT5Qf_nta1)



This dramatic and moving account makes us realize two things. First, it shows us that the cruelty of the EIC authorities knew no bounds. Violence was systematic and a way of life. And secondly, this passage also shows us the role of the Congolese people, who were not simply passive and unresponsive.

### V. Congolese People In Alice Seeley's Actions

Picking up on Alice Seeley Harris's testimony, Erika Nimis (2020:78) explains:

*« L'une de ses photographies les plus connues et les plus impressionnantes est celle des mains coupées de Nsala dans le district de Nsongo, prise en 1904. Deux hommes du village de Wala, qui avait été attaqué par des gardes de la compagnie ABIR (Anglo-Belgian India Rubber Company), étaient arrivés à la mission où vivaient Alice et son mari. L'un d'eux, Nsala, tenait à la main un petit paquet de feuilles qui enveloppaient les mains et les pieds coupés de sa fille et de son épouse, mutilées et tuées par les gardes de l'ABIR. Horrifiée, Alice avait photographié l'homme assis devant ces restes sur la véranda des Harris »*

**Our Traduction:** *« One of her best-known and most impressive photographs is that of the severed hands of Nsala in the Nsongo district, taken in 1904. Two men from the village of Wala, which had been attacked by guards from ABIR (Anglo-Belgian India Rubber Company), had arrived at the mission where Alice and her husband lived. One of them, Nsala, held in his hand a small bundle of leaves enveloping the severed hands and feet of his daughter and wife, mutilated and killed by the ABIR guards. Horrified, Alice had photographed the man sitting in front of these remains on the Harris veranda »*

We think it's important to point out that it was the Congolese himself who came to denounce and provide evidence of this crime. This shows that the Congolese knew, or must have imagined, that a camera could immortalize the moment and be used as a tool of protest.

This reality is not always brought to the fore, and there's a tendency to think that actions linked to denunciations are the exclusive preserve of Westerners. Admittedly, the contribution of associations such as the CRA is immense, but only in the light of the information that this research brings, the place of Congolese in the denunciation of atrocities committed in the Congo should be reviewed. If this Nsala had not come to see Alice Seeley with evidence to denounce this crime, this photo would probably never have existed. We believe that this act should be seen as part of the long history of Congolese resistance to oppression, and that Alice Seeley Harris's struggle should be put in its rightful place.

### VI. Conclusion

We conclude this contribution by insisting on the fact that the atrocities that took place in the Congo during the EIC are a human tragedy on a massive scale that can be qualified as genocide. The actions that led to the denunciation of these acts must not be forgotten, and must be revisited. The people who participated in these denunciations also deserve to be known.

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