

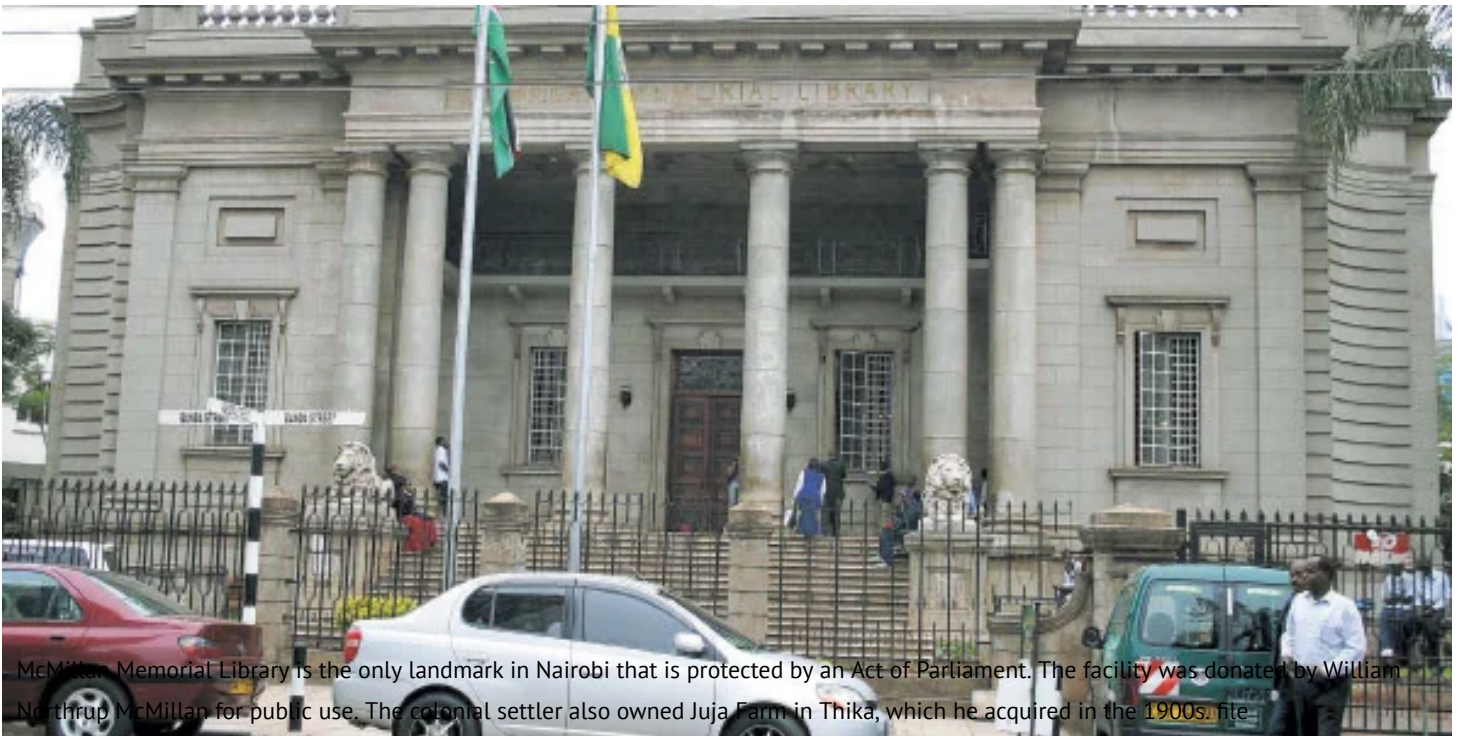
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McMillan Library and the jinxed Juja Farm

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McMillan Memorial Library is the only landmark in Nairobi that is protected by an Act of Parliament. The facility was donated by William Northrup McMillan for public use. The colonial settler also owned Juja Farm in Thika, which he acquired in the 1900s. file

When the final story of the McMillan Memorial Library is written, it will be about a person - William Northrup McMillan — who bequeathed part of his wealth to the citizens of Nairobi — and had it protected by an Act of Parliament. That was the work of a genius.

On the other side, McMillan was a maverick: How do you leave a will that states you would like to be buried on top of a mountain! Anyway, it happened and mourners were forced to hike a mountain populated with hundreds of buffaloes. McMillan is buried near the summit of Ol Donyo Sabuk where his grave overlooks the thousands of acres he owned — The Juja Farm.

Juja is not a local name, but was adopted from McMillan's Juja Farm, which expanded from near Ruiru and encompassed Mt Ol Donyo Sabuk to the east. It is near the summit of this mountain that McMillan, his wife, Lady Lucie, the househelp — Louis Decker- and the family dog are buried!

Private records from McMillan's estate indicate that sometimes in 1900 when he arrived in Nairobi he was carrying two statues he had bought in West Africa. He had been told that one was Ju and the other was Ja and had been asked to preserve them – otherwise he would perish at sea. (He actually died at sea!)

McMillan then settled on the road to Thika where he bought some 19,000 acres, at a time when nobody was allowed to own more than 5,000 acres. Privately, he attributed it to the powers of Ju and Ja idols and as a result he named the large expanse Ju-Ja Farm.

Because of the numerous superstition that surrounded Juja Farm, it became a no-go zone and locals used to fear entry into a land they always heard had been jinxed. As a result, McMillan's wife took the two idols from the house and buried them in Ndarugu valley, near Thika Town. As a result, the name Juja started entering into annals of colonial history in Kenya and interestingly refused to give way to its former name 'Weru wa Ndarugu', the Ndarugu plains.

The loss of Ju and Ja idols from his Juja House infuriated McMillan. He built a massive house near the mountain where he once hosted former American President Theodore Roosevelt (they used to hunt together in Juja) and Winston Churchill, when he was a minister of State for Colonies. The house, which once showcased the excesses of the dark side of British settler behaviours — there was an adjacent house that housed Somali women — has remained one of the standing embodiments of Juja. Though the verdant coffee plantations - a result of cheap African labour — as described by early travellers are no more, the library will for years be a landmark for Nairobi since Juja Farm is no more.

Like many other properties donated for public good, and had it not been protected, this library would perhaps have been brought down or sold.

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We have not yet forgotten the saga surrounding Lady Northey Home on Nairobi's State House Avenue, which was built in 1919 by Governor Northey's wife.

While the land was allocated to Lady Northey Home Registered Trustees for 61 years (from 1958) to run a children's home they naively transferred it to the City Council in July 1965 to hold in trust. The council later in 1994 hived a chunk of the land and tried to the transfer it to a private firm. A similar attempt had been done on McMillan library before somebody realised that there was indeed a MacMillan Library Act (Cap 217) that stood between the developers and the council. As the only landmark building in Nairobi that is specifically protected by law, this library will remain for years as a showcase of Victorian architecture.

The most important thing is that nobody will ever change its design and ownership.