

Letter to Adam Sedgwick, 27 May 1859

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MS 10/1
River Zambesi -East Africa
27 May 1859
Professor Sedgewick

My Dear Friend

We have just returned from the discovery of a magnificent Lake called Shirwa (Sheerwah) and a report of the natives on its banks, which we see no reason to doubt, says, that Shirwa is separated from a much larger Lake by a strip of land of only five or six miles in width - This larger Lake is called Nyinyesi = the stars - and is evidently the Nyanja, Nyassa, or Uniamesi of the Maps which stretches pretty well up to the Equator. This opening is so important that I feel bound to let you know about it as soon as possible - in order that you may sympathize in the emotions which it calls forth in connection with the great objects we have in view -

We visited the Shire about the beginning of the present year and our presence caused considerable alarm among the people who had never seen white visitors before We ascended in our little steamer about a hundred miles of Latitude - the Portuguese never went more than about 25 miles and having been beaten back had no good word to say for those who had drubbed them - The Manganja as the people are called are brave and can use well their bows & poisoned arrows.

We have had fever but of so mild a type that we failed for some months to recognize it

D^r Kirk & I have escaped altogether - The coal is excellent - one seam is twenty five feet thick and exposed in a cliff section - another 13 feet 7 in. old coal, I believe

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you must bear with my prosiness at first
My reasons will appear farther on - the river
is deep and easily navigated for one hundred
miles - Seeing the alarm we had created - The
people in large bodies gaurding us on both
banks night and day we retired in order
to let out (though I say it) decently civil conduct
have its effect, and in the end of March
returned, and found the inhabitants so frien dly,
that we left the vessel with a chief named
Chibisa; (16°2') and with D^r Kirk and 15 Makololo
proceeded Northwards on foot - Our course
lay along the banks of the Shire which then
was found flowing in a mountainous region.
and though our marches were but short we
each day gained 200 or 300 feet of elevation;
In about ten days we were 1500 feet above the
ship and in sight of a mountain - Dzomba -
or as people near it call it Zomba, over 6000
feet high - A marsh prevented our following
the Shire to the Northern spur of Zomba to which
it seemed to go or rather come, and in crossing
the Southern spur we were 3400 ft high, and
thence we got our first sight of Lake Shirwa
in the East - four days afterwards we stood on
its shores, and thanked the Great Father of All,
for permitting us the honour of first seeing its
broad blue waters - A grand sight it is for it
lies among bold mountain scenery - and
all the mountains are clothed with vegetation,
and several are inhabited even on their tops
We went some distance up a mountain and
could see 26° of watery horizon in the N.N.E.
only, two mountain tops rose in the blue
distance like little islands fifty or sixty miles
away. the Lake is of a pear shape or were it
not so unpoetical I would call it of a tadpole

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shape - It is from 25 to 30 miles wide in the
broad part but a narrow prolongation stretches
south of where we stood some 30 miles. No outlet
is known - its water is bitter but drinkable,
and it contains plenty of fish alligators, and
hippopotami - Leeches too as we found in
wading through a piece of marsh to get a

meridian observation of the Sun with the natural horizon - The shire probably comes out of Nyinyesi- It cannot come out of this for its water is sweet. We could obtain no information about Burton's party - but returning down the valley of the Shirwa - we ascertained that there is one point in which only about 30 miles of land travel will be necessary between a branch of the Shire, and the southern end of Shirwa - We have got no news from England since we left - If Burton has preceded us to Nyinyesi then we have got a Lake of our own and a short route to his - We mean to return shortly and I hope then to be able to tell you more about it.

At present I have to say that this is a real highland region - We saw many old people and D^r Kirk and I slept on the ground out of doors 20 nights and got our clothes wet with dew from the tall grass (7 or 8 ft) every morning yet returned to the ship in good health - The vegetation & people are much like what we have in Londa in the middle of the country also many streams with bogs - the people cultivate cotton very extensively - we never saw so much anywhere and this is the region I have pointed out as capable of becoming a counterpoise to American slave labour The farther we went the more important did this crop appear and every one spins & weaves it.

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Now the Portuguese knew nothing of this Lake being so near Lat 15 23' S. the point we reached Long- 35° 35' & 36° E. and we tell them very little - we allow our own Government to do that (tell them) for when I crossed the continent the Portuguese minister claimed the honour for two black men (Blue book for 1857) with Portuguese names, in order to establish a claim to lordship over the whole territory - then they propose to erect a station at the mouth of the Shire for the same purpose - and a custom house at the mouth of the Kongone branch of the Zambesi which we discovered = At present they are depopulating the country by French free emigration - The emigrants being sent out in chains - you will thus see that I cannot have much heart to open up a country for a parcel of

Portuguese pedlars in mens bodies & souls,
but I trust in Providence - a merciful
and kind Providence to turn all round to the
glory of God - We were obliged to wait for a
stronger vessel to take us up the rapids above
Tette - I would rather have gone up to make our
experiment in the Makololo country at once
but it has turned out for the opening of a
highland Lake region; and I pray that our
own Christian people may be permitted to
enter, and spread our blessed Redeemer's
kingdom - Be kind enough to present my
kindest remembrances to Professor Whewell
I shall take the liberty of writing him on our
return from Nyinyesi - Our naval officer
did not suit - Said he had not "his proper position
as second in command" so I had to become both
first & second and you know standing on a paddle
box in a hot sun is not favourable to literary labour
Blessings be on you. Ever Yours Affectionately
David Livingstone