

Letter to William R.S.V. Fitzgerald, 13 March 1872

Livingstone, David, 1813-1873

Published by Livingstone Online (livingstoneonline.org)

[0001]

Unyanyembe East Africa,
13 March 1872
The Right Hon'ble
Sir W. R. S. V. Fitzgerald,
May it please your excellency
Before starting on the
Expedition into Central Africa in
which I am now engaged I received
very great kindness and important
service from the Bombay Gov^t then
under Sir Bartle Frere. I have writ-
ten to express my thankfulness but
my letters to and from the coast
have all been destroyed, apparently
because I was considered a spy
on the slave trade whose correspond-
ence would do no good to the traffic.
The search for the sources of the
Nile they knew to be sham & I was
prevented from either getting supplies
of goods or sending information coast-
wards. This letter however goes by
Henry M. Stanley, the travelling
correspondent of the New York
Herald

[0002]

Herald sent at an expense of over
£4,000 to obtain accurate informa-
tion & afford assistance in my
isolation. If I give a short sketch
of my progress thus far it may
gratify the members of your Gov^t.
who cheerfully and cordially lent
me their aid.

The first point of import-
ance I ascertained was the
watershed of South Central Africa
was a broad tree-covered upland,
between 10° - 12° South Latitude. It
is generally between 4000 & 5000 feet

above the level of the sea, but mountains stand on it at various points which are between 6000 & 7000 feet above the ocean level - These mountains are possibly what the Geographer Ptolemy, for reasons now unknown, called the "mountains of the moon" because from the watershed on which they stand springs almost innumerable arise and unite into burns or brooks that never dry, and these converge into

[0003]

into streams of 20-40-60 or even 80 yards - and all running together form three great mains of drainage in a large gradually sloping upland valley which, beginning at the watershed, bends Northward and is probably the great valley of the Nile. The three [great] mains of drainage are large lacustrine rivers = extant specimens of what in prehistoric times abounded in Africa - and which in the Bechuana Country in the South still retain the name - "Melapo" and in the North are called "Wadys" both words meaning the same thing - River beds in which no water over now flows - these great Lacustrine rivers often take the name Lualaba & require distinctive epithets which I have ventured to supply. In the part of the great valley now explored there are, besides the great lacustrine rivers, fine lakes of great extent - connected by the rivers into one system - the furthest south is

[0004]

is called Bangweolo. It is between 140 & 150 miles long & 60 or 70 broad and I tried to cross and measure it accurately but on reaching an island 24 miles off, found that my mariners had stolen the canoe and got into a flurry on learning

that the real owners was in pursuit. They would come back for me - that they would certainly, but I had nothing left to hire another but my coverlet & it was very cold, being 4000 feet above the sea - so I did not relish being a Robinson Crusoe on a small island, and an apparently shoreless sea for 183° degrees around, & came back. Bangweolo is not a source of the Nile, for no large river begins in a Lake. It is fed by the river Chambeze & other streams & these may be considered sources rising far South of anything that geographers had dreamed. Emerging from the Lake it takes the name Luapula and that flowing into Lake Moero

[0005]

Moero escapes thence by a huge rent in the lofty mountains in the North - East and in the country called Rua & now assumes the name Lualaba - Webb's Lakeriver. It next enters Lake Kamolondo and moves on after that it has received in Kamolondo another large river - Bartle Frere's River - which far South is called Lufira as the Webb's great Lualaba or Central Line of drainage - Altogether west by Kamolondo, - Young's Lualaba flows through Lake Lincoln & then as to the great Lacustrine river Lomame it too falls into the Central main & four days beyond the confluence a fifth great lake is formed the discovery of which I was forced by Bamain slaves sent to me instead of men, to give up as the "unknown Lake". Nothing is more surprising in this Central region than the vast amount of water in Lakes, - rivers - and running rills - Webb's Lualaba, North of Kamolondo, is from one to three

[0006]

three miles broad and never can be waded at any point or at any time of the year. The Manyema Country through which it flows is inhabited by cannibals & no trader or traveller ever ventured there till two years ago. The elephants' tusks were left to rot in the interminable forests where the animals have been slain - the first adventurers I met had 18,000 lbs of ivory carried in two relays - and I have seen others with 3000 lbs weight bearing them in three relays of men. Bombay merchants will soon see these tusks in the market some half rotten & peeled to conceal the effect of tooth of time - others gnawed by a Rodent animal to sharpen his teeth, as London rats do on leaden pipes. In the forests one sees the sun about midday by thin pencils of rays sent down through the gloom, & at the clearances round villages. The Manyema, or as the Arabs shorten it Manyema, live in

[0007]

in villages & each headman is independent of & hates every other - there is no political cohesion and no great King in the whole country. They knew as little about the country as would be geographers who collected all their knowledge from slaves. At 30 miles distance they often had never heard of their own great river. It was therefore very difficult to explore & find out where the drainage went. I made four attempts in different directions but the vegetation was so dense, no help could be obtained by a glimpse of the river, - the mud was simply awful - plunging and plashing told severely on all. The ivory traders in spite of their intense eagerness to please the Bancain employers had often to give in by irritable eating ulcers fastening on the feet. I was laid up by them

for five months. It is impossible to describe the toil of winding ones way through forests so dense only elephants

[0008]

elephants & buffaloes could penetrate & often in mud from calf to thigh deep - these must be facsimiles of the haunts frequented by the megatheria & the great old uncomfortable beasts that geologists speak about - and then after all the great river made so much Westing - some [five] degrees of Long. - I could not for a long time be sure that it was not the Congo - & who would run the risk of being put into a cannibal Manyema pot and be converted into black man for anything less than the grand old Nile. But at length Bartle Frere's river & the Lomane river - the Western lines of drainage flowed into the Central main & report said it ran beyond the fifth or "unknown lake" into large reedy marshes - possibly Pethericks - or the Western arm in distinction from the Eastern which Speke, Grant, & Baker believed to be the Nile. - I do not speak positively

[0009]

positively yet too many clever men have been mistaken for me to assume the dogmatic tone. Before leaving the watershed I may add that four fountains are reported thereon & each at no great distance off becomes a large river. Two are reported to flow South & two run North - the Liambai or Upper Zambesi & the Kapul flow South. Bartle Frere river & the Lomane flow North to Egypt(?). I have presumed to give names to those fountains whose rivers I know, & my concluding trip is to rediscover these

fountains for I have the presumption to start the hypothesis in Central Africa, and without a single book of reference, that these are the fountains mentioned to Herodotus by The Secretary of Minerva in the city of Lais in Egypt - if they exist only in my imagination, from the dim recollection of reading the ancient historian in boyhood, then we shall see - and

[0010]

and I shall tell you that I was mistaken; another point to be examined is the very extensive underground excavations which seem to be ancient, for the natives all ascribe their formation to the deity and all have running streams of water laid on & are equal to the protection of the people of large districts in cases of invasion - also very ancient & inexhaustible Malachite copper mines at Katanga

I have been much longer than I intended - 6 years instead of 2 - but I have lost two whole years in time, been burdened by 1800 miles of useless tramp, - & how much waste of money I cannot say, all through the matter of supplies & men being entrusted to our Banian ~~Bichan~~ [Indian] fellow subjects & they entrusted the whole thing to slaves who lay and feasted on my stores for sixteen months & then sold off all for slaves and ivory - the slave trade in all this

[0011]

this region, & especially in Manyema, is carried on almost exclusively with arms, ammunition & goods advanced to Arab Agents by Banians - their slaves needed no more than a hint & all came & solemnly swore that they were told not to follow but force me back - they

forced me back 500 miles and again
I had to come 300 to seize goods here
sent by another lot of slaves - and my
Agent at Zanzibar believes all they
tell him. - It was stated in the
House of Lords on the authority he receives
that all my wants had been supplied
while I virtually got only what I my-
self sent to Ujiji in 1866. - But I am
all right & ready by M^r Stanley's help
and will be off as soon as fifty men
come from the coast.

I have &c
by David Livingstone
H. M.'s Consul,
Inner Africa.
P.S.

[0012]
P.S. I have requested vaccine
virus to be sent by mail & will
feel obliged if it is forwarded [to Zanzibar] at
your convenience, - add cover to John
Webb U.S. Consul; it will be
sent on safely.

(True Copy)
A C Milder
For Assistant Secretary.