

Easy Chair Geography vs. Field Geography, 25 November 1856

Livingstone, David, 1813-1873

Published by Livingstone Online (livingstoneonline.org)

[0001]

Steam Ship Candia

In Mediterranean

25th Nov^r

1856

To the Editor of the Athenaeum

Easy chair[,]~~geography~~ [-] versus Field geography

In coming up the Red Sea about

a week ago in the P. & O. Co^y steamer Nubia

I was favoured by M^r Latouche the Admiralty

agent on board with a sight of a late number

of your widely circulated journal containing

a paper by M^r Cooley the author of a pamphlet

called "Inner Africa laid open", in which he

rather lugubriously complains because I

have not thrown a "flood of light" on what

if his pamphlet is what its name implies,

surely needed not any glimmerings I could

give. He asserts that when I went to

[0002]

Loanda I got my head "stuffed full" of

antiquated Portuguese notions respecting

" Inner Africa" which (observe) I not they nor he

had visited, and then he modestly

makes mouths at Sir Roderick

Murchison for not inflicting the whole

of these "notions" in one dose upon the

members of the British Association

at Cheltenham. Excuse a stupid story.

It was formerly the custom at what are

called sacramental occasions in Scotland

for the assembled ministers to have a feast

on the Mondays when the entire services

were over. A worthy grazier & butcher Tom

Trumel by name having, on account of

his influential position in the parish, been

invited to share in the conviviality, sat

most of the time dumb, But one of the

ministers observing him several times

"making his mouth" as if to edge in an

[0003]

observation, interrupted the others by saying M^r T. wishes to make some remark, when Tom burst forth with "My brown bull is the best that ever came out of the isle of Mull". the explosion that followed may be imagined. Now M^r Cooley evidently considers Sir Roderick [^] [Murchison] and myself as a pair of "Tom Trummels". I could not, he modestly avers, open my mouth in Loanda, except about the ~~Zambesi~~ [Interior] and he is disappointed because Sir Roderick did not sustain fully the Trummel character - bore the members to death with what he proceeds to shew is my "nonsense" and enable the erudite author of "Inner Africa laid open" an opportunity of snuffing out my pretensions before I should reach my native shores or utter one squeak for

[0004]

for mercy. For some time I thought it unnecessary to notice such an ebullition of killing modesty on the part of a gentleman who never left his easy chair in London to settle one single point in geography or in anything else. One must make some allowance for the crochets of our elders, and we can readily excuse M^r Cooley in feeling the necessity of keeping up the eclat he formerly gained by his exposé of Douville's bungling attempt to appear as an actual traveller in Angola, by running a muck against every one else traveller or no traveller. We can even feel kindly to him though he used exactly the same means of getting some idea of "Inner Africa" as Douville did, and then boldly publishing "Inner Africa laid open"

[0005]

2^d Sheet

without even pretending to have visited the scenes which the title seems to promise, for, does not Carlyle declare that the whole world is a "huge sham" but I must crave leave to enter a gentle protest against putting Easychair geography on a level with that of actual

observation. Field geography need not rank lower than Field geology, and if the progress of the former in Africa should like all improvements bring the unavoidable evil with it of addling some ingenious speculations and theories, our comfortable friends need not despair. they may indulge their cacoethes scribendi by "Inner Australia laid open". Inner [^] [Ant]Arctic circle laid open" and if they wish to avoid being twitted about not having seen the countries they patronize they may give us "Inner Lunar lands laid open" as well.

In excuse for wasting time in answering

[0006]

the geographical twaddle contained in the paper referred to I have several things to plead, such as, a dislike to being represented as having discovered marvels I never saw and being quoted as authority for things I never said. My easychair friends are so fond of garbling matters on the plea of "right interpretation". (a favourite phrase with such) that I fear I must soon make out a list of things I did not see. One of them who is excessively fond of the parenthesis, "unknown to themselves", actually got up in a meeting of the Geographical Society in which the discovery of Lake Ngami by M^r Oswel and myself in 1849 was communicated, and declared that it had been discovered by me alone many years before. I was obliged to deny the assertion. then here comes another and asserts that a large river discovered

[0007]

by the same parties in 1851 runs not on the surface but underground. Now I cannot afford to deal largely in travellers' wonders I intend to return, and even supposing there were no other considerations, it would be rather inconvenient to be asked by a companion who may favour me with his company "Where did you meet the men with tails? Where was the Phoenix's nest? Where the river running underground? Or where did you drink the milk of she unicorns in your coffee?" the return difficulties

are all avoided by those who neither go nor come again.

In order however that your readers may understand the assertions contained in M^r Cooley's paper respecting the Leeambye or Zambesi I may explain that there are two main chains in the great interior valley neither of which nor

[0008]

valley itself were ever dreamed of by the author of "Inner Africa laid open". these drains are the Congo on the North and the Zambesi on the South. The rivers generally flow from the sides of the country into the centre to form the mains referred to, and these run the one North the other South till they find an exit to the sea the one on the West the other on the East coast. the Zambesi with which we have at present to do flows from North to South from 14° to 18° South Latitude before it turns Eastwards, receiving in that space, if my eyesight did not deceive me, no fewer than ten large perennial rivers, And if the native testimony may be received, there is [^] [in "Inner Africa"] a net work of waters with "anastomoses" unequalled in the world beside. The Zambesi however is the main artery of the system. And affords the best test of the utter worthlessness of easychair geography that could have been selected. the great river in the

[0009]

3rd Sheet

centre of the Continent is essentially an English discovery. the Portuguese all imagined that it rose in the South (vide all old maps)[and a jumble of the same in "Inner Africa laid open"]]

They discovered a branch of it at Cazembes town but supposed it went to Angola! from seeing it flowing westwards. It is named Luamegi (soft g) Luambeji Luambesi, Iambeji, Zjambeji, Leeambye Zambesei - OjimbesiZambesi at different parts of its course, the name varying according to the dialect of the people who live on its banks, But these words all express one and the same idea viz. the River par excellence, and it is

most appropriately so called for it truly is Malinoka cote = "mother of all rivers" to the inhabitants. When we discovered the southern portion we found it at its lowest [^] [state] yet there were from 300 to 500 yards of deep flowing water, and during its annual inundation there is a perpendicular

[0010]

rise of between twenty and thirty feet M^r Oswel had never seen such a magnificent river even in India. And the Nile at the spot where the railway from Cairo to Alexandria crosses it, lately seemed to me small in comparison. It forms the southern line of defence of the Makololo (from Sesheke to near the Portuguese possessions) against the Matibele of Mosilikatze. And they have men stationed at different points of its banks to prevent the original inhabitants of the country from ferrying their enemies over. But M^r Cooley tells your readers that this gigantic stream is only an "undeveloped river" And as his ideas of rivers all evidently formed from the sight familiar in his travels of little ragged boys letting crooked pins down through grating into Cockney streams to catch four legged fish, he declares that the Leeambye or Luamegi or the river runs beneath a grating somewhat larger

[0011]

than the whole French Empire. I only wish this were true. I should then have a travellers tale worth telling. But having traced it by travelling sometimes ~~by travelling~~ on one bank sometimes on the other or sailed hundreds of miles on its broad bosom, I am compelled to believe that a geographer on an easy chair with a bowl of Punch before him may see greater marvels than any traveller in the field. If we fancy the scene in England we have a clearer idea of the assertion that the glorious river referred to "runs underground and supports the vegetation of the Kalahari desert." The Thames at London bridge to the best of my recollection is considerably smaller than the Leeambye at Sesheke, but let us

take it for illustration, and conceive
of another river (the Chobe) having
120 yards of deep flowing water *
* 40 yards at the waggon stand of 1851 but 120 yards lower down
when all its branches are joined into one stream
running parallel to its right bank

[0012]

and intending to join it at Gravesend. then
listen to M^r Cooley declaring to the thousands
who peruse the Athenaeum that the "Thames"
and the "Pool" are not the same river. That
the Thames doubles down beneath the soil
and flows underneath the other river
and at right angles to it to support the
vegetation [of] England Scotland and the
Orkney islands. then winding up the
assertion with another one about
"sincerity"!

I have also to plead a desire to disabuse
the minds of your readers of the idea put
forth by this gentleman that actual
travellers ~~gain~~ have no knowledge of
the country adjacent to their line of march
and must rely on "conjecture alone" Grant
him this and the Easychair geographer
feels he has as good a right to put forth
conjectures as any man who ever
travelled. the Field geologist glories in
his hammer but say that he is

[0013]

4th
ignorant of everything but the hammer
and all the rest is conjecture, and you
bring back philosophy to the dignified
system which Bacon exploded, As your
readers must perceive by M^r C.'s confession
for such I regard it that conjecture holds
a prominent place in Easychair philosophy
I may give one instance of the value
of the actual travellers plan of gaining
information, and another of the folly
of trusting to "conjecture". We travel in
the company of men who are well
acquainted with parts of the country
by personal observation. I had one man
for instance who had [^] [formerly] travelled both
banks of the Zambesi to near Tete
and another who had been present
at an attack on Senna. they soon see

that we are interested in the courses
of rivers, names of hills, tribes &c &c
and make enquiries among the

[0014]

villagers to whom we come. Drawings are
made on the ground and parts pointed
out that bearings may be taken and
comparisons drawn from the views
of different individuals. We thus gain
a general idea of the whole country. We
confess our obligations to native
information, We admit our liability to
mistake. It is discovery not a survey.
[But] the self satisfied assurance of the Easychair
and pair of compasses, is not one
of our besetting sins. the first time I
ventured on [^] [giving] a large extent of country
on native information was in the case
of this same Zambesi or Leeambye. And
so accurate has it been proved by my
own personal inspection ~~of it~~ from
Lat. 14° South to the Sea I have little to add
to the native map of 1851. this shews
the value of the plan usually followed.

In that same year I was guilty of
"conjecturing" that certain wells south

[0015]

of the river system was probably supplied
by percolation through soft calcareous
tufa from the North. this was seized upon
and amplified in "Inner Africa laid open"
into the whole Zambesi going underground
If a little water percolates a hundred
miles a great river will percolate
seven hundred, and if it flows
beneath the soil it cannot run on
the surface, therefore the Thames & the
Pool are two distinct rivers. You
think I am trifling. [do you?] No one would
either argue in that way or if he should
could find an individual to believe him.
When M^r Oswel and I discovered Lake
Ngami in 1849 we believed that short
letters to the Royal Geographical Society
were all that need be published about
it. M^r Anderson who succeeded in
reaching it from the west adopted another
course and published a book, wishing
to see what his predecessors thought

[0016]

of it he seems to have turned to "Inner Africa laid open" and not suspecting that the statements had been garbled by "right interpretation" made several ludicrous blunders. He thinks [^] [for instance] we estimate the extent of the Lake too highly and then puts his own estimate at a higher figure, 70 geographical miles being greater than 75 statute miles. He verifies our observation of Lake Ngami being only 2000 ft above the level of the sea and though he was present when M^r Galton ascertained the country west of Libebe & the Lake to be about 6000 ft high he has no hesitation in "inserting on the authority of M^r Cooley the river Itchybumbum" which to flow at all westwards must run uphill four thousand feet. I quote from memory and with not the smallest intention to depreciate the merits of such an intelligent & enterprising traveller as

[0017]

5th

M^r Anderson, Indeed I feel a little sorry that I must refer to him at all as some may construe my reference into that. But we find him fairly deceived by this same curious logic and then quoted triumphantly by M^r Cooley in exactly the same style as a boy who had been duped on all fools day might be quoted to increase the number of dupes. M^r Anderson certainly would never have said that "M^r Cooley clearly proves that the Leeambye runs south." if he had known that I and about half a dozen Europeans had travelled North on dry land in what is said to be its bed and M^r Moffat had been prevented by want of water [^] [in the same quarter] from reaching me because that would imply the indorsement of the doctrine that the goodly river was all the while gurgling beneath M^r M's feet. I sailed along the noble river right to the cleft by which it bursts through the Eastern ridge. And as M^r Cooley has scraped together all the little the Portuguese had of Interior geography his meanderings

[0018]

most thoroughly demonstrate that the fact of a great Interior valley & the Zambesi flowing in it is a genuine English discovery and the point which proves the connection between the new and the old ought to have the name of our Queen in the way of commemoration.

It may now be seen whether M^r Cooley's positive assertion that I did not travel from the River to Loanda means more than whether six is less or more than half a dozen but he adds a mistake was made about the Chikapa. "there is a difference of forty miles between going and returning, this is very unsatisfactory." Now I did make a mistake but when on my return I crossed this stream forty miles further down I found out my mistake and hastened to correct it. Could mortal man do more? I was determined to succeed in opening "Inner Africa" and as there [^] [were] some very formidable probabilities against living through the enterprise - some forms of death which an easychair geographer

[0019]

would of course gladly dare. I sent home succinct accounts by every opportunity of every important point. these were necessarily fragmentary, and without remarking on M^r C's good taste in eagerly pronouncing a mistake corrected not by him but myself as "very unsatisfactory" I shall just notice the logic and then favour M^r Cooley with a proposition. the corrected mistake is declared to be unsatisfactory evidently to prepare the mind of the reader for believing his own mistake about the Zambesi flowing underground He could not mean if a mistake was made I ought to stick to it, like the man who always eat his asparagus hard end foremost, but simply this if he made a mistake in the Chikapa he has also made one with Leeambye, and if he is wrong I am right. It would scarcely do to add and if D^r L. corrected his error in one case he would do the same in the other? O dear No, that would be [Nigger logic]

[0020]

When M^r Gordon Cumming was forming his well known collection around and beyond my house at Kolobeng I had somewhat to do in the way of furnishing guides, and being considered by them as a sort of father they furnished me with a minute account of the movements and adventures which have since been published by the "Lionslayer" himself. Sometimes the narrators were sent forward with presents of game. At other times they came for assistance to extricate their master out of difficulties, so it generally happened that I had to listen to the stories from unsophisticated witnesses a considerable time before we had the pleasure of listening to the same from M^r Cumming's lips at our own fireside. Now I have two reasons for referring to this. One is I have frequently been asked if M^r Cumming's book were true and wish [^] [to] give a general answer to those who may wish to put the question again that without approving everything

[0021]

6th

in it the book is essentially a truthful one the statements with respect to the abundance of game at the time he was in the country far from exaggerated, and it gives a good idea of African hunting, The other reason may be seen in the following supposing as I had it in my power I had collected these hunting adventures garbled and "rightly interpreted" and published them in the manner of "Inner Africa laid open". Could I honestly have called myself a "lion slayer"? My antecedents would seem to say if I had made such a mistake so far from pronouncing it "very unsatisfactory" and trying to write M^r Cumming down before he could publish a connected statement, I would instantly have confessed my mistake by transferring the profits of my work to the true "Lion slayer". And as my hopes are excited by the flourish about "sincerity" if M^r

[0022]

Cooley will take the hint I hereby
engage to give a good account of the
profits of "Inner Africa laid open"

David Livingston

[1856

Rev.^d D^r Livingston]