



World History

Reading 1.3 – Exploration, and Imperialism

Name:

Section:

Commerce and Christianity: 1841-1857

In 1857 the most famous explorer of the day addresses an audience of young men in Cambridge's Senate House. He urges upon them an idealistic mission worthy of their attention in Africa. He is about to return there, he tells them, in the hope of opening a path into the continent 'for commerce and Christianity'.

He needs young enthusiasts to continue this work. The speaker is David Livingstone, aptly described by a commentator of the time as an 'indefatigable pedestrian'.

Livingstone's first involvement with Africa has been purely as a missionary, sent out to South Africa in 1841 by the London Missionary Society. But he soon becomes interested in other tasks far beyond the responsibilities placed on him by the society.

The challenge which first inspires Livingstone is to establish mission stations ever further north into the unexplored interior of the continent. This in turn brings him experiences which dictate the pattern of his life.

In these remote regions he sees the continent's slave trade at its source, where the victims are captured by fellow Africans for sale to the Arab traders who dispatch them to markets on the east coast. Livingstone becomes convinced that this pernicious trade will only be suppressed if routes are established along which European goods can reach the interior of the continent, providing the basis for new and different trading activities.

Along such routes missionaries too will travel, benefiting the Africans' spiritual as well as their material needs - hence 'commerce and Christianity'. But finding such routes requires from Livingstone the skills for which he becomes renowned, those of the explorer.

The great journey which has recently made his name, when he speaks in 1857 in Cambridge, has lasted the best part of three years.

Livingstone's first great journey: 1853-1856

In 1853 Livingstone is provided with twenty-seven men by a friendly chieftain at Sesheke on the Zambezi. With them he sets off west, into unknown territory, to find a way to the coast.

Six months later, after appalling difficulties from disease and hostile tribes, the group arrives at Luanda on the Atlantic coast. There are British ships in the harbor, whose captains offer Livingstone a passage home to instant fame. But he insists that he must take his men back to Sesheke.

Returning by a different route takes him even longer, suggesting that there is no easy access to the interior from the west side of the continent. Instead Livingstone now attempts a journey east from Sesheke down the Zambezi, this time accompanied by more than 100 tribesmen.

Within fifty miles their way is blocked by the Victoria Falls. This brings Livingstone the credit of being the first European to discover this marvel of nature, though to him it is merely an irritating obstacle. However in this direction the terrain does prove easier to cross on foot.

Reaching Portuguese Mozambique, Livingstone this time leaves his tribesmen at the coast (he returns two years later to guide them home). He sets sail in 1856 for England. Here he publishes *Missionary Travels* (1857), a dramatic account of his adventures which makes him famous. But by the end of 1858 he is back to Africa.

Over the next fifteen years his adventures form part of an intense search, mainly conducted by British explorers, to discover the sources of the Nile and the Congo among Africa's central cluster of great lakes.

Burton, Speke and the Nile: 1857-1876

The quest to discover the source of the Nile becomes an obsession of the mid-19th century. For it is an extraordinary fact that this great river was at the heart of one of the world's first civilizations and yet, 5000 years later, no one knows where its enriching waters arrive from.

It is true that the source of one its two branches, the Blue Nile (which merges with the White Nile at Khartoum), is known with some degree of certainty from the 17th century - for its waters flow from Lake Tana in Ethiopia, a civilized area familiar to many visitors. But the White Nile comes from much further south, in impenetrable equatorial regions.

The first serious attempts to explore far up the waters of the White Nile are made from 1839 on the order of Mohammed Ali, ruler of Egypt and recent conqueror of the Sudan. His explorers reach a point slightly upstream of Juba, where rising land and tumbling rapids make it impossible to continue any further on the river itself.

A land approach by another route towards the elusive headwaters is clearly required. Such an expedition is planned in 1856 by the Royal Geographical Society in London. Chosen to lead it are two young men, Richard Burton (already famous for the astonishingly bold pilgrimage which he has made in 1853 to Mecca, disguised as a Muslim) and the relatively inexperienced John Hanning Speke.

Burton and Speke arrive in December 1856 in Zanzibar, where they spend six months planning their journey into the interior of Africa. In June 1857 they are ready to set off from the coast at Bagamoyo. At first they are able to follow the well-trodden routes of Arab merchants which bring them by November to Tabora, the long-established hub of east African trading routes.

Here they are told of three great lakes in the region. To the south is Lake Nyasa (in western terms discovered in the following year by Livingstone, now back in Africa from England). To the west is Lake Tanganyika and to the north Lake Victoria, both about to be discovered by Burton and Speke.

It is a strange concept that Europeans should be described as discovering geographical features on which the local populations were well able to provide them with information. Yet the first description of such places by outsiders does have a real significance.

Travelers returning from remote places to the developed world contribute news of them for the first time to a global pool of ever-developing knowledge. The detailed maps which we now take for granted, and which in the 19th century had many uncharted blank spaces, depend entirely on such second-hand 'discoveries' and on subsequent visits by other explorers to fill in the details.

Burton and Speke first explore westwards, towards Lake Tanganyika, which they reach in February 1858 at Ujiji (the site thirteen years later of Stanley's dramatic meeting with Livingstone - see Stanley and Livingstone). When they arrive back in Tabora, Burton is ill. Speke therefore strikes north alone to reach (and name) Lake Victoria.

Speke conceives the hunch, on no firm evidence, that this great stretch of water is probably the source of the White Nile. It could just as well be Lake Tanganyika, and the issue is hotly debated on the return of the explorers

to England. The Royal Geographical Society therefore supports another expedition by Speke to try and resolve the matter.

Speke sets off again in 1860 with a new companion, James Grant. (A disgruntled Burton has meanwhile hurried west to inspect and describe the Mormons in their recently established utopia at Salt Lake City.)

Speke and Grant reach the southern shore of Lake Victoria in 1861 and begin exploring up its western coast. In July 1862 they discover and name the Ripon Falls, over which water tumbles from the northern extremity of the lake towards the distant Mediterranean. With considerable confidence Speke can now maintain that this great lake is indeed the source of the White Nile. But two more pieces of the jigsaw are required to clinch it.

Baker, Stanley and the Nile: 1863-1872

While travelling round Lake Victoria, Speke hears news of another large lake to the northwest. He guesses that the water from the Ripon Falls may reach and flow through this other lake, but he is prevented by a local war from following the course of the river towards it.

On their way north Speke and Grant rejoin the Nile at Konokoro, near Juba. Here, in February 1863, they meet the most eccentric pair of characters of all those involved in the Nile exploration. Samuel Baker and his intrepid Hungarian wife, Florence von Sass, have equipped their own expedition and have travelled upstream from Khartoum with ninety-six attendants in three boats.

Speke and Baker, friends already from earlier encounters, treat each other with exemplary generosity. Speke tells Baker of the reported lake and hands over to him the maps which he has made since leaving Lake Victoria. Baker, forced now by the approaching rapids to take to the land, gives Speke and Grant his three boats for their continuing journey downstream.

Baker and his wife now plunge into two years of extreme danger among hostile tribes from whom their only protection is alliances with unscrupulous Arab slave-traders or powerful local potentates, one of whom even tries to claim Florence as payment for services rendered.

Not until March 1865 are Baker and his wife safely back in Konokoro. But in the interim they have reached the stretch of water which Baker names Lake Albert (thus nominally securing the entire upper reaches of the Nile for the British royal family). Baker has explored far enough round the lake to identify the points at which the water from Lake Victoria both arrives and departs.

The only unsolved question is whether the huge Lake Tanganyika might also contribute to the flow. This is finally answered in 1872, when Stanley and Livingstone explore the northern shores. They discover that the only river at that point flows into rather than out of Lake Tanganyika.

Livingstone, Stanley and the Congo: 1872-1877

When Stanley departs for England in March 1872, he leaves Livingstone at Lake Tanganyika - for the veteran explorer is determined to investigate another river system, west of the lake, which he believes must be linked either to the Nile or to the Congo. In August 1872, receiving supplies and men sent from the coast by Stanley, he sets off south to the marshy area round Lake Bangweulu. Here, exhausted by dysentery, he dies in April 1873.

Stanley, devoted to Livingstone after the four months he has spent with him, is also well aware of the Livingstone legend, contact with which has secured his own fame. He decides to continue on his own account

the explorer's final quest (see Stanley and Livingstone).

Stanley raises support in London for a new expedition to explore the Lualaba, the river whose source Livingstone was hoping to find near Lake Bangweulu. In November 1874 he and his party of three Europeans and about 300 Africans (some of them women and children) set off from the east coast at Bagamoyo and head for Lake Victoria.

They have with them a collapsible boat, the *Lady Alice*, in which Stanley surveys the entire circuit of the shores of Lake Victoria and Lake Tanganyika before moving on further west to the Lualaba. In 1876 he reaches Nyangwe, the furthest point reached by Livingstone in a journey of exploration along the river.

Beyond this is inhospitable territory, of dense rain forest and savage tribes, unreached even by the Arab traders whose routes have long crisscrossed the continent. Stanley presses on till he can launch the *Lady Alice* on the Congo itself, a meandering river often four miles broad. Eventually he reaches a vast basin which he names Stanley Pool (now the site of Brazzaville on one bank and Kinshasa on the other). Beyond this the river plunges down a long series of cataracts, named by Stanley the Livingstone Falls.

Many of Stanley's men drown here. For the last part of his transcontinental journey, from Isangila Falls, he strikes out cross-country. He reaches the estuary of the Congo, at Boma, in August 1877.

It has been the most dramatic and arduous of all the great journeys of African exploration of the previous twenty years. When the remnants of the party reach Boma, more than half the Africans recruited three years previously in Zanzibar are dead. So are Stanley's three European companions.

The cost has been high. But with the Congo charted, the pattern of the great rivers rising in central Africa is now finally clear. And Stanley's achievement turns out to be a pivotal event in the 19th-century European involvement in the continent. This last instalment of the mid-century saga of exploration is also the first chapter of the subsequent 'scramble for Africa'.

King Leopold and the Congo: 1875-1878

For two years it is known around the world that Stanley, if alive, is somewhere in west central Africa. The last news received from him is in 1875, just after he has sailed the *Lady Alice* round Lake Victoria. There is therefore much excitement and curiosity concerning his exploits as an explorer. But only one European ruler sees Stanley's adventure as a prelude to imperialism.

This exception is Leopold II, king of Europe's newest country, the small and relatively insignificant Belgium. At a time when the main imperial powers, Britain and France, are extremely reluctant to take on more commitments, Leopold sees the chance of prestige in a new colonial role.

In September 1876 Leopold invites the world's leading African explorers and experts to a lavish conference in Brussels. He invites them to join him in setting up an International African Association, the purpose of which will be 'to open to civilization the only part of our globe to which it has yet to penetrate'. The king emphasizes in his opening remarks that in this he has no selfish designs. 'No, gentlemen, if Belgium is small, she is happy and satisfied with her lot.'

But in a subsequent letter to the Belgian ambassador in London, he is more frank: 'I do not want to miss a good chance of getting us a slice of this magnificent African cake.'

Leopold's interest can be taken as the beginning of the scramble for Africa (a phrase coined in 1884). But as yet there is little of a practical nature that he can do. Stanley, the man who will be best equipped to help Leopold realize his ambitious plan, is in September 1876 only just striking west from Lake Tanganyika to reach the Lualaba and begin his exploration of the Congo.

A year later, in September 1877, news reaches Europe of Stanley's success. Leopold sends agents to intercept the explorer on his journey back to England. They approach him in January 1878, in the railway station at Marseilles, and invite him to accompany them immediately to Brussels.

Stanley declines the invitation. He is determined that Britain shall benefit from the riches (mainly ivory and rubber) which he has observed in the Congo basin. He spends the next few months - on the crest of a hero's welcome - preaching to politicians, businessmen and philanthropists a renewed version of Livingstone's original message. It is Britain's duty and opportunity to take commerce and Christianity into the heart of Africa.

Stanley's clarion call falls on deaf ears. Within six months, in June 1878, he sends a message to Leopold. He is coming to Brussels.

The race for Stanley Pool: 1879-1882

Stanley agrees to work for Leopold for five years. His task is to create a viable link between Boma and Stanley Pool. This lake is the all-important strategic site on the Congo, for Stanley has proved that upstream from here the river is navigable for 1000 miles or more.

The immediate and daunting undertaking is to use tons of explosive to blast roads, bypassing the stretches of river where cataracts make navigation impossible. Along these roads, and on the calm stretches of water, the parts of two steamboats, the *Royal* and the *En Avant*, will be transported - to be assembled in Stanley Pool and then to trade on the upper river. By August 1879 Stanley is back at Boma, ready to begin this mighty labor.

Progress is predictably slow. A year later Stanley has still covered less than half the distance. And he is as yet unaware that a French rival, Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, has stolen a march on him.

Brazza has spent the years 1875-8 exploring the Ogooué River, north of the Congo in Gabon. Hearing on his return of Stanley's discoveries, and eager to claim the Congo for France, Brazza realizes that he knows a relatively quick and secret route to the great river. With considerable difficulty, he wins French support for a bold plan. Brazza proposes to forestall Stanley at his own strategically placed Stanley Pool.

Brazza starts his journey up the Ogooué late in 1879. By September 1880, with his rival still miles downstream, he is in Stanley Pool introducing himself to the local potentate, King Makoko, ruler of the territory along the north bank of the river. Within days Makoko puts his royal seal on a solemn treaty, placing his kingdom under the protection of France and agreeing to have no dealings with any Europeans other than the French.

With this achieved, Brazza makes his way down the lower Congo to the coast. In doing so he meets Stanley, busy with his laborious roadwork. Brazza mentions nothing to Stanley of his triumph, or of the treaty in his pocket.

Stanley discovers the unpleasant truth in the summer of 1881, when he reaches Stanley Pool. A tricolor is flying over a guard post (on the site of what later becomes Brazzaville) and Stanley finds that he is refused all assistance on the north bank of the river. Even the local markets are closed to him. He has no option but to cross to the south.

Here there is a friendly ruler, Ngaliema. He and Stanley became blood brothers when they met in 1877. After some difficulties Stanley establishes in 1882 a foothold in Ngaliema's kingdom, on a site which he names

Léopoldville. Thus the race between the two explorers results in the first unmistakable carve-up of African territory - French Congo north of the river, Belgian Congo to the south.

Because of Leopold's passionate interest in his venture, it is the Belgian undertaking which makes rapid progress. Stanley, unlike Brazza, is in situ. With his two steamers plying the reaches of the middle Congo, he is busy building trading stations. A serious commercial venture, the first in the interior of Africa, may perhaps be in the making in what soon becomes the Congo Free State.

The scale of Leopold's ambition (evident, for example, when he tries in 1882 to persuade General Gordont to take command in the Congo) suddenly alarms the larger European powers. They have shown no interest in any race for African territory. But if there is to be such a race, perhaps they cannot afford not to be part of it.

Before the scramble: 1882-1884

In 1882, when Stanley is securely established in Léopoldville, the European involvement in Africa is still limited to a few colonial ventures around the coast. Some, such as Portugal's holdings in Mozambique and Angola, date back to the early voyages of exploration.

The next African colony to be founded, a century and more after the pioneering efforts of the Portuguese, has meanwhile developed into by far the best established of the European settlements. The 17th-century Dutch presence at the Cape of Good Hope has evolved into Britain's Cape colony and two independent Boer republics, the Orange Free State and the Transvaal.

The 19th century brings increasing European involvement in north Africa, where economic interests cause France to annex Algeria and Tunisia. They also draw a reluctant Britain into close involvement in Egyptian affairs.

Elsewhere there are only a few places, all of them in west Africa, where there is any European involvement other than in coastal trade. Nearly all the European settlements derive originally from depots for the purchase and embarkation of slaves. But closer involvement in a few of them during the 19th century has a different purpose. In most cases the new aim is to develop markets for legitimate trade in place of slavery. In a few it is to mitigate the evil of slavery by providing havens for freed slaves.

Past and present patterns of trade lie behind the French involvement in the Ivory Coast (originally a source of ivory and slaves) and in Senegal (valuable gums and slaves). The same gradual development explains the British presence in Ghana (gold and slaves) and Nigeria (mainly slaves).

But the purpose of the British fort built on the Gambia in 1816 is to control the slave trade. Similarly a British trading group, the Sierra Leone Company, founds Freetown as early as 1791 to settle freed slaves. And France has the identical purpose in establishing Libreville on the Gabon in 1848.

Two much smaller colonies, Portuguese Guinea and Spain's Equatorial Guinea, complete this group of about a dozen territories. Together they are the only regions where any degree of formal European control is established before 1882.

Over the next twenty years this situation will change dramatically, until only a few African states remain out of European clutches. The catalyst for this sudden development is the German chancellor, who has been adamant that Germany is uninterested in African colonies. In 1884 Bismarck changes his mind.

Gascoigne, Bamber. "History of Sub-Saharan Africa." History of Sub-Saharan Africa. HistoryWorld.net, n.d. Web. 17 June 2014.