

Easy Chair Geography vs. Field Geography, 25 November 1856

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[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 - Ojimbesi Zambesi 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
 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 percieve 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 Easy chair 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 Mr 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 Mr 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

Mr 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 Mr 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. Mr Anderson certainly would never have said that " Mr 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 Mr 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 Mr M's feet. I sailed along the noble river right to the cleft by which it bursts through the Eastern ridge. And as Mr 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]