

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 moun-
tains stand on it at various points
which are between 6000 & 7000 feet
above the ocean level - These moun-
tains 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 laucustine rivers =
extant specimens of what in prehis-
toric 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 dis-
tinctive epithets which I have
ventured to supply. In the part
of the great valley now explored
there are, besides the great lacus-
trine 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 Kamo-
londo another large river - Bartle
Frere's River - which far South is called
Lufira as the Webb's great Lualaba
or Central Line of drainage - Alto-
gether 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 conflu-
ence 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 splashing 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 pre-
sumed to give names to those foun-
tains whose rivers I know, & my con-
cluding 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 foun-
tains 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 myself 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.