

## Easy Chair Geography vs. Field Geography, 25 November 1856

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[0001]

Steam Ship Candia

In Mediterranean

25<sup>th</sup> Nov<sup>r</sup>

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<sup>y</sup> steamer Nubia I was favoured by M<sup>r</sup> Latouche the Admiralty agent on board with a sight of a late number of your widely circulated journal containing a paper by M<sup>r</sup> 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<sup>r</sup> 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<sup>r</sup> 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<sup>r</sup> 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<sup>d</sup> 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<sup>r</sup> 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<sup>r</sup> 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, recieving  
in that space, if my eyesight did not decieve  
me, no fewer than ten large perennial  
rivers, And if the native testimony may  
be recieved, 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]

3<sup>rd</sup> 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 cotele = "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<sup>r</sup> 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<sup>r</sup> 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<sup>r</sup> 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]

4<sup>th</sup>  
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<sup>r</sup> 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<sup>r</sup> 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<sup>r</sup> 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<sup>r</sup> 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<sup>r</sup> 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]

5<sup>th</sup>

M<sup>r</sup> 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<sup>r</sup> 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<sup>r</sup> Anderson certainly would never have said that " M<sup>r</sup> 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<sup>r</sup> 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<sup>r</sup> M's feet. I sailed along the noble river right to the cleft by which it bursts through the Eastern ridge. And as M<sup>r</sup> 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<sup>r</sup> 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<sup>r</sup> 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<sup>r</sup> 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<sup>r</sup> 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<sup>r</sup> 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 Mr Cumming's lips at our own fireside. Now I have two reasons for referring to this. One is I have frequently been asked if Mr 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]

6<sup>th</sup>  
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 Mr 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 Mr [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.<sup>d</sup> Dr Livingston]