

A HISTORY OF THE GOLD COAST AND ASHANTI¹

THIS important work in two large volumes of over 600 pages each gives the history of the territory now called the Gold Coast Colony from the earliest times down to the year 1901. Its detail is of the fullest, and it should remain the standard work on this subject for many long years to come. By its publication the history published in 1893, by Colonel A. B. Ellis, which has up to the present been the standard work on the Colony, becomes completely superseded. This is not only because Dr. Claridge has brought his work more nearly up to date, but because Colonel Ellis's narrative has been completely revised by Dr. Claridge and a number of additional authorities consulted and made use of.

For a library bookshelf the volumes are imposing. From the point of view, however, of the European in Africa, who has to move about frequently, and may like to carry some books with him, these volumes are prohibitive both in size and weight. The Introduction is by Sir Hugh Clifford. The appendices are of more than general utility. Amongst them are lists of Governors of the Settlements, whether of English or other European nationality; a tabulated history of all the forts from the date of their foundation; lists of battles in the various Ashanti wars; and a genealogical table of the Kings of Ashanti, showing how the descent lies through the sister. The map at the beginning unfortunately looks as if Dr. Claridge had not given it his personal attention. It professes to be up to date because the railway lines are shown, yet many important towns are completely omitted, and an item

¹ By Dr. W. W. Claridge. London: John Murray. 1915.

of the first historical importance is also missing from it. That is the little pioneer railway with steam traction running from Half Asini some three miles to the lagoon behind. This, the first railway I believe in West Africa, surely deserved mention.

The Colony of the Gold Coast is now divided administratively into three parts. There is the colony proper; Ashanti; and the Northern Territories. Roughly, the two former are covered with dense forest, while the Northern Territories is grassland thinly timbered. The two former sections are the subject of this history. Their inhabitants belong to the Agni-Twi group, which covers also the greater part of the French Colony of the Ivory Coast. In the south-east, however, there is a portion of the Efe group of tribes; and here and there are traces of submerged ancient tribes. None of these tribes have any historical records going back beyond the advent of Europeans in the fifteenth century. The history of the country is therefore practically an account of the political relations between Europeans and the natives according to the records of the former.

Long before the Christian era attempts were made by Phoenicians and Egyptians to circumnavigate Africa. One attempt at least was successful. Other expeditions only went part way. Whether any of these touched at country which is now named the Gold Coast we have no direct evidence to show, all the records being lost. Ptolemy, when compiling his great geography, early in the second century A.D., carried the limit of exploration as far as Sherbro Island in the colony of Sierra Leone. The African Society's Journal published in July, 1915, an article by myself on this subject, and in a criticising addendum Sir Harry Johnston agreed with me that Sherbro was undoubtedly the limit of ancient exploration known historically. Dr. Claridge, however, carries the most advanced point down to Cameroons.

From these early days there is a gap historically until the fifteenth century, when the Portuguese planted settlements in the country. The Portuguese claimed to be the pioneers of West African discovery, and they have at least both documentary and monumental evidence of what they did do. It is, however, claimed by the French that they preceded them, and

discovered the Gold Coast in 1364. By French must be understood the inhabitants of Dieppe who were Norman-French, and of course good navigators. They possess, unfortunately for their claim, not a single record of any voyage whatever in that direction, but of course it does not necessarily follow that they were not the first pioneers. They were always enterprising sea-farers, and other States also undertook much maritime exploration before the Portuguese began. In fact after the Crusades the maritime States of Europe seemed almost at a loss as to whither they should direct their energies. In 1285, for instance, the Genoese sent out an expedition (which Dr. Claridge does not mention) to try to get to India round Africa. It was, however, completely lost, and how far it reached is not known. Such an expedition, which would keep close in shore most of the way, affords support to the claims of other States to have sent ships down the West Coast of Africa.

It is nevertheless undoubtedly to the Portuguese that the opening up of the Gold Coast to trade is primarily due. The Portuguese sent out a completely equipped fleet, which arrived at the place now called Elmina in January, 1482, ready to undertake the erection of a stone-built castle. This was started at once, and provided the headquarters of the Guinea trade, which the Portuguese had been already carrying on for some few years previously. The castle was named San Jorge de Mina (or, da Mina), and from it the place has been called Elmina ever since. It has been generally held that the place owed its name to some gold mine in the neighbourhood. There never was one there, however, and all the gold trade was in dust from the interior. In all probability the place derives its name from Amina, the ancient name of the country. The Portuguese having built a fort on that coast, and named it St. George would wish to distinguish it from other castles possibly bearing the same saint's name. They would therefore call it St. George of Amina, and the change to Elmina is readily comprehensible when the place became associated with the gold dust trade.

The Portuguese enjoyed a paramount position for about 150 years until the Dutch drove them off the entire coast and

occupied their forts. The English established themselves at Cape Coast Castle, where they began the existing castle in 1662. Other European nations, as the French, Danes, Brandenburgers, and Swedes also established themselves to share in the trade, but through the succeeding centuries it was the Dutch and English who handled most of the trade of the Gold Coast, and were the principal rivals.

In 1642 the Portuguese by treaty formally surrendered the whole of their interests on the Gold Coast to the Dutch; before long the whole coast line of the present Colony was dotted with forts, one being met with almost every five miles. In several places, important for their trade, rival nationalities had their forts within gunshot of each other.

The trade in gold dust was the first attracting cause to this country. At the beginning of the eighteenth century the estimated value of the gold exported annually was £220,000 sterling. This does not seem to have been maintained; but at the end of the nineteenth century, before the serious development of mining on modern lines began, the export averaged over £100,000 per annum. The trade was largely accompanied with fraud, the native traders of the coast towns becoming masters of the art of mixing brass filings with the gold dust.

There was one unsatisfactory feature in the gold dust trade from the shipping point of view. Though of value it did not bulk, and as regards hold space the masters of the ships would be hard pressed to find cargoes. Even a few packages of peppers, ivory and dyewoods would have been of inconsiderable bulk. The great European demand for palm oil and kernels had not then arisen. There was thus every facility afforded for meeting the growing demand for labour for the American plantations, the rise of which could not have been more welcome.

Thenceforward until its abolition the activities of the coast were entirely bound up with this traffic. The natives in the interior collected the slaves and brought them down to the coast, and the forts took them over. Figures of the annual exportation from the Gold Coast are not now obtainable. In the work under review it is stated that from the year 1700 to

1786 not fewer than 610,000 negroes were landed in Jamaica alone, while the total number imported into the West Indies between 1680 and 1786 was estimated at 2,130,000. These figures are probably from the reports of the Abolitionists. This means that the annual export, not from the Gold Coast alone, but from the whole of West Africa, from Cape Verde to the River Congo, was about 21,000 slaves per annum. Nevertheless this exportation was small compared with the dimensions it attained later. For instance, it is reckoned that 196,000 slaves were shipped to America in the year 1837, but nearly all of these came from lower down the coast, as none had for a long time been shipped from the British possessions.

The Abolition Act of 1807 made the trade illegal for British subjects, but in spite of the efforts of British and other foreign men-of-war, it still continued till well on in the nineteenth century, the local European merchants of whatever nationality having no great scruples as to its maintenance. As to the natives themselves a source of revenue was cut off. The Ashantis in particular were very much concerned with its abolition. It had afforded a means of disposing of prisoners of war at a profit, thus undoubtedly reducing considerably wholesale slaughterings; for, with the career of conquest on which that nation had embarked, they always had a large supply on hand.

The abolition of the slave trade entailed the gradual falling away of other branches of trade also. The constant tribal wars, principally due to the Ashantis' activities beyond their limits, accentuated the unsatisfactory position. Indeed, so thoroughly unsatisfactory had the position become, and so thoroughly tired were the Home Government with it, that in 1829 it was decided to abandon the Gold Coast settlements altogether. A man-of-war was sent out to bring away the merchants and to blow up the forts. The merchants, however, protested, and eventually were permitted to organise themselves in a committee to manage their own affairs. Their confidence in the approach of better times was justified. In 1831 the imports at Cape Coast Castle had been only £130,850 in value; but in 1840 had risen to a value of £423,170. The exports which were £90,282 in 1831, rose to £325,000 in 1840.

By 1843 the Home Government considered it worth while resuming control, and the Settlements were replaced under the direction of the Governor of Sierra Leone.

In addition to the competition of the European States in the Gold Coast trade, between some one or other of which there was generally a state of war, whereby the risks were increased, there is constant mention in all accounts of the coast in the seventeenth and eighteenth century of "interlopers." These were traders who came in their own vessels and endeavoured to pick up what they could either in slaves or other products without paying dues at the forts. These forts had been built to act as depôts and for the protection of the trade against both hostile natives and European enemies. Their maintenance was a considerable expense, and the legitimate trade had to bear a share of the burden. The earliest company, dating from the erection of the forts, was called the Royal Adventurers. Their successors in 1672, the Royal African Company (the fourth to be incorporated), had exclusive privileges, and when the affairs of this company were overhauled in 1698 and the trade thrown open—for a period of thirteen years to begin with—10 per cent. was imposed and collected in England on all goods exported, and the amount handed over to the company. Later the Home Government subsidised the Company to a small amount to keep up the forts. In 1750 the old Company was wound up, and a new one, called the African Company of Merchants, formed, which received an annual grant varying from ten to fifteen thousand pounds per annum, and its membership was thrown open to all British merchants on their paying a nominal entrance fee. The interlopers would pay no fees nor duties, and endeavoured to divert the trade by calling in at unoccupied places on the coast. These ships were all well armed, and were virtually pirates, and when captured were treated as such.

A new era began in the politics of the Gold Coast when, in 1872, the Dutch ceded all their forts to the English. A regularisation of the trade became possible, a regular revenue from customs duties began to come in, and thenceforward it ceased to be possible for the native States to play off the Settlements of one European nation against the other. A firm

policy began to be possible if not adopted, and with it began the penetration of civilisation into the interior.

When Europeans first began to arrive on the Gold Coast they found a number of small chiefdoms scattered all along the coast. The territories of these chiefs extended but a short way inland. As to what was beyond was largely only obtainable by hearsay from these tribes. Certain inland tribes began to combine in the interior early in the seventeenth century. This was the beginning of the Ashanti power. It was first heard of by Europeans on the coast when the Ashantis made war on the Denkeras, also a kindred tribe, to the south of them in 1699. This attack was successful, and Osai Tutu, the Ashanti King, then turned his attention to Akim, but was defeated and himself killed in 1731.

From that date, which, however, meant no cessation to the advance of Ashanti influence, that confederation never ceased to exercise a strong influence on coast affairs. Their growing strength pressed on the coast tribes, who had to look to the Europeans for protection. This, however, was only rendered fitfully. In all directions the Ashantis pushed on their conquests among the surrounding tribes, nearly all of which were of the same stock as themselves. Although they could conquer, their moral superiority rose to nothing higher than sending tribute to Kumasi, in gold, live stock, etc., especially slaves to be slaughtered for sacrifices. The residents appointed by the Kumasi Court were expected to see that the sacrificial supplies did not fall off.

It was with this people that the British Government from time to time made treaties or agreements. These were necessarily abortive. When the Ashantis attacked the tribes living close to the settlements, if not under the walls of the forts, it was impossible to refrain from being involved. The first war with Ashanti was in 1806, and the eighth in the last year of the century. It was in the fourth war (in 1824) that the Governor of the Settlements, Brigadier-General Sir Charles M'Carthy, was killed. His skull has never yet been recovered from the Ashantis. In the sixth war, as late as 1873, the Ashantis swept down to the coast itself and attacked some of the forts. The expedition to Ashanti in 1896 Dr. Claridge

does not count in the list of wars as no actual bloodshed took place. It was, however, one of the most important, as Prempeh, the last paramount chief of all Ashanti, was deposed and exiled, and no successor appointed. With the eighth war (called by Dr. Claridge the seventh), in 1900, Ashanti ceased to have an independent existence. The absence of a paramount chief successfully prevented any complete union between the chiefs of tribal sections. In fact the regeneration of Ashanti dates from the removal of a central native influence necessarily retrogressive if not baneful.

Amongst the leading names in Gold Coast history that of George Maclean stands out prominently. An officer in the Royal African Colonial Corps, he came first to the Gold Coast in 1826. When the Home Government handed over the forts to the Committee of Merchants, Maclean was offered the Governorship, and assumed his new duties in 1830. When in 1843 the Crown resumed the government, Maclean was not confirmed as Governor, but given the post of Judicial Assessor, which he held until his early death in 1847. During his term of administration, with inadequate means at his disposal—though incidentally this is a feature not peculiar to Maclean's administration—Maclean did much to introduce more civilised methods amongst the tribes in the vicinity of the forts. He did his best to check their numerous feuds. He greatly extended English influence. He set himself firmly against human sacrifices, but was held not to have done all in his power to suppress slavery and the slave trade, though he protested again and again he had not the means of doing more. Foreign slave ships used to call in at the ports, even at Cape Coast Castle, and be supplied with food, though not of course with slaves unless it was done secretly by the natives. Probably because he acted independently a strong agitation had grown up against him in England, which the death in unhappy circumstances of his only recently married wife, the poetess, Letitia Elizabeth Landon (L.E.L.), in 1838, caused to break out with renewed vehemence, and continued till his supersession. His moral reputation at home, with nothing to base the accusations on, became of the worst, presumably on the grounds that only bad things could come

out of West Africa. He nevertheless lived down such accusations, and has left the biggest name amongst Englishmen in the Gold Coast.

Whilst Dr. Claridge in the course of his history gives accounts of the various wars with much detail, and a long list of names of persons who performed subordinate military functions, there is little mention of the great work done by missions in Christianising and educating the natives. To the great efforts of the missionaries of all denominations the present material progress of the Colony is very largely due. Yet they are scarcely mentioned in these two great volumes. In the early days a chaplain was maintained in the larger forts; but his duties were entirely for the Europeans. No proselytising was done beyond the native employees of the forts. It was not till well on in the nineteenth century that any appreciable progress was made. We find, though, in 1849, the local Christians in the neighbourhood of Cape Coast were in a strong enough position to take public action against the shrines of the local deities.

Active missionary work has been chiefly in the hands of the Wesleyans in the central and western parts of the Colony. The Basel mission has worked the eastern part. The activities of the Roman Catholics, not confined to any definite area, have not been so great as the foregoing two bodies. The Church of England, which did not prosecute active mission work by agreement through the Church Missionary Society with the Wesleyans, was not seen outside the larger coast towns. All missions are now working actively throughout the Colony.

To close with a few remarks on the development of the Colony since the beginning of the present century, it may be said that the modern history of the Colony began with the first year of the century, when the last Ashanti war came to an end. A new era began. First of all, and acting as a moving impulse, as it has in so many other countries, was the development of the gold-mining industry. All gold had hitherto been extracted from alluvial deposits. Deep shafts were now sunk and heavy machinery introduced, so that quartz and banket were dealt with. The export of bullion has

now exceeded one and a half million pounds sterling per annum. Following on this naturally was the great development of banking operations. The export of indigenous products has steadily continued. Amongst them are palm oil, kernels, rubber, timber. To these have been added the cocoa industry, which may now be said to absorb most of the energies of the Colony during the dry season of the year. At present about a fifth of the world's production comes from the Gold Coast. Railway development has continued; but perhaps it is on motor transport that the immediate future of the Colony most depends. The making of a tolerable road practically ensures the advent of motor lorries. A cheap way of opening up the country, it has the advantage of indicating the possibilities of a hitherto undeveloped area before the expense is incurred of a railway, which nevertheless must follow in time if the preliminary pioneering is seen to justify it.

As to the future of the Colony it is impossible to make a forecast. Even to anticipate steady advancement is perhaps optimistic. Any financial distress falling on the Empire as the result of the present war is bound to be extended to every one of its parts.

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