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Southern Abyssinia: Discussion

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The theory of this flood seems to be that a new outlet was formed between Lake Abaya and Lake Chamo, through the narrow piece of land which goes between the two lakes, called by the natives the "Bridge of God." On account of this outlet Lake Chamo was flooded and formed another entry into the Sagan River close to its source. This has made an enormous difference to people living in Boran, as before this event took place they used to cross close by the old ford, whereas now they have to go round *viâ* Tertale or else cross the lower part of Lake Chamo in boats. It will be interesting to see whether this volume of water will continue.

I spent a month at Gardula, and then returned once more to Addis Abbaba. From here, after a short time, I returned to England on leave.

I have endeavoured in these brief notes which you have been good enough to invite me to put before you to convey to you a general idea of my travels through the least known parts of Abyssinia. The country is intensely interesting geographically and ethnologically. Its great and fertile area offers immense possibilities in the future development of the world as soon as the Abyssinian is able to grasp the spirit of modern progress and to bring himself into touch with the developments of the twentieth century. Up to the present he has not done so.

Before the paper the PRESIDENT said : Since I had the honour of presiding at the last meeting here I received an invitation to visit the Grand Fleet for the purpose of lecturing to the sailors on some geographical subject. As that invitation was sent to me as President of the Royal Geographical Society, I took it rather as a compliment to the Society generally than to me in particular. You all know that between His Majesty's Navy and ourselves there have always been the most cordial and happy relations. If we were to search through the records of this great Society we should find that many of the best and proudest achievements of the Society were won by sailors. Therefore I had no hesitation in accepting such an invitation ; and remembering this, and the happy relations that have always existed between us, as I passed from the battleship squadron to the battle cruisers, and from the battle cruisers to the light cruisers, I endeavoured in all cases to give them a direct and personal message from you. I tried to express as well as I could the profound admiration that we have for the work of the Navy towards the achievement of final victory, and I offered our congratulations most sincerely on the results. I found the greatest interest taken in geographical matters, as we might well have expected. I lectured entirely on one subject—the geographical problems arising from the present situation in the Balkans, which already seem to present some very thorny difficulties. Incidentally, I was fortunate enough to have the privilege of witnessing the most remarkable pageant which has ever taken place in naval history—the surrender of the German Fleet to the British. As the long lines of battleships turned inwards and, assisted by a great host of minor craft, encircled the German fleet and in solemn silence escorted it to its place of internment, the spectacle was one of immeasurable significance. It was magnificent in itself to see so many ships gathered together, and the impression left of the might and majesty of England's dominion of the sea is quite ineffaceable. It was a day of days, a day ever

to be remembered ; a day the full significance of which our minds cannot grasp at present ; only when years have rolled by shall we be able to know fully what the significance of it may be to English history and England's destiny.

Mr. Hodson, who is to lecture to us to-night, has had unexampled opportunities of travelling in a part of Abyssinia which is exceedingly little known. It is north of the British colonies in East Africa and south-west of Somaliland ; a part of the country that has been but little explored by any of our travellers ; and, with the exception of one very fascinating book by Mr. Donaldson-Smith, I do not know of any author who deals with it. Mr. Hodson's record of what he has seen there, and his observations, are bound to be of extreme interest.

(Mr. Arnold Hodson then read the paper printed above, and a discussion followed.)

Sir JOHN HARRINGTON: I had the misfortune or good fortune, whichever you choose to call it, to spend some eleven years in Abyssinia, and I did not get half the opportunities the lecturer had in three and a half years' travel of seeing the country. I can assure you I envy him. Most of the country through which he has travelled I know from the reports I obtained, but there has been a tremendous advance made since I was there. For example, we saw on the screen cotton carried on donkeys. It was only about four years before I left the country that they began cotton cultivation. The only regret I have with regard to the lecture is that Mr. Hodson has left out what would have been most interesting to us all—the present political situation in Abyssinia. But I quite understand Mr. Hodson's hesitation in dealing with that part of the subject. So far as I can gather, and I still have a few friends living in Abyssinia, the present political situation there is very much as it was when I lived in the country ; that is to say, there is entirely a one-man Government. The Emperor Menelik was a very fine fellow and a wily diplomat—and when I say "diplomat" I mean it in the worst sense of the term. At the present moment in Abyssinia there is a figurehead, the Empress Zauditu ; and there is a Regent, Ras Tafari, who when I left the country was about sixteen years of age. He is the son of a man I brought home to England to King Edward's Coronation, Ras Makuman, who was the one Abyssinian that in the course of my eleven years there I was unable to fathom. He was the biggest man and finest statesman in Abyssinia, and the result of his visit to this country was that he was favourably disposed towards us ; but as the Abyssinians were afraid of him and knew that at Menelik's death he was likely to become Emperor, Makuman was undoubtedly poisoned. The real power at the present moment is Fitaurari Hapta Georgis, a fine character ; even in the days when I was there he was one of the most powerful chiefs. He is the real power behind the throne, and whichever way he throws his influence, that will decide the question. The possibilities of the moment are these : that when Fitaurari Hapta Giorgis dies, if Ras Tafari has not made good, then there will be trouble in Abyssinia, and one does not know what the result will be. During the days when I was there, I was convinced that it was highly desirable in British interests that Abyssinia should remain independent, and for two reasons : the first being that Abyssinia is a Christian power, which, if properly handled by the European nations in contact with it, would act as a great bulwark against Mohammedanism. I do not suppose that the average man in this country realizes in the slightest degree the tremendous Mohammedan

propaganda that is going on throughout Africa. The second reason that I had in trying to maintain the independence of Abyssinia was this: that we have no right to attempt to force our western civilization on nations who, after all, have a civilization of their own. It may not be of the same standard as ours; but after all, ours is only about two hundred years old. My theory has been that always in dealing with the East we should endeavour to form a Government on the lines that those countries already have. I attempted when I was there to get Menelik to have an Advisory Council of Europeans. I got Menelik to agree to it, but in the end a lady, Queen Taitou, had the last word, and I failed. My opinion is that the only solution of the situation in Abyssinia is not for anybody to attempt to take possession of the country, or for anybody to attempt to get spheres of influence; but that the European nations who have relations with it and whose frontiers adjoin Abyssinia, should try and get the ruler of Abyssinia to have advisers, and improve the system of government there on Eastern lines, because Abyssinia really has a system of government which would be good if you could only prevent them from being such thieves.

The PRESIDENT: You all know that it has been the rule in this Society that politics should not be talked, but lately we have rather overstepped the limits of our rules, because there are subjects immediately connected with the war which it is impossible to discuss without some sort of political allusion. So far as the rule goes our lecturer was strictly correct, but if we had strictly adhered to that rule we should have lost very much of interest which we have just heard from Sir John Harrington. Hereafter, when war influences have entirely passed away, it is probable that we may revert to the old rules of the Royal Geographical Society.

Major-Gen. LORD EDWARD GLEICHEN: I have extreme diffidence in making any remarks on the subject of Abyssinia, because it is over twenty years since I was there. I do not know the south of Abyssinia at all—my only journey was from Somaliland to Addis Abbaba—but the lecturer's remarks vividly brought back to me the beauty of the country and the extreme interest of his description of such a very little-known region. I remember a thirteen days' march up from Somaliland over scorching, bare and desolate country, with nothing but rocks, stones, thorn bushes, and very little water. After reaching the foot of the Abyssinian plateau we had a two days' march on the top, and it was like getting into another world; there were cool, rushing streams, long grass, juniper and cedar trees, wild roses, jasmine, etc.—in fact it was really more like the wild parts of Surrey. Entering that beautiful climate after Somaliland was really a revelation. The whole of our journey was through beautiful country, but what struck one as being a great disadvantage in such a terrestrial paradise was the extreme want of any social system amongst the people. Nothing was done at all; if you wanted anything there were no shops, no bazaar; if you wanted a knife, or a plough, you had to walk about until you met some one who had one to sell you. On the way up, on the main caravan route, there were no arrangements for water; the natural water-holes had not been touched or improved in any way. I remember at one place, where our whole caravan had to get water, one had to scramble down a precipice to get it. By the time one reached the top one had upset half the bucket of water, and any animals that went down to water could hardly get up again. There was a hopeless want of co-ordination throughout the country. The Abyssinians themselves are, unfortunately, merely a semi-civilized people with rifles, and they are almost impossible to deal with. I

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would like to ask the lecturer to describe the animal to which he referred as the nyala. Then as to fever. I have always understood it is much more easy to catch fever in unlikely places, and more difficult to get over it, in Abyssinia than elsewhere. I wonder if Mr. Hodson could give us any explanation of that?

The PRESIDENT: It is just fifty years ago, barring one month, since I first made acquaintance with Abyssinia. Although I was employed on staff duty with the Napier expedition in a part of Abyssinia which has hardly been touched on by the lecturer to-night, yet there are certain analogies between the two parts of the country which have interested me exceedingly. Passing from Senafe, which was at the head of the gorge leading from the Red Sea coast up on to the plateau, we made a line almost due south for 360 miles to Magdala, where the Emperor Theodore held his court. You will remember that he committed suicide there when the expedition terminated so successfully for us. From what I remember it seems to me that the Abyssinian both of the north and of the south does not vary materially, either in manners or morals, from what he was fifty years ago. Whatever influence we may have introduced into the country during that expedition has clearly long since passed away, and although we hear of such innovations as motor cars, telegraphs, and so on, yet it seems to me that fundamentally the Abyssinian still remains the same. He still makes slaves, he still lives a semi-dilatory life with his hand against every man, whilst his dress is essentially the same, for he still clothes himself in white garments with a broad red stripe. So far as the country itself is concerned, that long march from the north to Magdala was along a very hilly region; it was the backbone, or divide, between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, and so far as I can see (and I would like Mr. Hodson's opinion on this) the same divide, the same geographical feature, extends all the way southwards to Addis Abbaba, which is nearly as far from Magdala as our starting-point at Senafe; otherwise, the nature of the country and the magnificent scenery seem to be much the same. What I remember was a broad plateau land, cut up by water action into a comparatively broad plain overlooked from the divide, dotted about with isolated hills, all with extraordinarily flat tops, all of the same level—isolated tables, as it were, in the midst of a wide tableland. Further, as our lecturer has said, these hills were precipitous, and it is on such a hill as this that the capital of Abyssinia stood. It was only because Theodore had had a road specially made to bring up his one gun (which you will remember burst at the very first discharge), that our troops reached the top at all. I can remember that the climate was absolutely magnificent; I do not think there is anywhere in the world (not even in the Himalayas) where the climate is so delightfully bracing and clear as in the highlands of Abyssinia. Mr. Hodson has broken into new ground, and that makes his story intensely interesting as a geographical adventure. We shall, I hope, obtain from him records which will enable us to revise our maps very considerably, for in reading the paper through by the light of the old atlas, I was able to identify hardly one single name which he has mentioned. There is just one question I would like to ask. A matter of very great interest to us during that expedition was the fact that the people of Abyssinia were of the same religion as ourselves, and they recognized the rights of those professing the Christian faith. All Christians were entitled to their hospitality and to their protection. When they made those sudden raids upon the military escorts which were so frequently successful, it was usually upon some party of the native troops with us and not upon Europeans. They did, however, occasionally take reprisals upon Europeans whom they thought had betrayed them

while in the country. I remember they murdered one of our permanent European officials whilst we were actually on our way out of the country. But the sign and symbol of their Christianity, which they were always ready to produce and which they always expected any of us to produce if we wanted to claim any assistance from them, was something blue, either blue ribbon or blue paper ; or indeed anything else that was blue. I was very desirous of finding out an explanation for this, and I was told by the Chief Rabbi of one of the synagogues in London that I should find that explanation if I looked in the Bible through the book of Leviticus. All I could find was the vague statement that the border of certain garments of the priests was to be blue, and I was informed that this was introduced originally into Abyssinia by the Jews. I should like to know whether it was universal, whether it was an ancient custom, or whether, after fifty years, they still recognize that blue symbol as indicating the brotherhood of Christianity.

Mr. HODSON : With regard to the first question as to the mountain nyala ; it is a species of kudu first discovered by Buxton and often called the Buxton kudu. As far as I am aware, it is only found in Abyssinia, and its habitat there is very restricted. As to fever in Abyssinia I do not know why it should be of a more virulent type there than in other parts of Africa, but it certainly seems to me that it is so. The only explanation I can give is that, as a rule, fever is contracted in the lowlands and perhaps soon after one ascends mountains over 8000 feet high. Probably the sudden change of altitude has something to do with it. Certainly it is difficult to throw off malaria fever in Abyssinia once it has been contracted. With regard to the question asked by the President as to the similarity between the country north of Addis Abbaba to that of the south, I have never been north of Addis Abbaba, so that I cannot offer any opinion. As to the blue symbol I have never had any Abyssinian ask me for anything blue, nor have I noticed them wearing it, so I think it must have been a local peculiarity in northern Abyssinia and not in the south.

THE POLITICAL STATUS OF SPITSBERGEN

Sir Martin Conway

Read at the Meeting of the Society, 9 December 1918.

ON 17 June 1596, a Dutch ship, whereof Jacob Heemskerke Hendricks was captain and William Barents chief pilot, came in sight of Spitsbergen for the first time on record. The expedition had been sent forth to discover the North-East Passage. It had consisted of two ships, but they had separated. The ship with Barents on board had sailed northward till it met the edge of the ice-pack at a point about due north of the north-west corner of Spitsbergen. They sailed eastward along it some 44 miles and then, the fog I suppose lifting, they beheld the north coast of the island wide spread before them, stretching from Hakluyt's

The authorities for the statements in this paper are all cited either in my 'History of Spitsbergen' (Cambridge, 1906) or in Arnold Raestad : 'Le Spitsberg dans l'histoire diplomatique.' Traduit du Norvégien par Charles Rabot. Extrait de *La Géographie*, t. 25, 5 and 6 ; t. 26, 2 (Paris, 1912).