Review: Sierra Leone

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SIERRA LEONE.

'The Advance of our West African Empire.' By C. Braithwaite Wallis. London: Unwin. 1903.

The comprehensive character of the title of this work is not quite justified by its actual scope, which is virtually limited to the one protectorate of Sierra Leone. The value of the book is not, perhaps, lessened by this limitation, but those who expect to find in it a general history of the recent development of British West Africa should be warned that this will not be the case. Captain Wallis went out to Sierra Leone under the orders of the Colonial Office early in 1898, and took an active part in the events of that troublous year, commanding one of the military columns engaged in the suppression of the native revolt, which, with its unspeakable atrocities, proved such a critical episode in the history of the colony. Captain Wallis sketches both the events which led up to this deplorable rising and the general course of the operations by which it was finally put down; not confining himself to his own share of the work, but describing, if at less length, the broad features of the campaign as a whole. The two main centres of the revolt were the Timini country in the north, where its instigator was the chief Bai Bureh, and the Mendi country in the south, where matters assumed an even more serious aspect; but of the whole area of the protectorate only the Koinadugu district in the north-east escaped contamination by the general disaffection. Captain Wallis brings out clearly both the formidable character of the rising—the most serious, perhaps, that has ever been faced by the British in West Africa—and the extraordinary difficulty encountered by those responsible for its suppression. Of the extraordinary secrecy, coupled with deadly determination, with which the Mendi revolt was organized, he gives a striking picture, and its outcome was a sequence of massacres and outrages, "the most terrible in the annals of our colonial history."

To the future historian of Sierra Leone the details supplied will be invaluable; but of wider interest, perhaps, is the light thrown on the general principles of British administration in the protectorate, which may serve in some degree as a sample of the policy adopted in our general dealings with the African race. As regards the motive of the rising, Captain Wallis shows clearly that it was not really a "tax-war," but a "slave-war," undertaken in the hopes of re-introducing practices prohibited under British rule, and that the imposition of the hut-tax merely supplied the excuse for an inevitable conflict between civilization and barbarism. He holds enlightened views as to the rules by which our conduct should be regulated in our endeavour to introduce civilization into the dark places of West Africa, showing that it is by making use of the native himself as an ally in the work that progress can alone be guaranteed. At the same time he realizes—and the revelations of fiendish cruelty of which the native in his natural state is capable put the fact beyond question—that there is much in the former *régime* so distinctly evil that it admits only of absolute suppression. Some good results in this direction have already been attained since the war, and the author was struck, on his return in 1902, with the immense strides already made. From the point of view of economic development, he is also disposed to take a sanguine view, insisting on the great natural resources of the country, but showing also the need of an energetic and enlightened policy. In this direction, too, it is only through the natives themselves that results of real value will be reached.