NOTES ON BASUTO-LAND

DURING the last few years attention has been much directed to Basutoland owing to its position, and the part which it will probably play in the future of South Africa. It also affords a unique instance of an African Race, advancing in civilization, under what is practically self-government, instead of becoming mere "hewers of wood, and drawers of water" to a white population. It is true, that the English Commissioners resident in the country exercise a controlling influence over the native chiefs, but this is wisely confined to the prevention of inter-tribal wars, and of the grosser forms of barbarity ; native laws, customs, and the authority of the chiefs being maintained, except where they run distinctly counter to progress and civilization.

This involves, of course, the exercise of the greatest tact and judgement, but success has hitherto crowned the efforts of our Commissioners in the country. Basutoland is bounded on the East by Natal, South by Cape Colony, and West and North by the Orange River Colony ; the Drakensberg Range dividing Natal and Cape Colony from Basutoland, while the Caledon River mainly forms the boundary between it and the Orange River Colony.

The country is practically a huge plateau, inhabited at the base only, and has been described as the "Switzerland" of South Africa ; but it differs in one respect from the "Switzerland" of Europe, for the latter is always accessible, while the Basuto mountains are snowed up all the winter, and the heavy rains make the tracks through them impracticable in the summer, the best months for crossing the country being September and October.

The country itself may be divided into three large valleys or districts, viz. the tract on the East between the Drakensberg Mountains and the Eastern range of the "Maluti" or Double

Hills ; that between the two ranges of the Malutis ; and that between the Eastern range of the Malutis and the Orange River Colony.

The area of Basutoland is about 10,000 square miles, and its average elevation about 5,000 feet above sea level. The population is roughly about 175,000, the most thickly populated part being on the Orange River Colony border.

The Basuto tribes, who were drawn together into a nation chiefly by the able old chief "Mosesh," on passing under British protection were at first administered by the Cape Colony, but the task proving a difficult one it was handed over to the Home Government.

The country is divided into three Magistracies, or districts, viz. Maseru with the Capital in the centre, Mafeteng in the South, and Leribe in the North.

A resident Commissioner is stationed at Maseru, who has Assistant Commissioners at various places ; while order is maintained by the Basutoland Mounted Police.

The people are divided into a number of tribes, under a paramount chief, Lerothodi by name. We had trouble about a month ago with Joel, a chief who helped the Boers during the late war, and he is now in gaol for a year, and has also to pay a fine of 500 head of cattle (£5,000). Joel has a brother named Jonathan, who has always been pro-English, and Lerothodi used to play one off against the other.

Although the surface of the country consists "chiefly of chasms and crags," it has been called the Granary of South Africa, as every available piece of ground is cultivated. On entering Basutoland from the Orange River Colony, one is much struck by the fertility of the valleys, and also by the difference in the formation of the hills ; Orange River Colony having flat-topped hills (taafel-kops), while in Basutoland one meets with pointed (spitz-kop) and craggy hills.

The expense of making good roads in such a hilly country would be prohibitive, and consequently mountain tracks are the only means of communication. Although the country is undoubtedly full of mineral wealth, the natives with much wisdom forbid all prospecting, for they fully realise that once mines are started the country is practically no longer theirs.

The white population is only about 400, chiefly storekeepers and their assistants.

There are several missions for converting the natives, of which nine-tenths are French Protestant.

The native himself is a most intelligent man, and capable of hard work ; though like all Africans, he leaves the home work, sowing, and ploughing, &c., to the woman ; the man generally going off to the Colonies to work, where having earned sufficient money he returns home, buys a wife, and settles down until the money is exhausted when he will go off again. The great ambition of every Basuto is to marry, and the more wives he has the more important he becomes. They have a curious method of arranging marriage settlements. The father has to pay the dowry for his son's wife, and if the son has a daughter the dowry for that daughter does not go to the father but to the grandfather.

As among all South African tribes, a man's wealth is estimated by the number of cattle he possesses, and all the property, a wife included, is valued at so many cows. The Basutos, however, practise agriculture to a greater extent than other Kaffir tribes ; so much so that the amount of ground under cultivation leaves little for grazing, and the stock has suffered accordingly. Their chief crops are mealies (maize) and Kaffir corn ; from the latter they brew a kind of beer of which they are very fond. It seems to be fattening, as those natives said to be addicted to it present a very corpulent appearance. Oats are also grown, which are given to the horses in the sheaf, *i.e.* unthrashed, this being the common South African custom. Wheat and other cereals do well, the rainfall being greater and more regular than in the Western parts of South Africa. The water-supply, the constant source of anxiety in these countries, never fails in Basutoland.

The natives are extremely superstitious. They have the same bad "sporting instincts" as are found in many Europeans, slaying every bird or beast seen. But the Basutos have at least the excuse of hunting for food. They have guns but are not good shots, and when in need of game about five hundred will surround a herd of deer and drive them over a precipice (*kranz*), picking up the bodies afterwards ; likewise if after quail, three

hundred or so will go out armed with sticks, and directly the quail rises the air is black with sticks.

The only living birds we saw in any numbers, were the heron and the hammakop ; we were unable to find out the superstition which prevented them killing the heron ; but they spare the hammakop (a kind of Bittern), because according to their belief the slayer of the bird will be killed by lightning. Although slovenly in his dress according to our ideas the Basuto is extremely fastidious ; for example, a storekeeper told us that one line more or less in the pattern on a blanket will make it, either worthless, or valuable. They have a very good idea of the value of money, and prefer hard cash to any article offered in barter.

The native women tattoo their faces, and also shave their heads, and those of their children. Their razor consists of a sharpened piece of "hoop-iron," and the yells of the children during the process of shaving can be heard for considerable distances.

The natives make tasteful bead work, wire work, and weapons, which are now largely bought by travellers as curios.

The worst class of native is the converted one, as is often the case ; they are generally very dishonest, and also very dirty.

As a rule the Basuto is a "hail fellow ! well met " person, greeting one on passing with an "Eya Morena " (Hail ! Lord), to which one replies "Eya." Basutoland has long been famous for its breed of ponies, which though small (seldom exceeding 14 hands) are strong and hardy, but the late war has drained the country of the best of them, and is also probably responsible for the outbreak of "scab" or "mange" (brand-sick) which is now universal. The Resident Commissioner told us that he was introducing Arab sires from India to improve the breed, an experiment which will no doubt be successful.

I have omitted to say a word about the climate of Basutoland, which is very healthy and invigorating, though doctors say that the rarefied air affects the heart and lungs of residents living there for long periods ; but the looks of those we saw belie the statement.

The towns through which we passed were Maseru, Tyatyaneng, Thlotsi, and Butha Buthe, all north of Maseru.

Maseru is situated on the Orange River Colony border, about 300 yards from the Caledon River, at the foot of the Maluti Hills. It is a very quaint little town, chiefly composed of brick and tin buildings and very few native huts, as the paramount chief does not live there, but resides at Matsieng about 20 miles south on the road to Mafeteng.

Tyatyaneng, Thlotsi, and Butha Buthe, are all very similar in appearance, being situated on the tops of hills. They were full of Mimosa trees which were in flower when we passed through, thereby giving them a most picturesque appearance.

Near Tyatyaneng are some old Bushmen Paintings, estimated at about 100 years old. The favourite subject is Bushmen hunting elands, and both drawing and colouring are excellent. One could hardly believe them to be the work of such wild and untameable people as the Bushmen were not the fact well attested.

All the towns are connected by telephone and telegraph, and have a Residency, though the Assistant Commissioner for Butha Buthe lives at Thlotsi, as both these towns are in the same district.

We left Basutoland very favourably impressed with the country and its inhabitants; and also with the success of its Administration.

A. T. DRYSDALE,
Lieut. R.A.