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Mr. Thomson's Report on the Progress of the Society's Expedition to Victoria Nyanza

Author(s): Joseph Thomson

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*Mr. Thomson's Report on the Progress of the Society's Expedition to
Victoria Nyanza.*

THE following is the detailed account of Mr. Thomson's proceedings which has reached us since the publication of his shorter letter to Colonel Miles, in the last number of the 'Proceedings.' In "Geographical Notes" of the present number, we publish a telegram received August 13th which announces the safe return of Thomson to his camp and his intended second attempt to penetrate the difficult region before him.

MOMBASA, June * 5th, 1883.

DEAR SIR,—My late telegram will have apprised you of the main facts relating to my appearance in the Masai country and subsequent retreat to Taveta. It now remains for me to enter into somewhat more satisfactory detail on these matters that you may clearly understand my present position. I have, however, just learned from Colonel S. B. Miles that letters sent from Taveta, containing an account of my proceedings so far, have not reached Zanzibar, and I am therefore under the necessity of commencing from Zanzibar and indicating to you how I reached Taveta.

From the time of my arrival at Zanzibar I was exceedingly anxious to learn what route Dr. Fischer proposed taking in order that I might avoid it as widely as possible, leaving him to pursue his explorations undisturbed. His agent, the German Consul, repeatedly informed both Colonel Miles and myself that his route was via Kenia to Baringo. It seemed, therefore, that I was left clear to follow my original route direct to Kavirondo, and I at once set about organising my caravan on that basis, more particularly selecting the goods required by the Masai and Wa-kavirondo of those regions. If I had had to proceed via U-kamba and Kenia the goods required would have been very different.

So much it is necessary to premise, in order to show that I had taken precautions to keep my route as far apart as possible from that of Dr. Fischer.

I left Zanzibar on the morning of the 6th March, on board the steam-tug *Suez* which had been kindly lent for our use by Captain Luxmoore of the *London*. Colonel S. B. Miles, in spite of the state of the weather and the uncomfortable character of the tug, kindly accompanied to give the weight of his presence to facilitate our departure from Mombasa. After a very rough passage we arrived at the latter place in the morning of the following day and found Martin with all the men safe encamped at Frere Town. Here we were hospitably entertained and every assistance given to us,—the Rev. W. E. Taylor deserves more especially to be mentioned.

On the 10th we moved up to near Jomvu and then to Rabai, where again I was treated with marked hospitality. It was not, however, till the 17th of March that I was able to make my final start. On that day we made a short afternoon march and camped at Kwalé.

The route selected is one which passes Taro and Maungu to Ndara, where there is now a Church Missionary Station. The description already given of this whole region by the numerous travellers who have passed through it, cannot be improved in the few lines of a letter, and I shall not attempt any at present. Suffice it to say that

* Mr. Thomson dates his letter "July," but this is evidently a mistake: his letter to Colonel Miles was dated June 5th.

we suffered some hardships in the way of filthy water and marches in which none was to be got.

The Church Missionary Station was reached in seven days. It is situated on a spur or ledge of Ndara, a bit of which I ascended. We had here a little affray which might have ended in bloodshed. Another march brought us to the Matate, and a second to the western side of Bura, where we stayed two days. An attempt to ascend Kilima Kibomu failed, owing to the stupidity of our guide.

I should have mentioned that a night spent with Mr. Wray at Ndara resulted in the stoppage of the watch which carried Greenwich time by the forgetfulness of Martin, the sailor, into whose hands it had been placed with strict injunctions to wind it at the right time. At Bura we had again a "little affair" with the Wa-teita, which even went so far as firing guns. This also ended amicably, though the following night a conspiracy to cause a stampede of porters was fortunately discovered just in time. We had intended to start on a long march at midnight, and we were just on the point of starting when we discovered that there were several hundreds of Wa-teita in the bush, so we quickly returned and waited till daybreak.

On the 31st of March we reached Taveta, the last march being from 2 A.M. to 6 P.M.

The journey was in every respect successful, though three men had to be left on the way and three ran away. It brought out, however, very prominently the fact that I had got as "rotten" (to use a Swahili term) a lot of porters as ever left Zanzibar. The town, in fact, was simply denuded of good men, and we had to be content with whoever came up. We did not ask too many questions, and the consequence was we recruited the major part of the rascality of Zanzibar.

On my arrival at Taveta we found that we had got a work of unexpected magnitude before us—namely the putting together of nearly 50,000 strings of small beads, and the sewing of nearly 500 of the cloths worn by the Masai on going into a fight. This proved to be a more arduous task than I had anticipated, occupying us over twelve days, during which our light-fingered porters contrived to assist themselves to over three loads of beads in spite of the severest punishments.

I found also on my arrival, that Fischer was at Arusha-wa-Chini, and that he had no intention of proceeding to Kenia, but was, as I originally thought probable, going straight to Baringo, viâ Ngurumani. On consulting my headmen as to what we ought to do under the circumstances, it was made clear that we must proceed as we had commenced, our goods not being suitable for an *up* journey through U-kamba. Fortunately there was a choice of routes. On all hands it was stated that Fischer was going viâ Arusha-wa-Jun and Kisongo, we were therefore left open to proceed viâ Kiraragwa and Ndupduk, which was a shorter, though a vastly more dangerous and expensive route. I had no opportunity of opening communications with Fischer as he left for the Masai a day or two after my arrival at Taveta.

At this point in our course it was made clear that it was of very great importance that I should get a second guide and interpreter. One named Muhinna I got at Mombasa, through the good office of Mr. Wakefield. We were not long in finding a very efficient interpreter in the shape of no less a person than Sadi, the guide of Von der Decken and New. Although we found him living like a pauper he proved to be extremely difficult to deal with, and six days were consumed in slippery negotiations. At last, much to my relief, every preparation was complete, and though many Wa-Swahili shook their heads at our small caravan, accustomed as they were to caravans of 500 to 1000 men, yet I was full of hopeful expectations of getting through all right.

On the 19th of April we moved out of the forest of Taveta and commenced our

hazardous march. Our route lay round the base of Kilimanjaro, which daily swathed in clouds had as yet baffled all our attempts to view it in all its magnificence. It almost seemed as if we were destined to go round about it and see a little of it, as if non-existent. Our first camp was at the small stream Habali. Here we were alarmed by the appearance of a messenger from Mandara of Moschi with the astounding intelligence that over a thousand Masai were camped two days ahead of us and might be expected to pass next day or the day following, and if they came in contact with us, it would mean either a disastrous fight or the giving away of all our goods. But I was equally afraid of falling into the clutches of Mandara. However, as it seemed the lesser of two evils I adopted the latter course. Next day, with much circumspection, we went forward, with an advanced guard a long way ahead to give timely warning for retreating into the jungle. The men went beautifully, there not being a single straggler; if they grumbled, they did so unheard. We crossed the Kilema and the Huni, and finally camped between two small volcanic hills. The following day we moved up to near Moschi to wait the passing of the Masai. Anxious to see the celebrated chief Mandara I resolved to occupy the enforced stoppage by visiting him—with empty hands however. I was received in the most princely manner, and a hospitality was displayed such as I had not seen anywhere else. His appearance is striking, and for an African, princely. He is very tall, and has an extremely intelligent face, which answers to every mood of his mind, and I may say I was captivated. He never hinted at the question of presents. It seemed to be too great an honour of itself to be visited by a white man, and he was ready to offer every assistance. Taking advantage of this generous behaviour I started on the second day to ascend to a height of 10,000 or 12,000 feet up the mountain for the purpose of making a small collection of plants from that altitude. I had, however, “reckoned without mine host,” for after a terrific pull of seven hours up the Chaga platform, I found myself only at a height of about 9000 feet, and as I had to return that same day I had to make a hasty collection and retreat precipitately to Moschi, where we found a splendid feast thoughtfully prepared for us by Mandara. We also learned the good news that the Masai camp had broken up, and that we might now proceed unmolested, and Mandara's face beamed upon us with all the radiance or blandness of the heathen Chinese. Two days later Mandara was the subject of our execrations—as we left our camp with the knowledge that we had been the victims of a clever ruse, and minus (1) my own double-barrel smooth-bore, (2) a government rifle and bayonet, (3) a service revolver, (4) an iron box of my own, (5) a suit of tweed clothes complete (would that he were condemned to wear the boots!), (6) a great deal of cloth, and minor articles.

The next two marches over broken country diversified by stretches of forest, more open grassy areas and miles of thorny shrubs. The whole country was covered with enormous erupted blocks, in fact agglomerates and tuffs are the only rocks to be seen in the river sections, though towards the south-eastern aspect streams of lava have found their way from the numerous parasitic cones which dot the lower margins of the Chaga platform. It seems very clear that no flow of any great volume has ever succeeded in passing beyond the base of the mountain from the main crater. The composition of the lavas varies exceedingly.

You are aware that Kilimanjaro consists of two chief summits, Kibo and Kimawenzi; the former and larger, which has been usually described as dome-shaped, is in reality a perfect crater, a feature well seen from different points. Kimawenzi on the other hand is a peak, pure and simple, but I have no doubt in my own mind that it was the original volcano; that, as so often happens, the pipe became blocked, and the imprisoned forces found vent to the west, forming a new volcano, which soon rivalled its neighbour in size. The crater around Kimawenzi has through the

ages been gradually denuded away, consisting as it did of loosely aggregated materials, and finally laid bare the plug of the volcano, which now stands forth as the most picturesque feature in the whole mountain. I have spoken of the platform of Chaga, by that I mean the broad irregular terrace which skirts the southern aspect of the mountain, rises from 4000 to 9000 feet in elevation, and extends north and south more than 10 miles. It is only the outer and lower margin of this terrace which is cultivated and forms Chaga proper. In my opinion it is almost entirely formed by the numerous parasitic or secondary cones, which would naturally break out along the base of the primary cone on its reaching the enormous height it has attained. On this subject I cannot, however, enlarge further, however congenial it may be. I may say that my feeling has been that of disappointment on viewing this stupendous volcano. The features are too even and monotonous. There are few rugged crags and overhanging precipices, serrated outlines, or fantastic peaks, while Chaga with all its extreme fertility does in no way enhance its appearance, taking away rather from the effect produced by a mountain of such magnitude. The view from the south-west looking over Machame, is perhaps the most picturesque and varied, as there only do you see the clear sweep of the mountain from top to bottom, while to the north the Shira flanking shoulder attracts the attention by its scaured sides, its black gloomy rocks and narrow gorges, with Machame smiling at its base. Turning to the east our eye wanders over Chaga, with its fertile shambas, with their colours varying according to the product cultivated.

But I must hurry on. After crossing the Weri-weri and another very large river, the Kikafo, we struck away towards the north, and after two marches reached Kibonoto, an important point on the Shira shoulder, where caravans collect as much food as they are able to carry for the Masai country, where as you are aware nothing but beef is to be had.'

The second day after our arrival a deputation from the Masai of Ngare-na-Erobi appeared with an invitation to proceed to their place. This is what is known as the door of the Masai, and we were pleased to hear that in passing the door there would be at least nothing to fear, but our pleasure was considerably dashed on finding that we had come upon the track of Fischer, he having taken the Kiraragwa route in preference to the Kisongo one, and still more, he had been fighting two days ahead of Kiraragwa and some people had been killed. It was represented to us, however, that they had held a grand meeting on hearing of the arrival of another white man, to consider the question of allowing him to pass or not. After a stormy debate, it was finally settled (we were told) that we might pass. The deputation remained with us that night to act as our guides.

On the 3rd of May we moved out of camp, and after a tramp of two hours we emerged from the undulating and woody country of Kibonoto, and before us lay the Masai country. The view was not of the character we had imagined it to be, namely, the somewhat sterile aspect of the U-gogo plains, where except in the far horizon, few hills, and those insignificant, are to be seen. On the contrary, a picturesque landscape met our sight to the left, and nearly due west lay the wonderful conical mountain Meru, with its secondary peak to give it some variety. To the right, and rising from our very feet, towered the Shira shoulder, with Kibo almost hidden behind it. From these two great pillars to the "door" or "gate" of the Masai swept round an apparently continuous and unbroken range of mountains of the most picturesque description, rising here and there into distinct masses which bore names long familiar to geographers. Bearing 334° from our point of view was Doengo Erok el Kaptei, an irregular shaped mountain, forming a long range and not conical. Ndapduk or Ntaptuk, comparable in size and appearance to Meru, bore 318° at a distance of about 20 miles. Then further to the

west could be descried at a great distance the mountains near the Guaso N'Ebor and towards Ngurumani, and sweeping round Gelei is to be observed bearing 293°. Inclosed within these mountains lies a great undulating reach of country, dotted over with small volcanic cones. In our immediate neighbourhood not a tree is to be seen except along the course of the Ngare-na-Erobi; but further to the north-west, in the plain of the Ngare-na-Nyuki, a dark green area indicated the presence of a forest. To complete this hastily-sketched picture imagine antelopes and zebras in hundreds, numerous rhinoceros and ostriches. Here and there strange moving black lines are to be seen which are not stationary. These are the enormous herds of the Masai, feeding gradually over the splendid grazing grounds. At two points smoke curling upwards indicates the position of the kraals of Lingobei and Mbaratien. These are simply formed of a circular fence of thorns, immediately inside of which are the dome-shaped huts of the occupants forming an inner circle. They are formed by bent sticks and an outer coating of dung. I observed none formed of boughs and skins. In height they are from four to five feet and little more than six feet in diameter. The whole of the central area of the kraal serves as an inclosure for the cattle at night.

It was near the kraal of Lingobei and in a corner where the Ngare-na-Erobi makes a sharp bend that we camped and formed our boma. We were soon surrounded by hundreds of Masai, all armed with their enormous spears and neatly shaped and painted shields, and in an hour I soon found that my original opinion about the necessity of having a large and very well armed force was only too true. Before night we disposed of ten loads of goods, principally iron wire as hongo, and the scene that ensued over the division of the spoil was not by any means encouraging. The hongo is not levied as in all other places by the chief but by the whole of the people; they are divided into so many parties, to each party so many coils of wire, strings of beads, and cloths are brought. These are not quietly distributed, but are thrown into their midst, and the whole party make a rush like wolves over their prey. If two men happen to lay hold of the same thing, the question of ownership is only settled by superior strength, but if equal usually the *cimé* or sword is resorted to. Two men thus got ugly flesh wounds in the division of the spoil. As another illustration of their readiness to draw their swords I may mention my own case, in which a Masai actually drew his *cimé* to settle matters with me, because getting tired of his extreme curiosity to see the whiteness of my leg, I pushed him away. On his drawing his *cimé*, I laughed and pretended I wanted to see it, and so the matter ended.

So far matters had gone fairly well, the worst hongo was over, the people at Ngare-na-Erobi were friendly, and we had every reason to hope that we should get through all right provided no untoward accident should happen, such as had happened with Fischer, though the question would obtrude itself—If they could murder some of Fischer's men with impunity what might they not do with us, with a third or fourth of the number?

Next day, however, matters began to wear a different aspect. All the El Nioran (the young unmarried fighting men) had disappeared, and only a few of the older men were to be seen about. We then learned that we were not after all to be allowed to pass scot-free. The whole of the Legoi tribe who inhabit the Ngare-na-Nyuki plains had risen to dispute our further progress. A white man had passed and fought with them, killing a favourite headman of the chief Mbaratiani (not Mbaratien), and, still worse, two women, an atrocity hitherto unheard of. They had accepted blood-money because he was too strong to be fought with, putting off their revenge till a small caravan should appear. Now one had come, and to make it all the better a European with it. They were resolved to take full advantage of the

opportunity. The young men of the whole surrounding country who were ready for a bit of fun flocked to join Mbaratiani. Fortunately the chiefs and old men of the Ngare-na-Erobi were against any such action, but then their power over the young men is but nominal, or nearly so. Spies were set to watch us, but we put on a bold face, and talked of starting such and such a day, and that if they would not let us pass we were ready to fight.

It was clear, however, that any such attempt would be pure madness. We could have easily fought them for one or even two days, but by the end of that time we should have found ourselves without gunpowder, owing to the reckless way in which the men fire away their ammunition. Then, again, though we might keep them at bay, we formed too small a force to be able to help ourselves to food, so starvation would follow. The question, therefore, was now only how we might retreat unseen to avoid a fight, as that would only make it more difficult to pass by any other route. On the evening of the 6th of May a blood-brother of my guide came secretly into camp and brought in the news that the people from Ngare-na-Nyuki were meditating an attack on the following day, and advised us to be ready. We informed him we were ready to meet them; nevertheless, as soon as he was gone we told the men—who so far had been kept in blissful ignorance of the whole matter—to get ready for a night march. Fortunately the night was dark, and rain came on, which probably had the effect of driving home any spies there might have been about. Making up our camp fires anew so as to burn for some time, we set off on our somewhat hazardous retreat, passing quite close to the kraal of Lingobei. If a dog had barked, or one of our donkeys brayed, we should probably have been discovered, but no such event happened, and after travelling all night we safely reached Kibonoto. We had just got into camp when a tremendous rain came on which lasted nearly the whole of the 7th, and probably prevented pursuit, as the Masai are not fond of exposing themselves.

I have already in my telegram given you the latitude and longitude of our camp at Ngare-na-Erobi. I may add that George's barometer showed 25·67 in. Thermometer 68° at 7 A.M., while the B.P.T. No. 83306 showed 24·35; No. 83305, 24·20. Thermometer 75°.

On our arrival at Kibonoto my first idea was to proceed at once by Arusha-wa-Jun and Kisongo, but a moment's thought showed the uselessness of the attempt after the enormous hongo we had already given at Kiraragwa. There was a considerable hongo at Arusha, and another large hongo at Kisongo, that being another "door" to the Masai, besides a smaller one at Ngaruka.

To attempt to pass now alone would mean that we should have found ourselves at Ngurumani unable to proceed a step further. There was only one way open, to return to Taveta, and there join another caravan, and thus lessen the enormous strain on our resources, besides mutually adding to our safety.

Fearing a pursuit, we wasted no more time at Kibonoto than was necessary in order to procure food for our desert march to Taveta. In five days we reached the latter place, only to learn that no caravan would leave there till the end of Ramadan (it commences in July). Here was an enormous delay, with nothing to do and men eating up our diminished stock of goods. To remain in Taveta to nurse my bitter disappointments would have killed me. More goods, especially iron wire, were urgently required if I did not want to find myself hopelessly stranded half-way to the lake, owing to the enormous expenses in hongo and food in the Masai country. I at once made up my mind to proceed to the coast, and after a day's rest I set off with a party of twelve men, not daring to bring more, knowing as I did that there was hardly a man in the caravan who did not want to run away. They are, however, virtually imprisoned at Taveta, as their guns have been taken from them.

Two days brought me to the Matati, and half a day to Ndara. The next march was from Ndara to Taro, a march probably without rival in the annals of East African travelling. We travelled rapidly from 6 A.M. to 4 A.M. of the following day, with a rest of only an hour and a half, without food or a drop of water. After a few hours' rest we proceeded to Gorah, and next day to Rabai, having done the whole distance in five marches, thus eclipsing Rebmann's feat.

In a very few days I shall be once more on the road, with sufficient goods to render me independent of the Arabs, if an agreement cannot be come to. And I may say that now, after getting a fair insight into the situation, I am as sanguine as ever. In no respect have I lost heart. My principal source of annoyance arises from the loss of money entailed by our prolonged stoppage, which will compel me to shorten the time I had hoped to have for my exploration.

I have little more to add to give you an idea of the situation. In everything I have done I acted as I believed the Society would have me to act, and it was impossible for me to foresee that I was destined to stumble upon the heels of Fischer, or that he would raise trouble in his path of which I should have to bear the brunt. Neither could I help the fact that I had too small a caravan to force my way on finding our way closed, and be unable to take another till I had replenished my goods. The first was due to one of those accidents which will happen in spite of all precautions, the second to the state of the Society's funds.

I regret exceedingly that in my sudden departure from Taveta I left behind all my maps, &c., or my enforced leisure here might have been utilised in sending you a copy. I may say, however, that I lost no opportunity of taking observations. George's barometer and the boiling-point thermometer have been almost in daily use. I think I forgot to add that I visited Lakes Chala and Jipe, and that numerous observations on the geology of the country have been made. Martin, my assistant, is a capital fellow, and makes life in camp very much more pleasant than it would otherwise be. He has learnt the art of doing what he is told without question, while treated very much on a footing of equality otherwise.

On my arrival at Mombasa I despatched the telegram which you have doubtless received. I wrote also to Colonel S. B. Miles for various articles, my letters, &c. With his usual generous promptitude, he moved Captain Luxmoore, of the *London*, to lend his large steam-tug to bring them to me, as dhows at this season cannot be got, except at exorbitant prices, to go north. I cannot speak too highly of the extreme interest Colonel Miles has taken in the expedition, and the readiness he has shown to assist me in every way in his power.

Since my arrival here I have been the recipient again of the generous hospitality of the missionaries at Frere Town. I must now once more bid you adieu.

Believe me, yours truly,

JOSEPH THOMSON.

To the Secretary R.G.S.

GEOGRAPHICAL NOTES.

Later News from Mr. Thomson.—We have received from the Eastern Telegraph Company (through the kindness of Sir James Anderson) the following telegram, announcing the return of Mr. Thomson with his renewed supplies to his camp at Taveta, and his preparations for a fresh start: "August 13th, Zanzibar, Colonel Miles to the President R.G.S. —Thomson arrived at Taveta on the 2nd of July, and intends leaving