

Gale Primary Sources

Start at the source.

Landscape, Geography and Exploration

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The Bible Society Cleanings.
Various source media, 19th Century UK Periodicals
DECEMBER, 1896.



A CYCLING TOUR IN SOUTH AFRICA.
BY THOMAS WOODVILLE HARKER.

ii. HE vrow is indeed the helpmate of her husband in every way, would be useless. I do believe the American poet at some time or other must have had visions in his dreams of this portion of the globe, for has he not written:—

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Baptisms at San Salvador. [FEBRUARY, 1899.]



JANUARY 1, 1890.] THE MISSIONARY HERALD.

CALABAR COLLEGE, KINGSTON, JAMAICA.

THE following graphic letter from S. B. Burton, Esq. F.R.G.S., of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, will be read with great interest:—

"Newcastle-on-Tyne, December, 1894. Royal Mail s.s. *Eden* on July 18th last.

"DEAR MR. BAYNES,—The request "On the twelfth day out we passed

The natural world held enormous fascination for the British in the nineteenth century. Their eagerness to understand its workings and reveal its secrets was evident in the attention they gave to exploring and mapping territories, collecting and classifying plants and animals, gathering and testing geological samples, compiling and interpreting climatic data, and recording their personal observations in travel diaries and journals, often published as books and articles for a public whose appetite for accounts of far-away lands seemed insatiable. A multiplicity of motives inspired these activities, ranging from scientific curiosity to commercial gain and from professional duty to the taste for adventure. Nothing was more integral to this engagement with the natural world, however, than the remarkable expansion of Britain's economic and political influence around the globe in the nineteenth century, which was most readily apparent in terms of its empire.

Britain's formal empire grew from approximately 1.5 million square miles in 1800 to 10 million square miles in 1900, extending its sway across the entire continent of Australia, all of South Asia, large swathes of Africa, a substantial share of Southeast Asia, and much more. In addition, its explorers, merchants, prospectors, missionaries and other outliers penetrated many distant and unfamiliar lands that remained outside the official orbit of empire. Although the story of this expansionist enterprise usually turns on the encounter with the indigenous peoples of these territories, the British were no less preoccupied with the physical environments they faced. For the settlers who immigrated to places like Australia and South Africa, this preoccupation hinged on how to make a living off

the land, determining which crops would cope with strange soils and pests. For the soldiers who served in regions such as India or West Africa, it centred on how to endure the climate and escape the diseases that took such a deadly toll. For almost everyone who advanced British interests abroad, the promises and perils of the natural world loomed large.

The British brought a distinct set of cultural assumptions and expectations to their encounters with unfamiliar environments. Much of their response in the early nineteenth century was marked by Classical and Romantic notions of nature. Travellers often relied on the aesthetic conventions of the pastoral, the picturesque and the sublime, drawing on them to interpret landscapes as varied as the verdant grasslands of Africa, the imposing peaks of the Himalayas, the dense rainforests of the Amazon and the sparkling bays of New Zealand. The lithographs and other visual images that often accompanied their accounts of these landscapes in periodicals and other publications adopted similar representational strategies. The exoticism of these lands was thereby contained and made comprehensible.

It was neither possible nor desirable, however, to entirely erase the strangeness of some places, and by the second half of the century the natural world came to be bifurcated in the British imagination between those lands that resembled Britain itself and those that seemed ineluctably alien. The former consisted of countries and colonies such as the United States of America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, which attracted large numbers of British immigrants. Termed

“neo-Europes” by the historian Alfred Crosby, these were mainly temperate lands where settlers sought to replicate their mother country through the introduction of its plants, animals and patterns of land use. Though large parts of Australia and other settler territories were in fact environmentally unsuited for such adaptation, they nevertheless came to be seen as places where British settlers could create some version of their homeland. The periodicals that catered to these communities – publications like the *Adelaide Observer* and the *Cape Monthly Magazine* – expressed their sense of civic pride as colonial landscapes were transformed through agricultural, pastoral and mining enterprises, roads, railways and telegraph lines, villages, towns and cities. They saw themselves as making ‘white men’s countries’, a telling phrase that signified their association of environment with race.

By contrast, most of the African, South and Southeast Asian, and Caribbean territories that came under Britain’s imperial sway were decidedly not suitable for reconstitution as white men’s countries. This was not only because these regions were already inhabited by large numbers of non-white peoples, but because their environments were believed to pose particular risks to British sojourners. The term “tropics” came to signify those risks: deadly diseases, debilitating climates, dangerous wildlife and more. By the second half of the nineteenth century, it was widely held that persons of British heritage could not survive in the tropics past the third generation – they would degenerate and die out. Colonial officials in India sought seasonal refuge from the heat and pestilence of the plains in cool, remote hill stations, where they fashioned a simulacrum of the quaint English village. Many Britons who served in the

colonial tropics were granted extended home leaves in order to restore their physical and mental health. Nothing, however, more vividly illustrates British concerns about the tropics than the famous phrases they applied to Africa – ‘the White Man’s Grave’ and ‘Darkest Africa’. This preoccupation with the environmental hazards posed by Africa and other “tropical” territories pervades missionary periodicals, among the most numerous and widely circulated publications of the nineteenth century. The pages of these works were replete with tales of missionaries’ trials and tribulations in the tropics, thereby reinforcing readers’ impressions that these places were innately and unalterably alien.

An important feature of nineteenth century British attitudes toward the natural world that cut across the representational distinction between temperate and tropical zones was the conviction that God had endowed earth with a vast reservoir of resources for the benefit of humankind. The exploitation of those resources was seen as no less a duty than an opportunity, and no nation was believed to be better prepared to carry out this great task than Britain. Its unrivalled industrial, commercial and maritime standing gave it the opportunity and the incentive to seek out the plants, animals and minerals that promised greater prosperity. Whether it was cotton, timber, rubber, whale oil, ostrich feathers, gold, diamonds or other materials, the British were at the forefront of efforts to transform this natural bounty into valuable commodities.

The British also understood, however, that their success in exploiting the world’s resources depended

on their ability to comprehend the natural laws that accounted for this abundance and diversity. Economic opportunity, then, was contingent on scientific knowledge. A distinctive feature of the Victorians' pursuit of this knowledge was the close collaboration they established between amateurs and experts. The natural sciences were still in some respects accessible to anyone, requiring little more than a willingness to observe nature with care and cultivate or collect some of its more curious or valuable products. *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*, initially titled the *Botanical Magazine*, which enjoyed uninterrupted publication from the beginning of the nineteenth century to its end, is one indicator of botany's appeal to the public, which extended to other natural sciences as well, as evidenced by periodicals such as the *Geologist* and the *Edinburgh Journal of Natural and Geographical Science*. Missionaries, merchants, big game hunters and other interested parties in distant lands gathered and shipped back to Britain a veritable flood of information about the natural world – cartographic readings, meteorological records, mineral and soil samples, plant specimens, and the preserved remains of insects, fish, birds and mammals. Most of this information and material made its way to Kew Gardens, the British Museum, the Natural History Museum, the Royal Geographical Society, the Royal School of Mines and other institutions, where it was categorized, catalogued and analyzed by specially trained experts. This collaborative enterprise helped to establish geography, geology, botany, zoology and meteorology as distinct scientific disciplines in the nineteenth century. While the long term result was the rupture of the relationship between amateur and specialist, the new disciplines' founders stressed the importance of empirical observation in the field. Virtually all the

leading British scientists of the nineteenth century – Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, Joseph Hooker and Alfred Russel Wallace, among others – served their scientific apprenticeships as naturalists on expeditions to distant lands.

All of these strands of involvement with the natural world – the imperial, the representational, the commercial and the scientific – came together in the enterprise of exploration. The nineteenth century was the great age of British land exploration. It built on the triumphs and techniques of late eighteenth century seaborne exploration, most famously the voyages of Captain Cook. At the start of the nineteenth century, the interiors of the African and Australian continents were almost entirely terra incognita to the British. Central Asia, the Amazon basin and large portions of other continental land masses were almost equally unknown to them. Efforts to rectify that ignorance resulted in the development of scientific protocols for exploration, the creation of a quasi-professional class of explorers and the establishment of an interlocking network of sponsoring institutions.

The African Association can be considered a key progenitor of this drive to explore the interiors of continents. Founded in 1788 by a group of gentlemen scientists under the leadership of Joseph Banks, the patrician naturalist who had accompanied Captain Cook on his first voyage to the South Pacific, the Association sponsored a series of expeditions into West Africa in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Its initiatives are detailed in the *Proceedings of the Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa*. In 1831 the African Association merged with the newly established Royal Geographical Society,

which provided much of the institutional leadership for British exploration through the remainder of the nineteenth century. Though the Admiralty, the Colonial Office and other government agencies at home and abroad often financed and supervised major expeditions, the Royal Geographical Society played a crucial coordinating role. It lobbied officials to initiate expeditions, supplied explorers with scientific instruments and advice, assessed the value of the information they brought back, and disseminated the resulting geographical knowledge to their members and the public at large.

Like their naval predecessors, the men who led expeditions into Africa and other continents were expected by their institutional sponsors to possess a specialized set of skills. First and foremost, they had to know how to determine latitude and longitude, which was essential to plotting position and mapping territory. Not surprisingly, many of the early explorers were naval officers and surveyors who had been trained to carry out these technically challenging tasks. In addition, explorers were encouraged to acquire some familiarity with astronomy, botany, ethnography, geology, meteorology, philology, zoology and other realms of knowledge. A number of manuals were published in the nineteenth century that provided introductions to these subjects for explorers and like-minded adventurers. Properly outfitted expeditions included compasses, sextants, chronometers, barometers, thermometers, artificial horizons and other precision instruments that allowed explorers to determine their direction, distance, location and altitude, as well as to measure temperature, winds, rainfall and the like. In addition, they were expected to

gather botanical, mineral and zoological samples, archaeological artifacts, ethnographic items and more. The range of skills and knowledge that the most highly trained explorers acquired made them much more than mere travellers: they were in fact nascent professionals, making a crucial contribution to the scientific understanding of the natural world.

At the same time, many of them became national heroes and martyrs. Their expeditions often generated intense public interest and success brought them unprecedented acclaim. David Livingstone became one of the most beloved figures of his age, a missionary-explorer whose condemnation of the slave trade in East Africa and call for the region's redemption through commerce and Christianity circulated widely in the popular press and inspired countless of his countrymen. When he died on his third expedition in Africa, he received a state funeral and burial in Westminster Abbey, London. African exploration produced a number of larger-than-life figures, including Mungo Park, Richard Burton, John Hanning Speke and Henry Morton Stanley. The exploration of Australia brought fame to men like Charles Stuart and John McDouall Stuart and martyrdom to others, most notably Robert Burke and William Wills. Alexander Burnes garnered plaudits for his exploration of Central Asia, as did Robert Schomburgk for surveying the frontiers of British Guyana. The public eagerly awaited the latest reports about the progress of prominent explorers and the books that explorers wrote about their adventures often became bestsellers. Most Australian, South African and other colonial newspapers gave detailed accounts of the expeditions that set off from their frontiers. Periodicals such

as *Illustrated Travels, Our Ocean Highways* and the *Scottish Geographical Magazine* published stories of exploration for the delectation of domestic British readers.

Exploration, then, was the most visible manifestation of the British engagement with the natural realm in the nineteenth century. It brought together a multitude of forces – scientific curiosity, economic enterprise, imperial ambition and a culture of celebrity – that were integral to that encounter. The periodicals of the period provide us with a panoramic view of the world as the Victorians experienced it.

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