

A Voyage To Fernando Po

OCTOBER 12, 1840, Monday. It was determined by the Committee of the Baptist Missionary Society to commence a Mission in the interior of Western Africa; and George Kinghorn Prince, M.D. and myself were appointed as a Deputation to examine the island of Fernando Po, the adjoining Continent, and the banks of the Niger, if practicable, as high as Egga, Rabba and Bonassa."

So wrote John Clarke, late of Jamaica, in the confined space of the cabin of the *Golden Spring* he shared with Dr. Prince, beginning a new book of the diary he kept all his life. A tall man, if the sketch we have of him (with the Doctor) made at Gravesend is photographic, his careworn face showing high resolve and his hair a trifle unruly. A man of method (to use one of his self-descriptions), laborious in detail, as witness his making his own ink and cutting his own pens, and the way he sought detail of history and geography and anthropology to put into his black-coated manuscript-book.

"We sailed in the barque *Golden Spring*, Captain Irving, a vessel belong to the West African Company¹ bound to Fernando Po, chartered by the Government to convey coals and stores for the use of the three steamers which have been prepared to ascend the Niger,² and is expected to call at the Grain Coast³ for a supply of Kroomen,⁴ and at Cape Coast Castle. We hope to reach Fernando Po in ten weeks." A Captain White sailed with them as trading agent for the Company.

After a "most interesting" meeting in Park Street Chapel, at which he and the Doctor spoke, with "Brother Knibb,⁵ Dr. Angus, Dr. Cox and Mr. Hinton,⁶ and bidding farewell the next morning to a host of friends at the Mission House, that included the above and Dyer of the B.M.S.⁷ (who had not been able to get to the meeting) and Mrs. Prince and Dr. Cox's son and Mr. Stanger, they were escorted to Gravesend in the *Diamond* and seen on board the *Golden Spring*. Going down the Thames they passed

¹ The African Steamship Company of Macgregor Laird of Liverpool.

² The 1841 Expedition under Captain (Admiral) Henry Dundas Trotter, R.N.

³ Coasts of Sierra Leone and Liberia from which came "grains of paradise" (melegueta pepper).

⁴ The Kru race of Liberia, that provided many West Coast seamen.

⁵ William Knibb, of Jamaica.

⁶ Joseph Angus, M.A., D.D., Pres., B.U. 1851. Francis A. Cox, D.D., J.L.D., Pres., B.U. 1834, 1845. John Howard Hinton, M.A. Sec., B.U. 1841-66, and President 1837.

⁷ John Dyer was the first full-time secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society.

the *Rapid* "bound to the place⁸ where my earthly affections are centred and where those remain to whom I am so closely united in soul."

At Gravesend a delay (awaiting the ship's papers) enabled them to visit Dr. Park, the brother of Mungo Park⁹ and General Gordon, finding them both from home, and to enjoy the hospitality of Mrs. Georgina Hewett Thompson,¹⁰ the friend of Wilberforce and Granville Sharpe and Clarkson,¹¹ and a lady who had been nursed as a babe by Thomas Peters.¹²

On the Thursday they sailed, and there followed for John three months of close study of books (he took a small library with him) and men, the Scriptures, the records of West African exploration and missionary enterprise, the journals of Clapperton and Denham,¹³ Laird and Oldfield,¹⁴ Lander,¹⁵ McQueen¹⁶ and Mungo Park; listening to the skippers' (Irving and White) tales of pirates and slavers like Pedro Blanco of the *Gallinas*¹⁷ and Duke Ephraim of Old Calabar¹⁸ and Captain Connaught¹⁹; noting wind, weather, thermometer reading, latitude and longitude, between preaching several times a week and acting as schoolmaster to some of the crew.

In addition there were the tracing of drawing of the Benin and Calabar rivers, the daily exercise to recover from the cramping of his nineteen-inch bed, the attempts to describe the goodness of God, the glories of the setting sun, the tragedy of the starling that rested on the rigging, only to be slain by a seaman, and the flying-fish entangled in the forechains. Most unexpectedly, here and there is recorded "composing a piece of poetry."

Slowly the little barque tacked against squall and head-wind,

⁸ Berwick-on-Tweed. ("Nov. 10. This is the birthday of my only child. Her sisters are in Heaven. Painful to the flesh this long separation from my beloved wife and child, but in *me* the spirit triumphs." "Dec. 18. We are now opposite Cape Three Points in the longitude of Berwick-on-Tweed.")

⁹ Mungo Park, 1771-1806, Niger explorer. Drowned, with Martyn, on second journey.

¹⁰ The families of the Clarkes and the Thompsons later intermarried.

¹¹ Members of the Committee that sent the first settlers to Sierra Leone, known afterwards as the St. George's Bay Company.

¹² The West African who was the real founder of Sierra Leone.

¹³ Captain Hugh Clapperton, 1788-1827, Major (Lt.-Col.) Dixon Denham,

¹⁴ Macgregor Laird and R. A. K. Oldfield, joint authors of *Narrative of the Niger*.

¹⁵ Richard Lemon Lander, 1804-1834.

¹⁶ James McQueen, author of *Northern Central Africa* (1821), *Geographical Survey of Africa* (1840), and with Sir R. F. Burton, *The Nile Basin*.

¹⁷ Guinea Coast.

¹⁸ Southern Nigerian seaport. Scene of the dramatic life-work of Mary Slessor, the mill-girl Presbyterian missionary.

¹⁹ Spanish Slaver of New Cestos, Liberia.

one day losing fore and main-top masts, unable as it seemed to leave the vicinity of the Isle of Wight, and then suddenly finding way across the Bay to the coast of Portugal, where conditions became so bad that John tried dieting to overcome sea-sickness, and at last after seventeen days sighting Madeira.

"Nov. 1, Lord's Day. Lat. 32.16, Long. 17.33. Came to Madeira at 4 o.c., a.m.; passed on its western side. It was much covered with clouds but was in sight till about noon. Preached from *Job. xiv. 14*, half the ship's company attending. Dr. Prince read the chapter and hymns and engaged in prayer. Reading the Book of Psalms, our Missionary *Record* and *Manners of Modern Jews*. Teaching the Congo boy."

Ned, the Congo boy, was enslaved when very young ("he is about 12 years of age now") and taken to Princes Island²⁰ by a Portuguese merchant, thence to Fernando Po where he served the Port Doctor and gained knowledge of English (he interpreted John's sermons to the other Congolese). Then he was found as stowaway on the *Golden Spring*, having secreted himself when she lay anchored off Clarence Cove.²¹ "He speaks three languages, reads fairly, and performs well his duty as cabin-boy to his master Captain Irving."

"A good man, Captain Irving, who 'in great kindness gave up his cabin to me, thus affording more room and giving place of retirement for Dr. Prince and myself.'" John follows this entry with "Excellent health, take exercise morning and evening on deck, use plain food and water my only drink. Reading Johnson on *Tropical Climates* and an American work *The House I live In*. Both recommend water."

Two days later he notes, in less firm writing, "Have injured eyes by too much reading and writing." Some of the too much writing being the thirty letters completed for friends in England and Jamaica "ready for the first home-bound boat that would take them."

Fortunately the eyes made rapid recovery and the writing boldly tells of the barque's place of launching, age and tonnage (317), weight of cargo (260 tons over our register), the number of the sails (15), the soundings when they were making land-falls, and the daily run. This last fell to as little as 40 miles (knots?), the crew taking advantage of the slowness to fish. "Lowering boat to take the fish that are in great numbers, albicore, bonitos, dolphin" . . . "another shark caught and eaten by the seamen."

Not only did he preach to the crew, but he wrote their letters

²⁰ Principe, near St. Thomas.

²¹ Port of Fernando Po, its good harbour attracting many trading vessels.

and recorded particulars of their appearance and bits of their biographies. One had been round the world with the American Expedition of Discovery, a fleet of two ships of war, a brig, a storeship and two schooners, this seaman serving in one of the last-named three years and five months. Then "thinking himself badly used he left at New South Wales." Eight of the crew were Negroids, coming from Fish Town, Cape Coast, Bereby, Cavally and the Congo. "The native of Cape Coast came to serve as steward he had not time to attend to The Book, but when he got to Fernando Po he would learn to read."

Whilst in Jamaica John had compiled list of 97 West African words and 59 numerals used there, and he now added some Fernandian and Congolese from the native seamen. He was also learning Hausa²² and Grebo²³ and "reading the Book of Matthew in Arabic" and "with my friend and brother Dr. Prince reading French and the Psalms in Hebrew." His reading on the voyage also included Harvey's *History of Hayti* and Zealand's *Life of Mahomet* and Hodgkin on *Liberia* and Nesbit's *Hinduism*²⁴ and *The Koran*. Nor did these exhaust his interests.

"Beautiful large yellow papillioes flew sprightly about our rigging (see Humbolt, page 30). Nearest land St. Jago about 380 miles, Sierra Leone upwards of 700. Humbolt mentions swallows, but that butterflies should appear at so great a distance from land appears to me most remarkable."

"Examined flying-fish that had small creature attached to it with fourteen feet, powerful hooked teeth and broad tail. It required force to detach it and the place from whence it was taken looked tender as if bitten. It was $1\frac{3}{4}$ inches in length and $\frac{1}{2}$ broad. I put it into spirits to have it more particularly examined at a future date."

"A large vespertillio came on board and was caught, not as large as the vampire of South America, but larger than the reibat of Jamaica."

"Moluscae drawn up from the sea for examination, each having underneath eight red worm-like threads giving power of navigation. Beneath the top is beautiful fringe."

"Sunk empty bottle in depth of 100 fathoms, the cork being covered with pitch and canvas and bladder. It came up filled with water, the cork and coverings in place. A decanter was let down, the glass stopper securely fastened. It returned with bottom forced in from the pressure."

²² Language of a Sudanese race of Fula and Arab blend found from Lake Tchad to the Middle Niger.

²³ A Kru language.

²⁴ A missionary in the East Indies. ("He and I were at Sabbath School together, and since my return have baptized his eldest brother.")

The first land-fall should have been Settra, but the surf was too strong ("thus prevented from first attempt to preach to the natives of Africa in their own land"), and they drifted slowly down the Mesurada Coast²⁵ accompanied by increasing fleet of canoes, John (besides counting the houses in each "town" passed) noting down the kind of fetich worn by the paddlers, their hair-arrangement, teeth-filing, tattoo, cicatrice, and the varied clay-washes used as adornments. "The coffee bush growing here is of a different species to that of Jamaica." "The herbs and trees are similar to those I know." Some of the day's entries end quaintly. "Yellow paddles are used." "They seem fond of red night-caps."

From Dec. 6 to Jan. 1, when they reached Clarence it was procession rather than voyage, with many anchorings and much hospitality given and received by ship-men and traders and native kings. He walked and talked with these sable monarchs, some of them grotesque, and with missionaries from the United States, black as well as white, and recorded the interviews by light of moon or ship's lantern, remembering the names of the gods, how and why and where they were worshipped, the reason of the metal rings worn on limbs ("some carved with name of owner and advertisement that he was a good boy"). One man "had five rings on each ankle and on wrists and six crowded upon one finger." Also the gre-gres or ju-jus, tiger's claws, cowries, small horns filled with grease. Sixteen or twenty of these horns around one neck were sometimes seen.

He interviewed the negro named Jumbo²⁶ who had nursed John Dring, a merchant of Hull, up the Sestos river the six days of the fatal illness, and the midddy of the man-'o-war that just missed 100 slaves shadowed out to sea by cunning Captain Connaught. He learned that a white beaver hat (now decorated by gold lace) worn by a nude visitor had belonged to Surgeon Oldfield, and that the man rewarded by a Sierra Leone governor with £10 for saving a victim from the red-water ordeal had buried the money and forgotten where. And he went to some trouble to know why the dead woman with the shaven head had the soles of her feet colour-washed, and why the sun raised blisters on the skin of the seven-year-old albino boy, and what the discharged Kru seaman intended to do with his wages, a musket, a hat, two pieces of cloth and a bar of tobacco.

The first governor he met was Mr. Russworm of Cape Palmas ("affable and courteous gentleman of colour"), to whom

²⁵ Liberia.

²⁶ Absurd names like Bottle-of-Beer were rule rather than exception, no doubt representing humour of Europeans.

he delivered letters from a Dr. Hodgkin ("on the subject of colonisation he was silent").

The societies represented by the missionaries held large concessions on this part of the coast, as did the companies that sent out the traders. "A man came on board of the Maryland Colonization Company with a paper dated Oct. 12, 1835, in which King Tom of Robookah had gratuitously ceded a large tract of land to the Company. The paper was signed by Dr. Hall. The land is up the Cavelly river near Great Cavelly, where Kuh, the Kru devil, resides under a great stone, over which is built a devil-house." John strode over some of these estates, inspecting church and school and house between taking services and questioning the children. Everywhere, he found, sickness and death were frequent. Tiny churchyards were crowded with rude memorials. Yet sturdy of mind if not of body the missionaries carried on.

"The Rev. J. L. Wilson (of the U.S.A. Presbyterian Church) has been about six years in the country, and has applied himself to the Grebo language, and with his printing press has issued a grammatical analysis, a vocabulary, a dictionary, several small books on Scripture history, tracts, and the Gospel of Matthew. He has thirty scholars from distant places in his school and holds classes in his house."

J. L. and his wife were from the Southern States and there were other Wilsons (Dr. A. D. and wife) from the Northern, who had come here from work in South Africa. They were at Fish-town, some ten miles from Cape Palmas, a cheerful place because higher and with more design to their buildings. Three miles along the coast, at Mount Vaughan, were some American Episcopalians, the Rev. Thomas Smith, John Payne, Dr. Savage and Layman Perkins, with eleven communicants from a district of twenty square miles. "Beyond their district the people are cannibals."

The one Baptist, the Rev. John Revey, had twenty-four members. He had been "long in the colony and spoke, in general, favourably of its condition."

Other than these were two coloured Methodists, Williams and Paine, who were "visited by their brethren from Sinon near Settra." Paine (later Dr. James A. Paine) was to outlive all the others John mentions, and become known as head of a Negro College in his home country.

F. W. BUTT-THOMPSON.

(To be Concluded)