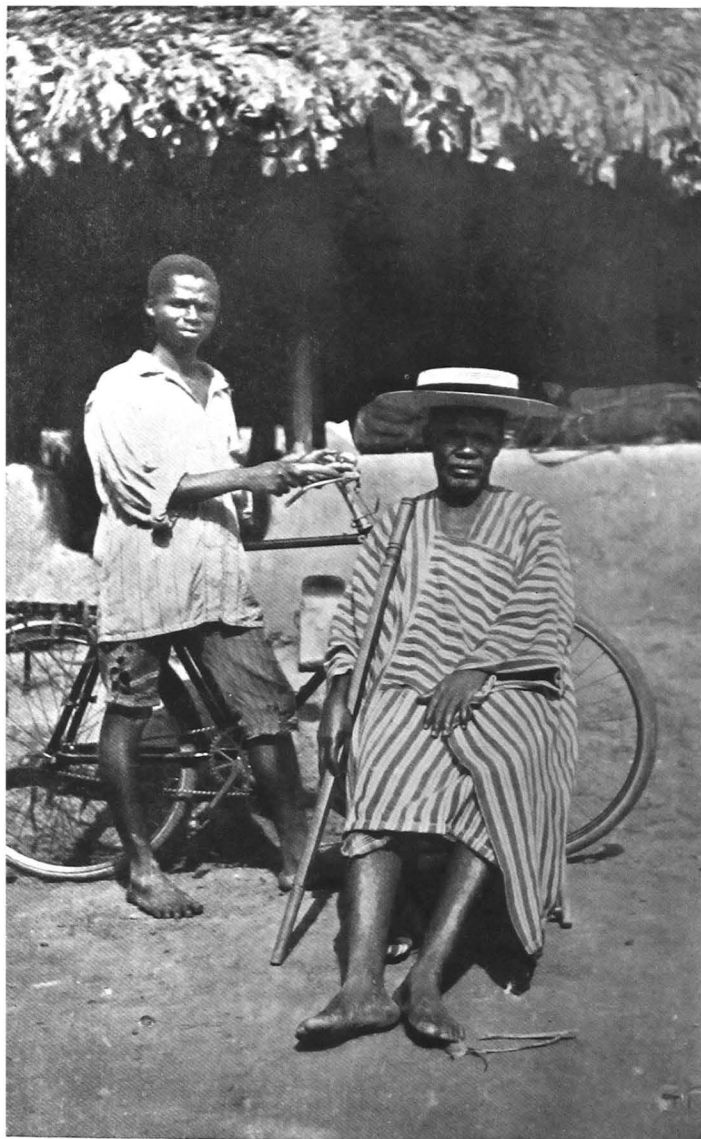


THE BLACK REPUBLIC



NATIVE HEADMAN, CENTRAL LIBERIA.

THE BLACK REPUBLIC

LIBERIA; ITS POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS TO-DAY

BY

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
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“ Love of Liberty brought us here.”

(Motto of the Liberian Republic.)

PREFACE

FOR several years past the author of these notes has been convinced that it is the conscientious duty of every sincere friend of the African races to bring under the notice of the Powers which have recognized the independence of the Liberian Republic the failure of the rulers of that State to make good their promises, and to keep in line with the great civilizing efforts of other Governments on the west coast of Africa.

Twenty years of experience, and the knowledge gained of the splendid progress made by European Powers in their endeavours to bring the Tropical Belt across the Continent more and more into line with the enlightenment and civilization of the twentieth century, entitles one who has been a pioneer, and humble worker in that vast field of practical work of the Christian nations, to ask the rulers of the Liberian Republic, "What hast thou done with thy

talent?" How hast thou repaid the parental kindness, both sentimental and practical, that the great Powers, England, France, and America, have consistently evinced towards thy little State, for the best part of a century?

The answer is contained in the statements made herein, written after several visits and a residence in the Interior for part of three successive dry seasons.

In revealing the actual internal conditions of the State, the author has been careful to speak of things as they are, "To nothing extenuate, nor set down aught in malice." The statements made are not the result of hasty judgments of passing events, but may be regarded as well-drawn conclusions after several visits, fortified by inquiries from all classes of the Liberian community; and, although in some directions the information is not drawn from personal experience, it can be confirmed by reputable witnesses.

In order that they may also be supported by written testimony, the author proposes to draw largely upon the most recent works on the general state of the Republic and its Government, and therefore cites at length statements made by Professor Frederick Starr, in his able and comprehensive con-

tribution to the available literature on the subject, written in 1911-12 ("Liberia," by Frederick Starr, Chicago, 1913).

Professor Starr, in his turn, has quoted liberally from former authorities, notably Mr. G. W. Ellis, for some years secretary to the United States Legation at Monrovia, and M. Delafosse, sometime Consul for France to Liberia, whose observations cover approximately the period 1900 to 1910. All three of these authorities are actuated by friendly feelings toward the Liberians and show that friendliness in their writings; but, as will be seen, all three regard themselves in a position to speak the truth with regard to the internal conditions and shortcomings of the Government of the Republic.

The masterly work of Sir Harry Johnston, "Liberia" (London, 1906), has also been drawn upon for confirmation of statements made by the other authors, and where applicable the references are quoted. Professor Starr does not agree with Sir Harry Johnston's statistics with regard to the population of Liberia, but as the latter is so well known as a careful and experienced observer his figures have been adopted.

Sir Harry Johnston is also a friend of Liberia and

the Liberians, and his splendid book testifies to his kindly interest in the little Black Republic.

The author has been a consistent friend of native races and a supporter of their interests during forty years spent working amongst them; and it is purely on these grounds, and on behalf of the indigenous tribes of Liberia, that he now poses as a candid critic, and in the words of the celebrated apostle of Right and Justice boldly says to the rulers thereof, "J'accuse."

H. F. R.

INTRODUCTION

THIS book was one of a number of manuscripts by Henry Fenwick Reeve. It was intended for publication in 1921, but his death prevented this. His friends, knowing the love he had for Africa and the Africans, and the depth of his feeling regarding Liberia, felt it would be wrong that his views, as expressed in these pages, should not be placed before the public.

Henry Reeve was a many-sided man. Alike as administrator, architect, civil engineer, geologist and surveyor he made his mark. He was a copious but singularly exact writer, chiefly on African subjects. He was of old English stock in the County of Kent, where he was born in 1854. He went, while a boy, to Australia, where he passed into the Public Service after several years spent at the Melbourne University.

Soon after reaching twenty he began a career as a Civil Servant, which was to continue for some-

thing like forty years. Engineering and public works in general were his special professional province, and he carried out work in this sphere for several governments. For a while he kept to Australia, holding posts under the Governments of New South Wales and Victoria, but soon decided to range farther afield, and thus began his connection with the Tropical Dependencies, which was to last for the rest of his official life, except for a period during which he served in Newfoundland. There, as also in Lagos, and in Fiji, he worked with Sir William MacGregor, with whom he formed one of the most valued friendships of his life.

Mr. Reeve's work in West Africa had been preceded by a term of stiff work in Fiji, the chief town of which, Suva, was laid out by him. On the west coast of Africa he was occupied partly in the old Lagos Colony, of which he was for a period Acting Governor, and partly in Gambia, where he ended as Colonial Secretary. During his term of office he acted as Chief Commissioner of the Anglo-French Boundary Commission, which was at work in 1895-6 and again in 1898-9; and soon after the conclusion of his services on the latter occasion he received the C.M.G.

As a Civil Servant Mr. Reeve is still, in both the West African Dependencies just named, remembered with the affectionate respect which people rarely fail to extend to those who are able, honest and generous. But his interest in West Africa was far from ceasing with his official connection. He wrote and published, a few years ago, a book on the Gambia, which is still, and will probably long remain, the classical work. While he had a warm regard for our Allies of France, he was an active, indefatigable British patriot, and both in public and in private represented strongly the injustice and impolicy of leaving a country with the loyal people and wonderful resources of the Gambia in uncertainty as to whether it was to be British or French. He never tired of telling those interested of the immense potentialities of West Africa. He practised what he preached, for he spent thousands of pounds of his private funds upon experiments in the Gambia, and also interested himself greatly in the development of Liberia.

Reeve went to Liberia on behalf of the Liberian Development Company to investigate and report on their gold and diamond proposi-

tions in the Republic. His work resulted in the finding of extensive gold deposits, and in the initiation of dredging operations. He also found diamonds, and was convinced that both these propositions could be worked profitably. The European War, however, and shortness of capital, put an end, for the time being at any rate, to active work. It was during the periods he thus spent in Liberia that he put together the notes for this book.

Henry Reeve was an earnest advocate for safeguarding the rights of the aboriginal tribes in Africa. No one understood natives better or was more in sympathetic touch with them. The conditions prevailing in the Republic of Liberia impressed him very strongly. While in sympathy with the ideals of the original founders of the Liberian Settlement, he arrived at the distinct opinion that the attempt to establish a Black Republic in West Africa on civilized lines had ended in utter failure, and that the worst point in it was the handing over of some two millions of aboriginal tribes to the tender mercies of a band of a few thousand American negroes.

My own experience of Liberia consists of two visits made during 1919-20-21, during which I

spent six months in the country. On the first occasion I entered the Republic by way of the Sierra Leone Railway from Freetown to Pendembu, as this enabled me to get at once to the Liberian Hinterland and to dispense with the troubles and difficulties experienced in getting up country from Monrovia, as there are practically no means of transport in the Republic and no roads. On the journey I traversed all the Hinterland of the western half of Liberia, and eventually reached the coast at Monrovia, following down the valleys of the Lofa and St. Paul Rivers. On my second visit I landed at Monrovia and went up country to the Boporo district, also visiting some of the coast settlements.

I always met with kindness and friendliness on the part of the Liberian Government and officials, and believe that under President King they are doing their best—in their own way—to establish a reasonable administration of the country. But there can be no question that—as Mr. Reeve states—this experiment of the establishment of a Black Republic in West Africa, to amalgamate the aboriginal inhabitants, and to teach them to govern themselves, has been an entire failure. The most

striking feature of this failure is that a few thousand coast negroes, by means of an armed force, equipped with modern rifles, field guns, etc., and officered by American negroes, are able to more or less keep in subjection, to tax, to levy from, and in many ways to treat as inferior races, some two million industrious, capable, and naturally well disposed aboriginal inhabitants.

Soldiers of the "Liberian Frontier Force" take what they want from natives in villages in the Interior. If there is opposition then comes trouble. Anyone who has had to do with Africa knows what native soldiers are when the strictest control is not exercised over them, and when they are given power of any kind: they become a pest; and in Liberia are a common cause of the misunderstandings and wars which arise from time to time.

There is no more valuable asset to any country than its native population. In Liberia large districts have been practically depopulated owing to wars with the aboriginal tribes.

The payment of a hut tax in civilized African territories is supposed to be a contribution by the aboriginal inhabitants to a Government which secures for them peace, a good and just administra-

tion, easy means of communication, opportunities for trade, educational facilities, medical treatment, and, generally, the benefits of civilization. The Liberian Government draws a considerable revenue from the Hinterland people, but gives them little or nothing in return. Beyond the coast belt there are no roads, no good footpaths, no permanent bridges, no telegraphs, no postal system, no adequate magisterial provision, no agricultural effort, no medical or educational facilities, no public works. The Interior exists for two Government purposes—the extraction of as much revenue as possible—and the provision of a number of billets for coast men.

I was much impressed by the inland tribes of Liberia. They are among the finest and most capable Africans I have met in Tropical Africa, and only require good government, sympathetic treatment, and development of the country by railways and roads to become great producers. There is no sympathy whatever between them and the coast Government: it is only the arms and ammunition at the disposal of the latter which enable them to exist.

The Americo-Liberian is not industrious. Mon-

rovia, the capital, lives largely on tinned goods, has scarcely any supply of vegetables or fruit, and imports hundreds of tons of rice for local consumption. In this district where the Americo-Liberians have many small settlements, a moderate display of energy and industry could raise a sufficient amount of fruit, vegetables, rice, poultry, and farm produce to keep Monrovia going and to supply shipping.

The capital town of Liberia is prettily situated on hilly ground, and the appearance of the place from the sea is pleasing and picturesque. The inner harbour is the estuary of the Mesurado Creek, into which run several other creeks, the Stockton communicating with the St. Paul River, the Wotherpoon Creek, and others. Monrovia has thus a fair amount of inland water communications, which might at moderate expense be improved. The streets, though wide, are impassable except for foot traffic, as they are a mass of rocks.

In Monrovia there are few people who have been thirty miles inland. This applies not only to Liberians but to Europeans, and is partly accounted for by the fact that under existing Liberian laws no one may go inland without a permit. Moreover,

no European trader is allowed to establish trading stations up-country.

Liberia is a rich country, and is at present the one totally undeveloped stretch of West Africa. As there is no means of transport inland—none of its rivers being navigable for more than a few miles—there is under existing conditions no possibility of development, even if its Government encouraged the trading community to exploit the Interior, which is not the case. Comparing the central and most inland districts of Liberia with similar districts in Sierra Leone, there can be no doubt that the former are much richer in oil palms. Liberia also has great mineral possibilities. Wherever, in West Africa, the oil palm grows in fair quantities, and there is a native population, it will pay on that account alone, to construct railways. Railways are the only means by which Tropical Africa can be developed. Roads serve up to certain limits: but the bed-rock test is the cost per ton mile, and this for motor traffic in West Africa is certainly not less than one shilling and sixpence (often more), whereas rail transport should be done for twopence.

So far as climate goes Liberia may be divided into three zones:

- (a) The Upper Hinterland, where the general elevation is on an average about 1,500 feet above sea level.
- (b) The Central Zone, round about 500 to 700 feet.
- (c) The Coastal Zone, from 400 feet downwards.

In the Upper Hinterland the climate in the dry season is pleasant.

In the Central Zone you get pleasant mornings, but the middle hours and afternoons become unbearably hot, with oppressive nights.

The Coastal Zone has much the same climate as the Central, but is damper (not the same dry heat).

In all the inland districts cotton is grown by the natives, and spun into thread, from which "country cloths" are woven on roughly constructed looms. Every village has its weavers. Some of their cloth is dyed blue (with home-grown indigo), and the favourite pattern is alternate stripes of blue and white.

In the Hinterland Mandingo traders from French territory bring horses, cattle, calabashes, and various articles of trade, buying in return chiefly kola nuts and rice, both of which are largely produced in districts near the inland frontier.

One travels in Liberia, not only in the Hinterland districts, but right down to the coast belt, on native paths, always in forest, as practically the whole of the Republic is covered with dense forest. What one longs for is some open country and a view, which is never to be had. The paths run up and down steep hills, are a few inches wide, and are crossed in every direction by creepers and tree roots of all sizes. Stumps and rocks are also everywhere. Many tree trunks lie—where they fall—across the paths, and have to be climbed over.

Liberia is remarkably free from noxious beasts: no lions, leopards which seem seldom to attack human beings unless molested, few crocodiles in the Interior, few snakes, not many districts where tsetse fly are troublesome, and I saw no houseticks and few jiggers: many districts are more or less free from mosquitoes.

Looking to the future I can see little hope of progress in Liberia under the present system of government of a large slice of West Africa, holding some two million aboriginal natives, by a few thousand alien negroes from America and elsewhere. They have had their chance, and have shown themselves to be incapable of civilized government.

There will be little hope of proper treatment of the inland tribes, of just treatment of the population, of honest government, or of any advance in civilization, and development of the country's resources, till every branch of administration is taken over and supervised by some civilized power or powers. The "ruling caste" has shown itself to be incapable. The conduct of affairs in Monrovia, and the other coast settlements, has been poor enough, but succeeding Governments' dealings with the Interior tribes have been reprehensible. These inland natives are naturally peaceful and industrious: they put up with bad treatment till it reaches breaking point; then they either clear over the borders and become settlers in a new land (Sierra Leone or French territory), or they put up active opposition, which means military action against them. Liberia is being slowly but steadily ruined. These native "wars" are not conducted on the same lines as those on which the British have carried out such military expeditions as have been necessary in West Africa. In Liberia the military force is accompanied by a large contingent of native "allies," whose operations chiefly consist in finishing off the work carried out by the military,

looting, and seizing all the people they can, who are afterwards disposed of either by retaining as serfs or selling over the borders to other tribes. It must be realized that African tribes are seldom united, and that one tribe is always glad of the opportunity of raiding another.

The purchase of young people is quite common in Liberia: it is called "pawning." The price ranges from about three pounds to four pounds. The person pawned becomes the property of the purchaser, but is supposed to be redeemable by payment of the price originally paid. Children thus obtained by Liberians are almost invariably well treated; many of them are given some education. Probably their lives are just as happy as they would have been in their own environs. I was told that it is seldom any of them attempt to run away.

On what precise lines some reorganization of the Government of Liberia should be undertaken by the Powers is not for me to say. International control has never been a great success in any part of the world, but anything is better than the present state of affairs.

However desirous the leaders of the Americo-

Liberians may be to improve their administration, they have no capable, honest body of their class on which to draw for officials. If every corrupt official of the administration were dismissed tomorrow, there is no better material with which to replace them.

Perhaps the worst example of Americo-Liberian Government is the Inland District Administration. There are few—if any—honest District Commissioners, and many are hopelessly corrupt and unscrupulous: yet these are the men on whom depend good or bad relations with the aboriginal tribes, and whose action may cause uprisings and wars.

Some time ago it seemed likely that the United States Government were going to make a loan of five million dollars to Liberia. The conditions for the granting of this loan were somewhat onerous, and possibly were felt by the Liberians as humiliating, as they placed almost every department of the Republic under the control of officials to be appointed by America. The conditions were, however, accepted by Liberia, as the Government stands in pressing and immediate need of funds in order to pay their current expenses and salaries.

They are already largely indebted. The United States, however, finally vetoed the loan, and it is difficult to understand how the Liberian Government is able at the present date to carry on.

Liberia has very great possibilities. It is a rich country, but no development is possible under existing conditions. The country is a blot on West Africa. It has all the essentials for prosperity, a very fine inland population, rich land, existing products for export. It only requires two essentials: good government and means of transport.

Little is ever heard of the country. Henry Reeve's book may serve to make the existing conditions better known.

A. S.

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