

**KONCZACKI, Janina M. (ed.), "VICTORIAN EXPLORER. THE AFRICAN DIARIES OF CAPTAIN WILLIAM G. STAIRS, 1887-1892"**

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The central body of this book consists of the diaries William G. Stairs composed during the two expeditions he made to the African interior at the end of the nineteenth century. The first was the "Emin Pasha Relief Expedition" (1887-1889), led by the well-known Henry M. Stanley; the second was the "Katanga Expedition" (1891-1892), under the command of Stairs himself.

Owing not in the least to the laborious work of Konczacki, out of scraps and bits of notes, a magnificent work has been created. Due to climatic and logistic reasons whole phrases of the diaries were either lost or illegible. The fragmented entries were carefully recorded and, as far as possible, missing or illegible words and phrases were reconstructed. Each chapter, dealing with a certain phase of the expedition, is intertwined with editorial narratives and comments on the experiences of Stairs and his companions. Adding to these the numerous historical notes, pointing to thorough research, the two diaries reveal a good deal of Stairs's expeditions.

Although the reader, especially the one not too familiar with Central Africa, comes across a lot of interesting geographical, botanical, and ethnographical details about this part of Africa, he learns in fact more about the current western views and thoughts on Africa and Africans at the end of the nineteenth century. Consider the following quotes:

*One does not notice among the natives the diversity that exists among Europeans. All these blacks lead the same kind of life, absorb exactly the same food and exercise their thoughts on the same sparse subjects. The result is that, little by little, they now have only one identical brain.*  
(p. 200)

*Among our people their are perfect savages. They come mainly from Mombasa and one would truly say that they had never seen whites before. [...] It's quite monstrous the way they swindle and cheat the white man who organizes a caravan in this country. All those Arabs in Zanzibar cling to one like vampires, squeezing everything they can out of one, and they even, once the caravan has set off, often persuade the men to desert. (p. 210)*

Seen from the actual point of view, these thoughts are of course not that flattering, but full of biases and prejudices. One might use the term racist. That depends on the definition of "racist". Nowadays, it is widely acknowledged that the term can be used upon contemporaneous people who discriminate other people on behalf of their colour, ethnicity, language, or whatsoever. For decades, however, discourses deal with the question whether acts and thoughts of long ago can be labelled as racist. It is not my intention to answer this question in a few lines. More important to acknowledge is that the non western 'dark continent' at the end of the nineteenth century, was damaged a lot by the dark thoughts, views, and acts of western, Victorian explorers.

As the diaries and the commentaries of the editor suggest, the explorers at that time acted in a highly pragmatic way; either seeking adventure, or opting for a high military career - though most of the time some combination of the two - they set out for Africa. Whenever in Africa, in handling the daily human and material encounters, the explorers and their caravans acted for their own benefit. Sometimes this was, at least temporarily, beneficiary for the local people; most of the time, however, people and societies were disrupted in some way or the other: villages were burnt down and pillaged, people were shot or threatened, bush was cleared, diseases were spread, and, most fundamentally, the expeditions confronted many a native for the first time in their live with white people. Not to mention what kind of effect this had on local social structures. The following quotes give a good description of the pragmatic way of handling of the expedition people and of the consecutive reaction of the local population:

*We had great difficulty in getting any wood and on landing for the night at a small village, the natives ran away after first threatening to fight us. Soon after, our men commenced to loot in the dark and took a tremendous quantity of food and spears. (p. 66)*

*On nearing the village we met some Washenzi, one of which we shot. After we had settled down in camp and made ourselves comfortable,*

*Stanley send off some men to search for food. (p. 84)*

As follows also from the appendices in Konczacki's book, Stairs's views and behavior were in some way quite representative for western explorers at the end of the nineteenth century.

Like others, Stairs's enterprise was undertaken on behalf of the nations that, following the 1884 Berlin conference, wanted to carve up the African continent. As Konczacki points out, the real goals of Stairs's expeditions are not quite clear. The first one, formally aimed at rescuing the Turkish/Egyptian governor of Equatoria, Emin Pasha, was organized by private initiative in Britain, with the assistance of the Egyptian government. The commander of the expedition, Stanley, was nevertheless formally in the employ of King Leopold II of Belgium. Just like the British, Leopold wanted to extend his influence in Equatoria. Emin Pasha, by whose assistance Leopold wanted to achieve this, increasingly lost his grip on Equatoria. According to the editor, however, the egocentric Stanley paid little attention to the interests of the powers that financed his expedition. His own interest seemed to have been sheer "ego-boosting and the material for another bestseller." (p. 17). The second expedition, led by Stairs himself, was aimed at obtaining the submission to the Congo Free State of the despotic chief Msiri of Karengaze. Although already part of the Congo Free State, Msiri's kingdom was not yet under effective control of Leopold II. Moreover, also Cecil Rhodes of Great Britain had a great interest in that area. On reading the diaries, it is not quite evident which western power Stairs sided with. Anyhow, he seemed to be able to reconcile the interests of both Leopold II and the Katanga Company, partly sponsored by British investors.

Whatever the case, whereas Belgian enterprises are criticized and ridiculed, British rule is pictured as the archetype of colonial success in Africa. Stairs reveals this for instance in a the following unrestrained way:

*This is the territory of that most "Rotten of Rotten" concerns [sic] the Congo Independent State. You are welcome to your vast extent of wastelands dear Leopold! [...] No doubt there are still fools who will extol this mismanaged concern [...]. (p. 142)*

*The experiment that Great Britain is attempting in Central Africa should be closely followed by all true friends of the natives. May real success crown England's efforts! (p. 187)*

Apart from presenting his views on Central African society and British and

Belgian colonial enterprise, Stairs offers the reader a profound, although probably exaggerated, picture of Henry Stanley's behaviour during the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition. As one might think that this explorer, widely known by his encounter with Livingstone at Ujiji, is some kind of a noble adventurer, this myth is unmistakably broken by Stairs's notes. Although some accusations certainly will have to do with the power struggle between Stairs and Livingstone, phrases of the following kind are so numerous that it's not too problematic to state that the forementioned myth is indeed shattered too pieces.

*Stanley does not care a jot about our food as long as he is well fed. He never interests himself in his officers' behalf in any way. (p. 90)*

*Faith in Stanley [has] lessened tremendously. Stanley proposes to return from the lake [...], pick up Barttelot, then [travel] up [the] Aruwimi, and perhaps then strike direct[ly] across the lake. The expedition is now so frightfully cut up that I doubt if these plans will ever be realized. (p. 102)*

As the previous quotes already suggest, the two diaries of G.W. Stairs do not have a high literary level, I should say. That's not a problem, but it has to be mentioned in order that the reader will not be disappointed on that matter. Stairs is not to blame for the lack of literary quality of his diaries. Apart from the poor time and circumstances in which to write them, he seemed not to have the intention of creating a work of art. His sole aim was to register ethnographical, geographical, climatological, botanical and zoological facts and to express his views on Central African society and his western compatriots. Nothing more and nothing less. This registering style leads to an abundance of the following, almost telegraphic phrases:

*Had heavy showers early this morning and did not get away till after seven o'clock. Today the water was smooth and we made good time [...] (p. 86)*

*Made five miles. [...] Passed along within two miles of the lake, but the country was so flat we could see very little of it. [...] (p. 178)*

The relevance of the diaries is not literature, but a cultural and historical account. This is best expressed by the following phrase:

*The publication of Stairs's diaries corrects the claim made in 1968 by the editor of "The Diary of A.J. Mountenay Jephson" that with the appearance of the latter "the documentation of the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition is as complete as it is ever likely to be." [...]. The significance of the Stairs's diaries goes far beyond the fact that it provides one more version of events related in the diaries and memoirs of the other members of the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition. With the exception of Jephson's diary [...] other narratives were written specifically for publication and for this reason alone their authors were restrained in expressing their opinions and in*

*reporting some of the more controversial or unpleasant events. They do not share the spontaneity, openness, directness, and tartness of Stairs's writing, although his style is often deficient of the customary literary standards. (Preface, p. xi)*

The two diaries are embedded in chapters and appendices in which Konczacki describes Stairs' life, the goals and achievements of his two African expeditions, the diseases caravans had to cope with in the African interior, the colonial bearings in Africa at that period, as well as appendices on chief Msiri of Karengaze and the Zanzibarean Tippu Tib. The latter was at the time a powerful slave- and ivory-trader, whose influence extended over great parts of Central Africa through which the first Stairs expedition had to pass.

The book ends with an extended bibliography and index. The whole work is supplied by handsome maps of the expeditions and beautiful pictures.

The altogether thorough work Janina Konczacki delivered, constitutes a sound contribution to the study of African and western cultural history.

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