CHAPTER I

THE ATTEMPT IN THE WEST

THE MAP of Africa in 1840 shows at a glance how little was then known of it. It remained to the outside world a continent of coast-lines and little more. The great rivers had not, for the most part, yielded up their secrets. True, the course and delta of the Niger had been recently determined, but the Nile sources remained an unsolved puzzle, the Victoria Falls on the Zambezi were undreamed of, and the Congo was known for the merest fragment of its course—a course which, placed upon the map of Europe, would sweep from Istanbul to London. Of the great lakes of Central Africa not one was yet upon the map. The towering mountain peaks of East Africa, the loftiest in the continent, could not be marked because the cartographer was unaware of their existence. There were, indeed, mapmakers who, as Dean Swift reminds us, sought to compensate for ignorance of geographical fact by flights of artistic fancy:

So geographers in Afric maps
With savage pictures fill their gaps,
And o'er unhabitable downs
Place elephants for want of towns.[1]

Within half a generation of 1840, however, the veil began to be lifted, and by the close of the century a new map of Africa had been given to the world. The opening up of so vast a continental area in so short a time was without parallel in the annals of exploration. The effect upon the Christian enterprise was profound: societies already at work rapidly extended their operations into new fields, while organizations new to Africa entered by the score. Not only was the Christian advance into interior Africa dependent upon this opening up of the continent to the peoples of the West: the initiative itself came in large measure from men whose ultimate purpose was to plant Christianity in Africa.

Attempts to penetrate the continent were first made from the west coast and from the east. These would seem to be the natural starting-points for such an operation, yet these early efforts

[1] J. Swift, *On Poetry: A Rhapsody* (1733). For reproductions of such maps, see Scott Keltie, *The Partition of Africa* (1893), facing p. 46; R. V. Tooley, *Maps and Mapmakers* (1949), 97, 98–9.

failed to achieve the result at which they aimed. The successful break-through was made from the south and was carried out so unostentatiously that the first an astonished world heard of it was when the accomplished fact was reported by the man who had done it singlehanded—singlehanded, that is to say, with generous African co-operation.

These various attempts were not deliberately concerted, yet an interplay of influence may be discerned.

(1) *The Plan of 1841*

The first attempt to break into the interior on a major scale was made in the west. The River Niger, its widespreading delta at last identified, seemed to provide the obvious artery for inland traffic. Explorers from Mungo Park to Richard and John Lander had revealed its course from the mighty "Niger bend", where it swept up to the very confines of the Sahara, down to the sluggish estuaries on the fever-infested coast.[1] Not only was this new knowledge attractive to an effort here, but an entry at this point would penetrate behind the slave-trading middlemen of the coastal region to the slave-providing chiefs and peoples of the interior, and so enable the positive policy for the suppression of the trade to be applied.

The anti-slavery campaigners were faced by the fact that the legal prohibition of the traffic was not in itself proving finally effective. A new policy was demanded which, by substituting a profitable commerce in the resources of Africa, would deal the death-blow to the trade in men. Such a legitimate commerce, first conceived by Granville Sharp for the Sierra Leone Settlement, it had been from 1807 a principal object of the African Institution to promote. Little, however, had been done, for attention had been diverted to the unanticipated threat of the continuing external slave-trade.[2] The new positive policy now

[1] Mungo Park, ascending the River Gambia, first sighted the Niger in 1796; on a second expedition in 1805 he lost his life in the Bussa rapids. In 1821 Denham, Clapperton and Oudney set out from Tripoli for the Hausa States where they travelled, but without reaching the Niger. In 1825 Clapperton and Richard Lander went inland from Badagry, but were foiled in their attempt. The brothers Lander started from the same point in 1830, reached Bussa, and eventually completed the journey down the Niger to the sea, emerging through one of the many mouths. This solved the problem why no single estuary could be found equal to the discharge of the waters of so mighty a river.

[2] E. C. Martin, *The British West African Settlements* (1927), 108; *Report of the Committee of the African Institution* (1807), 65–71; *Fourth Report of the African Institution* (1810), 1.

to be advocated was the proposal to use this very development of natural resources and legitimate trade as a principal means of countering the human traffic.

Thomas Fowell Buxton, with the Emancipation Act of 1833 crowning his parliamentary labours as Wilberforce's successor, soon turned to this new task. Public opinion must be aroused to the situation and the Government be induced to adopt the positive policy as its own. With this twofold aim in view he prepared a study of the continuing slave-trade, marshalling evidence as to its alarming extent and heavy mortality. This was a full generation after the Abolition Act, and exposed a situation in which the profit incentive had proved more powerful than all the notable efforts at suppression.[1] The only remedy, then, that could hope to be finally effective would be the development of the resources of Africa on a scale sufficient to displace the slave-trade. In a word the policy was to be "the deliverance of Africa by calling forth her own resources".[2]

Buxton first prepared in 1838 a statement intended only for members of the Government and described as a "Letter to Lord Melbourne".[3] The response of Ministers was better than he had dared to hope. The facts were admitted as beyond dispute; the immediate question was what should be done. Buxton had recommended certain specific steps as auxiliary measures: a more adequate naval preventive force on the West Coast, and a series of treaties with important chiefs beyond the coast; but as the final remedy, the development of Africa's resources. "The real remedy, the true ransom for Africa", he declared, "will be found in her fertile soil," a proposition that was argued with wide reference to existing authorities. The Niger, it was claimed, offered unusual facilities for reaching the interior, and

[1] The British slave-trade had been brought to an end, but that under Spanish, Portuguese and Brazilian colours still flourished. Through the failure of the United States to agree to reciprocal right of search, the American flag was also resorted to for protection.

[2] Memorandum of April 1839.—C. Buxton, *Memoirs of Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton* (3rd 8vo. ed., 1851), 459. Buxton seems to have hit on this as a new discovery, and finding Palmerston of the same opinion, remarked: "I now find that either the observations, which I made in a conversation with Lord Palmerston some time ago, or which is much more likely to be the case, his own wit, has led him to the same conclusion as my own, viz.: that the slave-trade is to be abolished by legitimate trade."—*Ibid.*, 442, 446. But Palmerston's comment to Glenelg in the same year (1838) indicated a rather different attitude: "No doubt the extension of commerce in Africa is an object to be aimed at, but I am inclined to think that such extension will be the effect rather than the cause of the extinction of the Slave Trade."—Quoted in R. Coupland, *East Africa and Its Invaders* (1938), 288.

[3] In view of its purpose only twenty copies were printed.—C. Buxton, *Memoirs*, 446.

the island of Fernando Po was an ideal centre for the headquarters of the enterprise.[1]

Next in importance to Fernando Po, Buxton claimed, was a settlement to be made at the junction of the Benue and the Niger, where Africans could be trained in up-to-date agricultural methods and British rule would guarantee security. "The proposal of a settlement in Africa", he admits, "necessarily recalls to mind our vast empire in India," but emphatically declares: "I entirely disclaim any disposition to erect a new empire in Africa."[2] Nevertheless, even with this disclaimer, the proposal to acquire sovereign rights over new territory however limited ran directly counter to British policy in West Africa for half a generation.[3]

At the same time Christian missions were to advance into the interior territories, for without the indispensable moral and spiritual contribution of Christianity the whole undertaking would be incomplete. "It is the Bible and the plough that must regenerate Africa," wrote Buxton in a phrase that became famous.[4] The immediate starting-point for this comprehensive programme should be, he proposed, an expedition to the Niger in sufficient force and with adequate authority to conclude treaties with the more important chiefs upon its banks, to explore the possibilities for agricultural and commercial undertakings and to make some beginning with them.[5] The whole situation was finally set forth by Buxton in a work that had

[1] *Ibid.*, 449, 451–2. For a period after 1827 the British Government had actually maintained an establishment on the island for Africans emancipated under the Slave Trade Abolition Treaties, but later withdrew as Spain was unwilling to consider a transfer of sovereignty.—T. F. Buxton, *The Slave Trade and its Remedy* (1840), 537.

[2] T. F. Buxton, *op. cit.*, 353, 453.

[3] The relation of Buxton's proposals to existing colonial policy is discussed by J. Gallagher, "Fowell Buxton and the New African Policy, 1838–1842" in *The Cambridge Historical Journal*, Vol. X, No. 1, (1950), 36–58, who comments: "On *a priori* grounds the plan would seem doomed for rejection, for it flagrantly violated the canons of British colonial policy. . . . Yet in principle the scheme was adopted." Palmerston's recent refusal to acquire so eligible a base as Mombasa in East Africa may be noted.—R. Coupland, *op. cit.*, 287–9.

[4] C. Buxton, *op. cit.*, 451; T. F. Buxton, *op. cit.*, 483. As Buxton remarks, a similar conjunction had been made by James Read thirty years before.—Cf. I, 244, *n.* 3.

[5] James MacQueen, who had foreseen the Landers' discovery, had proposed a similar plan some years before, involving both Fernando Po, and a station under the British flag at the Niger-Benue confluence.—W. L. Mathieson, *Great Britain and the Slave Trade, 1839–1865* (1929), 31. An expedition, promoted by Macgregor Laird in the interests of exploration and trade with Fernando Po as a base, made two ascents of the Niger to the Benue confluence and beyond in 1832–33. Mortality was heavy, only nine Europeans surviving out of forty-eight.—A. C. Burns, *History of Nigeria* (3rd ed., 1942), 101–2.

a wide circulation and influence, *The Slave Trade and its Remedy*.[1]

Meanwhile there had been formed in June 1839, under Buxton's leadership, the Society for the Extinction of the Slave Trade and for the Civilization of Africa. Leaders in Church and State served on its committee and Buxton wrote with much satisfaction of the first meeting, held in July: "It was a glorious meeting, quite an epitome of the state. Whig, Tory, and Radical; Dissenter, Low Church, High Church, tiptop High Church, or Oxfordism, all united . . . good men and true came to my assistance . . . and no one better than the Bishop of London."[2] A few days later a deputation from the Society was informed that the Government had decided to send an expedition of three ships to the Niger. This was gratifying news indeed. The "Comptroller of Steam Machinery", having been instructed to prepare the vessels required, reported on investigation that these would have to be specially built.[3] This meant an unfortunate delay, but in so important an undertaking it was vital that the best equipment available should be used. The building of three iron steam-vessels adapted to the work required of them was accordingly authorized.[4]

Within a week of this being reported to the House of Commons there appeared the prospectus of the Society for the Exitnction of the Slave Trade and for the Civilization of Africa.[5] It was and remains a notable document. At the outset of the

[1] The first part, delineating the extent and horror of the continuing slave-trade, was issued in 1839. A second edition was soon called for, and to this was added the positive programme advocated by Buxton, the combined work, issued in 1840, bearing the above title. James MacQueen had collaborated with him.—C. Buxton, *Memoirs*, 446. There has been some criticism of Buxton's exposition.—See Mathieson, *op. cit.*, 37–45. The book aroused much interest in Germany, as well as in Austria and Switzerland, and in July 1841 a German edition appeared in Berlin.—*The Friend of Africa* (1841), 13–16, 186–7, 220–2.

[2] Buxton to Trew, Secretary of the Society.—*Memoirs*, 462.

[3] Steam was still struggling into favour for ocean voyages, and was chiefly found as an auxiliary to sail. The first regular Atlantic service under steam was begun in 1840 by the forerunner of the Cunard Company. In 1841 out of 23,172 vessels of all classes belonging to the United Kingdom, only 790 were under steam.—*Ency. Brit.* (1947), XX, 544, 549.

[4] The proposals were set out in a letter from Lord John Russell to the Treasury, dated December 26, 1839, which was submitted to the House of Commons, February 8, 1840. The letter is printed in T. F. Buxton, *op. cit.*, Appendix F. The expedition was under the immediate command of the Admiralty. The estimated expenditure for capital outlay and twelve months' running expenses was £79,143. —Allen and Thomson, *A Narrative of the Expedition sent by Her Majesty's Government to the River Niger in 1841* (1848), I, 500–2.

[5] On February 14, 1840. A copy was prefixed to the 1840 edition of Buxton's book.

statement of principles it is affirmed: "It is the unanimous opinion of this Society, that the only complete cure of all these evils, is the introduction of Christianity into Africa." But the Society had no intention (its broad-based support would alone scarcely permit it) of engaging directly in missionary activity, even to the extent of opening schools. Giving unqualified support to Buxton's proposal for an expedition to the Niger, they sketch an ambitious programme of the activities they are prepared to promote in its train, when treaties have been successfully concluded and possibly certain districts secured for settlement. Their proposals are remarkably comprehensive and far-sighted: a survey of the leading languages and dialects and the reduction of the more important to writing; the introduction of the printing press and the local manufacture of paper; an investigation of the climate in various localities and the introduction of medical science "to prevent or mitigate the prevalence of disease and suffering among the people of Africa"; the engineering of roads and canals for transport, and a suitable system of drainage for health; the sharing with Africans of the best knowledge available in agriculture, and the provision of approved implements and tested seeds, together with advice as to the best economic crops to produce for world markets.

This programme would not come amiss at the present day, but a century ago, with the meagre knowledge of inland Africa then prevailing, and the current experience of the slave-ridden coast, it was indeed remarkably enlightened. There were naturally critics who scented in such proposals the mad excursion of incorrigible idealists who could only be disciplined by disaster. But such was the national will to see the slave-trade effectively abolished that the proposals secured far-reaching support.

The Society's first anniversary was celebrated by a great public meeting in Exeter Hall on June 1, 1840. It was an impressive occasion. The meeting was presided over by Prince Albert, and as this was his first public engagement in the country, attendance was overflowing long before the appointed time. The distinguished platform included many peers, M.P's and bishops. Among the Members of Parliament were Sir Robert Peel and Mr. Gladstone. A young medical missionary candidate, David Livingstone, was in the audience.[1] The resolutions laid before the meeting were enthusiastically endorsed.[2]

[1] W. G. Blaikie, *The Life of David Livingstone* (1906 ed.), 23.

[2] A full account of the meeting, with a number of the speeches printed verbatim, appeared in *The Times*, June 2, 1840.