

A TRIP TO THE VICTORIA RIVER.

By the Rev. J. E. Tenison-Woods, F.G.S., F.L.S., F.R. Asso. Soc., &c.

I.

At the end of June last year I made a trip to the Victoria River in a steam launch which carries station supplies to the only settlement on the river, that of C. B. Fisher and Co. There are-or there were-two or three Victoria Rivers in Australia, and as there are many who have not the least idea where the river to which I refer is located, a word or two of explanation may be useful. The peninsula of Arnhem's Land in North Australia is formed between two deep indentations on the coast-line. One, on the east, is the Gulf of Carpentaria, and the other, on the west, Cambridge Gulf and the entrance of the Victoria River. Anyone who has read the work of Captain Stokes, who discovered this river, will remember the romantic enthusiasm with which he made his boat expedition along its waters. He and many others thought that it was a kind of Australian River Nile, and that its sources would be found in the very centre of the continent. It was owing to this idea that A. C. Gregory made his celebrated expedition to the watershed in 1854, when the now great Baron Von Mueller won his spurs as botanist to the party. But the rule in Australia seems to be that the importance of rivers is inversely proportionate to the promise at the mouth. The Victoria was not found navigable for 150 miles, and the watershed at its source is not 1500 feet above the sea. Nevertheless its opening is the outlet of many waters, and it forms, apart from its associations with the history of exploration, one of the most interesting geographical features on the north coast. For this reason I was very anxious to visit it, especially as the geology promised to throw much light on what I had seen elsewhere in Australia. It is only recently that there has been any settlement on the river. Mr. Fisher has formed one or two cattle stations of the upper portion of the stream, where the land improves into well-grassed, open downs of rich soil. Up to this supplies have been sent from Port Darwin in a small but very fast steam launch called the Victoria, navigated by a partner in the firm, Mr. Stevens. The distance is about 800 miles to the mouth of the river, but the Steamer generally goes about 90 miles up the stream. The plan was to send down a small sailing vessel from the station when the launch was expected, and the stores were transhipped when the vessels met. Two previous voyages of this kind had been made; and at 10 p.m. on a fine night at the end of June I went on board as a guest on the Victoria in making her third trip. I had for a travelling companion a son of the late Justice Stow.

Mr. Stevens came on board at 4 a.m., and we weighed and steamed away before daylight. The Victoria is a screw launch of 17 tons register-a long narrow boat of shallow draught, with compound engines, which easily steams 10 miles an hour. Mr. Stevens is an amateur mariner. He is not a certificated master, but he has a certificate of some kind. He has had much experience in navigating small boats about these coasts. He came originally to the colony as an operator for the B. A. Telegraph Company. With all the energy of his race (he is a nephew of the great Sir H. Havelock) he has become one of the leading men of the Territory, a squatter, a bushman, a sailor, engineer, a man ready and fit for any hard work, and to whose good sense, courage, and coolness one could trust anything. Our crew is an engineer and a cook, both Chinese, and good sailors.

We had when morning dawned a fine day and smooth water, with a gentle swell. After passing the inconspicuous red headland of Point Charles, at the entrance of Port Darwin, there was nothing to look at but the sea and the sky, and the sky and the sea, for the shores of North Australia are low. Now and then one would discern a faint black line or a few trees on the horizon, but generally we were out of sight of land. To go any nearer would be unsafe even for such a little boat as ours, for the water is so very shallow. With the glass one could discern on one or two points or headlands, some red rocks, or low cliffs 20 to 30 feet high, certainly no higher. This is the appearance of the whole of the coast between Port Darwin and the mouth of the Victoria. A little way inland there is a dark fringe of forest vegetation, showing slightly elevated land, but of mountains or even hills there are none. Sometimes a very small hummock or a ridge becomes conspicuous from the absence of competitors, but such exceptions are scarce. So this, in brief, was all we saw for the first day, except the reef on which the Brisbane was wrecked, and this was only a discoloured patch on which the sea broke angrily.

At night we anchored in a little bay just inside Cape Ford, a low point as usual. There was a line of dark rocks in front, then sand, and then red cliffs the size of a small house. Behind was a thin level line of dark forest. It was impossible to make up a landscape with fewer materials. All day long the air was murky with smoke from many large bush fires. The sky was brown and curtained with streaks of smoke, and the sun went down red and flaming, but for two hours before it was quite hidden. If one did not know the cause one would certainly say that the heavens were lowering and threatening, and full of evil portent. Our anchorage was not far from the mouth of the Daly River, which drains such an immense area of country, very nearly as great as the Victoria, and yet with such a narrow opening into Anson's Bay that it was never seen or its existence suspected by any of the marine surveyors. Mr. Stevens had never anchored here before, so we went in feeling our way. The night was beautiful and mild, and, in fact, a little chilly. I was glad of the shelter of our fore-cabin, nay, our only cabin, which was doing temporary duty as a fore-hold for special parcels. It was not a bad little cabin, and by duly adjusting the tea-chests, saddlery, stationery, bacon, wire, surveying instruments, and fire-bricks, there was a fair amount of sleep to be got out of it

The change of tide roused us before dawn, and made us heave up anchor and away. It was a beautiful morning, bright and silvery, before dawn, by the light of the waning moon and the planet Venus. As the morning broke, the red sunrise beneath, the blueish grey of the sky above, and the silver moon and stars made a glorious combination of colour and brightness. The coast soon showed up in the cold, grey mist, and then our previous day's experience was repeated—green, bright water, with a foamy ripple upon it, and a low coastline, from which columns and clouds of smoke were everywhere rising. In the middle of the day we stood in close to Cape Hay to clear many outside reefs and banks. This is a passage discovered by our indefatigable skipper. At 2.30 p.m. we passed Point Pearce, and then in a moment the whole aspect of the sea was changed. It became turbid and muddy, the tide was flowing one way, and the stream another, so the tide rips and ripple were such as to make one imagine that breakers were on all sides of us. The little steamer jumped and skipped about in a most lively manner; indeed, it required a strong arm, and much care to keep her head to the stream. It was such a change that for a moment or two the effect was quite startling, and made one think that the size of the Victoria was really greater than it is. There was no land visible to the westward. To the South-east it was broken with table-topped hills, ranges of the usual type of broken sandstone table-land. None of the hills were high. The highest were far away, and have been ascertained to be about 600 feet high, so the horizon was not much broken. Before us was the Macadam range, of which a poor and exaggerated picture has been given by Stokes. Near us on the left was a low red cliff called Fossil Head by the same explorer, and behind it to the south-east a flat-

topped plateau named Table Hill. I suppose we must call this a mountain since it is the highest hereabouts, say 650 feet high. It slopes upward for half its height and then becomes precipitous with conspicuous white cliffs all around. I need hardly point out that this is a common form of tableland in Australia and similar countries. It is seen in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales, and must be familiar to every traveller I have found in the Northern Territory, as stated in my former letters, that the white cliffs are generally ferruginous magnesite derived probably from volcanic sources, and those are probably the same.

Macadam Range, as we passed it, became remarkable and picturesque. It is openly timber of a lovely uniform crest and diversified by deep gullies. Red cliffs were scattered along its sides, and there is one conspicuous bluff bounding a dark green gorge. There must be a watercourse there, perhaps a deep torrent in the rainy season, but Mr. Stevens told me that it is generally dry, and so are all the gorges and gullies at the foot of the range. The soil is also very poor, and thus the grass is scanty and of poor quality. Trial wells have been sunk, and only yielded salt water. Yet there are natives in this country, which is one significant sign in its favour. On the whole I think it is much better than it looks. There are many worse, far worse, places which are thriving cattle runs in more populous parts of Australia.

When we had steamed a short distance past the end of the range, another showed up to the south of us, occupying the whole width of the horizon. The river here was, I should say, about two miles wide, and bounded by low banks of very peculiar mangrove scrubs, which at a distance looked like walls of dead bushes. We got well up to a mud-bank with scrub on the western shore, and there as the day was far spent, we anchored. It is difficult to convey the impression which this large, lonely river makes upon a stranger. I am used to the lonely wilds of Australia, and have been familiar with them for more than half my lifetime, yet this great solitude of a river strangely impressed me. However, it had a beauty of its own. As the sun set the colours of the hills changed into surprising hues of purple, out of which the red cliffs stood in lurid patches. This was set off by an orange sky and a blue haze, while the calm and stillness made the columns of smoke rolling upwards throw a mysterious gloom over all. There were bright specks of flame visible when twilight set in, and the stars were reflected on the turbid murmuring river. There were natives about at no great distance but not likely to come near us, however. There are treacherous tribes on all the river, and not to be trusted for a moment. The night set in with a heavy dew and a brilliant canopy of stars. I took the first watch, and part of the second, and while my four shipmates slept on the deck, the stillness of the scene was inconceivable to those who have never strayed far from the busy haunts of men. Not a sound on any side but the rippling of the tide and the slow measured breathing of the crew. I have never had an experience like it, and could scarcely tear myself away to go below when the night was far advanced.

We had to wait a very long time for the tide ere we could continue our journey next morning. Mr. Stevens was anxious to go up at low water, so that he had a better chance of seeing the mud banks, and if we grounded we would easily get off again at the rising of the tide. Very little is known of the river. There was a survey once, but the banks are constantly shifting. It would be tedious to tell all the dodgings in and out, up and down, we had to avoid the shallows and mud banks. We did not quite avoid them all, but if we touched it only involved our dropping the anchor for a short time. Our skipper has had to feel his way each visit, and has not yet found a really good channel. I don't suppose that the Victoria River will ever be navigable for large vessels. There is, however, another entrance. The bank on the west is a mud island (Guvin Island), and another channel has been surveyed on its western side. Our draught was only six feet, yet we had barely enough water at half tide.

We got over all the flats about midday, and then came to a point where there was but one deep channel. This emerged from the ranges to the southward, which appeared looming on the horizon at sunset of last evening. As soon as we passed the point, the character of the river was completely altered. Enclosed between high banks into a stream sometimes not quarter of a mile wide, it rushed and roared with impetuosity which looked really threatening. There were eddies and whirlpools, tide rips, and boiling, tumbling narrows, which took the helmsman all he knew to make the Victoria keep her way. It was a regular wrestle. Though our speed was so good, yet the stream would almost have its will at times. It required most careful steering. If the least little helm were given at the turns, the whirlpools would twist her half-way round ere she would be brought up. Then there would be a pause, and the launch would quiver and heel over in the frothy turmoil all around us, until the river would yield the point, and wheel away on its mad, rushing, bubbling race. Woe to anyone who should fall overboard in such a place. I don't know what small boats could do. It reminded me of an exciting journey up the rapids of the Katsura River in Japan.

With a change in the river the character of the banks had changed. Instead of the long stretches of mangrove flats we had hills about 400 feet high close to the water's edge. They were lightly timbered with what most colonists would call scrubby vegetation, while the soil looked poor and light. But the rocks were the remarkable features. At first the surface was broken up into boulders, rugged cliffs, and rocky outliers, such as one usually sees in a granite country. But the stones wanted the rounded outlines of granite. Before long the outcrop assumed the most fantastic shapes. There were masses of rough-hewn blocks piled into mimic masonry of every form. One hill was protected by a long low wall of red and white square stones; another was a mass of fragments of quite a monumental character, like a cemetery or a stonecutter's yard, only a good deal more jumbled. Then one would see a fair representation of ruins - a castle or a tower, one would say - but, as the windings of the river gave rise to different points of view, it changed into as many forms as faces in the fire. The colour of most of these rock masses is red, but not a uniform red. There are brown-reds and fiery reds, light and dark reds, bright and deep reds, in every variety. There is no monotony, but rather such an endless variegation that it is bewildering. After all, what wonders can be done with varying tints of one colour! But the general aspect is lurid, and it gives the impression of a true land of Edom. There was order, however, in all this grotesque piling and colouring. Long lines of stratification in regular succession showed the dip and strike in pretty equal beds. Such lines could be traced when the rock could not, and there were terraces and rectilinear marks in the distance which revealed the formation and kept up a continuation of the geological story. Sometimes - especially near the water's edge - the sandstone is washed and worn so as to manifest finer subdivisions, almost like slaty laminations. In short, the rock is a fluvatile sandstone such as already described as occurring in the interior of the Northern Territory. Those who want an idea of what that is like can best see its features in the gorges of the Blue Mountains, especially about Govett's Leap; but the scenery at the Victoria River, with hills not 400 feet high, is not nearly so picturesque.

Sometimes the river widened out to nearly a mile, or it narrowed to a mere gorge. Each point and each turn had its pile of rocks, so that it would be hard to tell the story of all. But there is one that deserves especial notice. It is a wide part of the stream, where an opening valley on the left bank (ascending the river) gives a view of distant hills some 600 feet high. They are precipitous, or nearly so, on their river face, of deep red colour, and very scantily timbered. The long lines of stratification are very marked, showing the dip, and a regular dome-shaped curving on the strike, which is very peculiar. This is evidently another formation on which the fluvatile sandstone rests uncomfortably. It is old, possibly Palaeozoic. Mr. A. Gregory thinks it is Devonian or carboniferous, but I have had no opportunity of discussing the matter with

him. At any rate the geology of the river valley thus far is very easily understood. It is a deep erosion in ancient rocks, which is extensively covered with newer river deposits. These deposits I should say are tertiary, but they may be older. Some geologists would call them desert sandstone, but by this time my readers must have perceived that this term is one of rather vague application. It is applied indiscriminately to desert, river, and volcanic formations of different characters and different ages. But the whole of the broken sandstones in the valley of the Victoria are fluvial conglomerates such as we meet in every river valley of North Australia and nowhere else except in river valleys. Broad and important as the Victoria River is, even its present dimensions seem inadequate to account for the river deposits we find in the valley. And this is the case with all similar formations. The present streams would never apparently have produced them. Just at the present streams in the Blue Mountains seem so insufficient as causes to account for the denudation of the Hawkesbury sandstone It must be therefore, either that we underrate what a running river can do, or our rivers have formerly been much larger than they are now-at least in North Australia.

Article: *Sydney Morning Herald* (NSW: 1842-1954) Saturday 21 May 1887 page 6 obtained from the National Library of <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article13660549>