

Three Journeys in Northern Oman

Author(s): S. M. Zwemer

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cuts into two the reflection of the trees on the right bank. A comparison with Fig. 1 shows at once the turbulence of the water behind the bore. The alternation of wide bright bands with narrow dark bands parallel to the front of the bore, indicates the character and position of the undulations behind it, whilst the confused reflection of light near the left bank indicates resurging therefrom. If the apparent heights of the banks in the two figures be measured, the level of the water will be found to have risen behind the bore.

Fig. 3 shows the wave as yet unbroken, but with steeper front due to its approach to the shoal; the inverted image is plainly visible. Measurement of the post from the picture shows that the water there is 2 feet 5 inches above the level of the river in front of the bore.

Fig. 4 shows the bore rushing over the Stonebench. The mean level of water at the post is 2 feet 11½ inches above low water, but there is a noticeable difference of level at front and back of the post, indicated by a dark shadow on the picture. This shows that the current, which, shortly before the bore arrived, I found to be ebbing seawards at 0·8 mile per hour, is now making in the opposite direction with considerable strength. The boat remains in position, being anchored.

THREE JOURNEYS IN NORTHERN OMAN.

By Rev. S. M. ZWEMER, D.D.

HISTORICALLY, politically, and geographically, Oman has always been the most isolated part of Arabia. As far as outside communication with other Arabs is concerned, Oman was for centuries past an island, with the sea on one side and the desert on the other. The people are even more primitive than Arabs in general. Only Maskat has its eyes open to the wide world; that is the only port in all Oman at which steamers call. Ottoman rule never extended to Oman, not even under Suleiman the Magnificent; nor did any of the earlier caliphs long exercise their authority here. The whole country has for centuries been under independent rulers, called imams or sultans. The population is wholly Arab and Mohammedan, and derived from two different stocks, the Kahtani and the Adnani—rival races ever at feud or war with each other. The Jebel Akhdar region, or southern Oman, has been explored in part by Wellsted, Miles, Carter, and others. Northern Oman and the so-called Pirate coast are less known. It was my privilege, while engaged in missionary labour, to visit this region on three journeys. The first was in May, 1900, when I crossed from Sharka, on the Persian gulf, to Shinas and Sohar, on the Gulf of Oman, by way of Wadi Hitta. Afterwards, in February, 1901, I travelled along the Pirate coast, from Abu Thabi to Sharka; and the last journey, in May, 1901, was right across the north of Oman, from Abu Thabi to Sohar by way of Bereimi. All of these journeys were made with one companion only, a native of Mesopotamia; and we were of necessity compelled to travel with as little baggage as possible, since we knew not how the Wahabi Arabs would receive strangers and Christians. Instead of giving a diary of

each journey, I will combine the results and information gathered on the way into one account.

The only way to reach the Pirate coast is by native boat. On my last journey, we were eleven men in a small boat without cabin and only a narrow sailcloth for awning; a fine Arab horse and a yelping greyhound, presents from the Bahrein sheikh to the Sheikh of Abu Thabi, also took passage. The noble quadruped had the largest share of accommodation midships, and the dog was confined to the forecastle lest prayers be polluted. We had a corner on the left side of the poop; the captain, with a *mullah* and a merchant, squatted at our right; and



UNDER A VILLAGE MANGO TREE IN OMAN.

the crew slept, smoked, washed themselves, and ate their dried fish and rice anywhere.

We passed the islands of Karnein, Arzenah, and Dalma, but did not land. From the latter island I secured some fine specimens of iron-ore crystals and iron oxide. Dalma is a great centre for the pearl-boats during the season, and one of the principal markets in the gulf. Merchants from the Arabian and the Persian coast meet here to secure bargains in pearls, and competition is often very keen.

Abu Thabi is the first town on the so-called Pirate coast, and was settled some hundred years ago by the great Beni Yas tribe. The town is under an independent ruler, Sheikh Zeid, and his influence is wide and strong over all the tribe inland as far as Jebel Akhdar. The sheikh is a well-preserved old man; although his years are over

threescore, he has twelve sons, and the full number of wives that the Moslem law allows. We found him genial, hospitable, and, for an Arab, very intelligent. We were assigned to a large room in one of his stone-built houses, and all our wants were supplied from his beneficence. Huge dishes piled with rice, steeped in gravy, and crowned with several pounds of prime roast mutton, the whole surrounded with dates and bread-loaves on a large mat, and washed down with perfumed water! We were never hungry in Oman; everywhere this hospitality was repeated.

The population of Abu Thabi is not over 10,000, and, except a dozen Banyans from Sind, is wholly Arab or Negro. With the exception of a dozen houses and an imposing castle, the whole town is built of date-mats, and extends along the seashore for nearly 2 miles. The only industries of the town and of all the coast are pearl-fishing and drying fish for export. On Ptolemy's map of Arabia this region is named *Ichthiophagoi*; and Niebuhr wrote, "Fishes are so plentiful on the coast, and so easily caught as to be used not only for feeding cows, asses, and other domestic animals, but even as manure for fields." His testimony is true.

About 80 miles north-east of Abu Thabi is the real metropolis of northern Oman, the growing town of Debai. In the 'Persian Gulf Pilot' (edition 1890) the population of this town is given at 5,000; it is at least three times as large now. Between Abu Thabi and Debai the coast is desert, and so flat that a hill 220 feet high is called Jebel Ali (the high mountain). This is the only landmark on the coast, and visible 17 miles. The town of Debai has many good houses built of native stone, and plastered on the outside; the harbour is an inlet, or *khor*, and the town is built on both sides of this, so that ferry-boats ply between continually, and the place has a business-like aspect quite unusual in Arab towns. At the present rate of growth, Debai will outstrip all the other towns, and soon be a port of call for steamers. At present all the cargo for this region is landed at Linga, and re-shipped in native craft.

Sharka is still a Wahabi centre, although this Moslem sect has lost a great deal of its old fanaticism. The people of Debai, however, consider their neighbours heretics, and make sport of a rival bazaar where tobacco is still sold *secretly*.

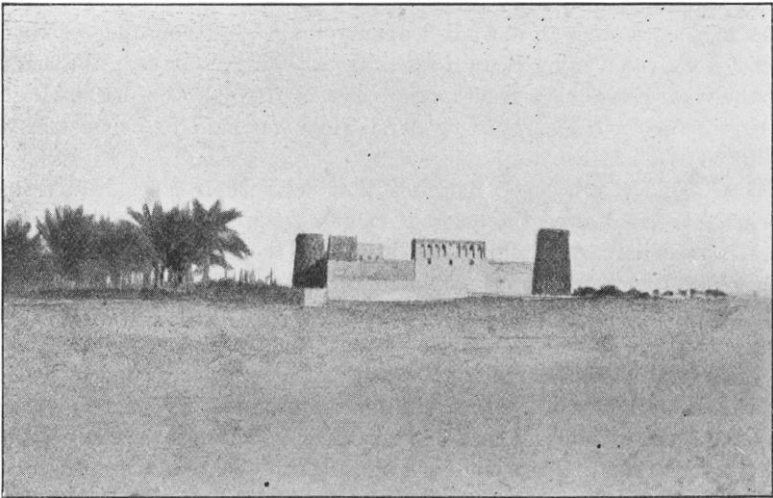
Formerly this entire region was noted for the savage ferocity of its inhabitants. Forty years ago Sir John Malcolm wrote, "Their occupation is piracy, and their delight murder; they are monsters." Thanks to British trade and influence in the Persian gulf, these fanatic Wahabis have become tamed, and they have settled down in many places to begin agriculture. Young date-plantations are a sign of the progress of civilization, and commerce is crowding the nomad spirit out.

From Sharka the coast continues flat and sandy until you reach

Ras-el-Kheima; Ajman and Um-el-Gawein are unimportant hamlets. The low coast which is characteristic of all the Arabian littoral from Kuwait down the gulf, ceases here and gives place to rugged headlands :

“ O'er the sea
Of Oman beetling awefully;
A last and solitary link
Of those stupendous chains that reach
From the broad Caspian's ready brink,
Down winding to the green sea-beach.”

Jebel el Harim, the chief peak of these headlands, is 4470 feet high, precipitous and rugged, as are most of the peaks on Ruus-el-Jebal.



THE CASTLE AT ABU THABI.

Ras-el-Kheima, the largest of the northern towns, was identified by Bochart and Sprenger as the Raamah of Scripture (Gen. x. 7, Ezek. xxvii. 22), while the Greek geographers speak of it as Regma Polis. There are said to be ancient inscriptions on the rocks in the region back of the harbour, but I did not visit the spot. There is coffee-house babble in Eastern Oman concerning a mysterious race of light-complexioned people who live somewhere in the mountains, shun strangers, and speak a language of their own. I think I have found the clue to this strange story that has puzzled travellers to Maskat. At Khasab, near Ras Musandam, live a tribe whose speech is neither Persian, Arabic, nor Baluchi, but resembles the Himyaritic dialect of the Mahrás described by Carter (*Journal Bombay R.A. Soc.*, July, 1847). This language is used by them in talking to each other, although they speak Arabic with strangers. Their complexion is, however, like that of the

average Arab, and their religion Islam. Perhaps this is the tribe the rumours refer to.

In my journey from Sharka across the north of Oman, we rode on camels. For the sum of twenty *rials*, or Maria Theresa dollars (the standard of value among all the nomad Arabs), we secured two companions and five camels to take us to Sohar. By travelling in the cool of the day or by starlight, and resting at noon under some scraggy acacia or in the shade of a Beduin fort, we completed the distance of ninety odd miles in a little over four days. At first the road is bare desert of white sand without pasturage, and therefore without even the booths of the nomads. But on the second day we passed villages and cultivated fields. The three chief hamlets are Felaj, Fulajj, and Athan. On this slope of the Zahira hills there is good pasture and plenty of water. One night we slept in a wadi-bed, surrounded by thousands of sheep and goats, driven in by Beduin lasses from their pastures. The ascent to the wadi-passes that lead to the coast is gradual, the descent more abrupt. As the usual route by Wadi Hom was said to be unsafe, we followed Wadi Hitta.

Our guides proceeded mounted, but with their rifles loaded and cocked; then followed the baggage-camel, to which mine was "towed" in Arab fashion by hitching the bridle of the one to the tail of the other; in like manner, my companion rode his beast fastened to the milch-camel, followed by its *two* colts. We were not troubled by the heat at night, but during the day it was intense, and it was refreshing to come to an oasis where water burst from a big spring, and trees and flowers grew in luxury. In these mountain passes of Oman the roads run almost invariably along the wadi-beds; sometimes these are sandy watercourses with huge boulders, again deep rocky ravines or broad fertile valleys. Vegetation is fairly abundant. Tamerisks, oleanders, euphorbias, and acacias are the most common trees and shrubs. Where the country appears arid and sterile, one is surprised to find a considerable population of shepherds and goatherds. Their dwellings are mere oval shanties constructed of boulders or rocks; the *tent* is rarely seen in Oman, and is rather characteristic of North Arabia than of the south. In the fertile valleys the population always centres in villages, and scarcely ever is a dwelling found at any distance from this common centre. Here often are the fresh-water wells and the watch-tower that protects them in case of war.

Just at the top of the pass of Hitta is the village of Ajeeb, rightly named "wonderful." The view 1000 feet down the mountain and over the fertile stretch of coast called El Batina out to the Indian ocean was grand. We descended to the sea, and the turbulent mountain stream, so cold to our bare feet as we waded it in the early dawn, dwindled to a brook, and at last ebbed away along the beach, a tiny stream of fresh water. These perennial streams are the secret of the

fertile coast all the way from Wadi Hom to Birka, a distance of 160 miles. From Shinas, where Wadi Hitta reaches the sea, we rode along the coast past El Wa (wrongly given as Lawa on some maps) and other smaller villages to Sohar; thence by boat to Maskat.

Our last journey also terminated at Sohar, but we came across country from Abu Thabi by way of Bereimi and Wadi el Jazi. On the way to Oman I visited the island of Keis, on the Persian coast, about 40 miles west of Linga. The population is mostly Arab, and is now confined to three villages, Sefil, Harira, and Mashi. Date-groves abound,



OMAN CHILDREN IN FEAST-DAY DRESS.

and the water-supply is good. Keis is a very ancient settlement, and has ruins to witness to its former importance. When the trade of Ormuz flourished, Keis rivalled its neighbouring city of Siraf.

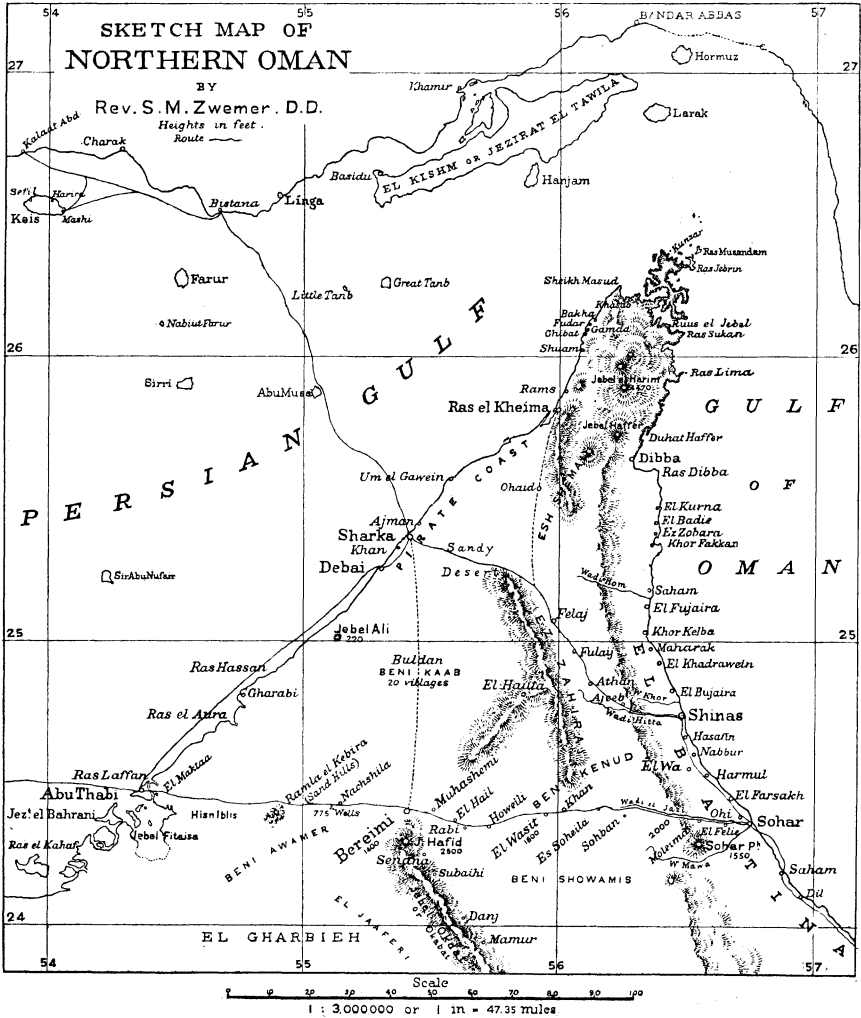
The town of Abu Thabi is situated on an island at high tide, as the backwater of its harbour turns in a few miles beyond the settlement, and forms a channel 200 yards wide, and, even at low water, 5 feet deep. This natural barrier against nomads from the desert has been utilized. Right in the midst of the tidal current stands a fort, built by the predecessors of Sheik Zeid. Even without its challenge, ordinary camels

with their riders have a close escape from drowning every time they cross. Our animals were in up to the breast, and had there been a slip or a stumble we should have come to grief. Along a sand-beach, level as a billiard-table, we rode out from Abu Thabi 10 miles to this ferry, which the Arabs call *El Maktaa*. The water was too high on our arrival, so we slept on the bank until the tide was lower, and the Arab watchman in the fort signalled that crossing was safe. The route we took to Bereimi runs due east for three camel-hours, to a place called Hisn Iblis, the Devil's Castle, an outcrop of limestone rock in fantastic shape above the white sand. For two days beyond, the road is through sandy stretches with scarcely any vegetation. Shale and shingle crop out at intervals, everywhere with a dip of 30° to the north.

We travelled with as little baggage as possible, to avoid awakening cupidity on the part of any Arabs we might meet—only four camels in the caravan, and all our belongings in two Bagdad-leather boxes. At noon we rested under the shade of blankets stretched over our boxes; there was no vegetation large enough for shade. It was over 104° Fahr. in the shade one day, and the water in the skins took on a foreign taste after hours of jerking on the camels. On our halts we made soup from condensed vegetables, and had dates for dessert. But the Beduins of our party were afraid of tinned provisions; they much preferred boiled lizards and rice. There are two species of lizard in Eastern Arabia—one is called *dabb* (*Uromastix acanthinurus*), and feeds only on desert vegetation; the other is called *waral* (*Weranus arenarius*), and eats insects, birds' eggs, etc. The latter kind is considered forbidden, but the former lawful food.

The only settlement we passed on the way to Bereimi was Nachshila, a half-ruined village with a few date-trees. By camel-marches and ordinary caravan rate of 3 miles an hour, it is thirty-three hours from Abu Thabi to Bereimi, and thirty-seven from there to Sohar. Water is scarce on the route, but camel-grass and tamarisk shrubs are plentiful when you pass the Ramlah el Kebira, or "the great sand-heaps." This is a long range of sand-mounds shifting with the desert winds, and about 100 feet in height. Dews fell very heavy at night in May, and it was remarkably cold, so much so that we needed camp-fires at daylight on one occasion. On Sunday, May 5, we arrived at an encampment of the Muzari Arabs, and spent the day with them. Their tents were like those of the northern nomads, but smaller and more wretched. These were the only tents we saw in Oman. We left our Beduin host at nine o'clock that evening, and rode until past midnight in the bright moonlight, always due east. In the early morning we came across a poor nomad lass, who had lost herself in seeking for a strayed camel. Our guide gave her water and dates, and helped her on the way to her tribe, the Beni Awamer. All around was a wide wilderness of

sand, not level, but in weird folds and billows that change with every simoon storm. In one narrow pass, between two high sand-heaps, we heard "the song of the sands." A fairly strong wind swept along the upper layer, and its vibrations gave forth two distinct notes, with volume and tone as sweet as a church-organ. The day was hot and dry.



At noon in the camp our Arabs sprinkled the saddle-ropes of the camels—like Chinese laundrymen are said to sprinkle clothes—by squirting them with their mouth full of water. They said it was the only way to keep them from breaking in this intense dry heat, which cracks everything. On Tuesday we reached the oasis of Bereimi, a 4-mile

stretch of fertile palm-country under the shadow of Jebel Hafid, the first spur of the Okdat range. It seems, after careful inquiry from several Arabs, that the true name, or at least a second name, for this mountain range is Jebel Okabat. The first name signifies "knots," the latter "deep defiles;" both names are appropriate to the rugged outline of the range, as seen from the desert.

Bereimi is the name applied to a group of villages in this oasis, viz. Geemi, El Kantara, Oheli, Ain, Saara, and Matrid. These villages are nestled in one continuous fertile strip of garden—palms, fig-trees, mangoes, mulberry-trees, and pomegranates. On the outskirts of the gardens is a plain, green with grass and shrubs, where sheep and camel-herds tell of Arab wealth. The oasis is due to a half-dozen springs of excellent water from the Okdat range, bubbling up out of the rocks, and led in artificial channels to irrigate as wide a region as possible. Bereimi was formerly called Et-Towam (twins), and the ancient name of the district, the Arabs said, was El Ghabir. The entire region from Jebel Okdat and Jebel Akhdar, north-west to the coast, is called by the Arabs *Ez-Zahira*, in opposition to the eastern coast, which is called *El Batina*, terms which are best translated by "the outer" and "the inner" region. On the road from Bereimi north to Sharka there are twenty hamlets of the Beni Kaab tribe; this, too, is a regular caravan-route. Wellsted did not reach Bereimi, and Palgrave's information is inaccurate, as he wrote from hearsay. Bereimi was for many centuries the most important centre of western Oman. In 1736 the Persians, under Saif-bin Sultan, took the castle of Towam, after utterly defeating the forces of Imam of Maskat in a battle fought near Es-Samini. About the year 1800 (A.H. 1214) the Wahabis entered Oman, and their leader, El Harik, a Nubian slave, took up his residence at Bereimi, and levied tribute for his master, Abd-ul-Aziz.* Although no longer under foreign rule, Bereimi is still a Wahabi centre, but the people are very friendly, and have put off the austere garment of Arab Puritanism, although retaining its ritual in their mosques. The towns of this oasis have no special industries; the gardens are well kept, and all the labour is done by slaves, who form, I think, at least one-half of the population.

Beyond Bereimi, the road along the Jebel Okdat range passes the following villages: Hafid, Senana, El Felai, Dank (or Danj), Jabil, Subaihi, Mamur Abri; Jebel Hafid is two camel-hours (*i.e.* 6 or 7 miles) from Bereimi, and thence to Oki it is four days by caravan. By my pocket aneroid I made the height of Bereimi 1400 feet above sea-level. Jebel Hafid is probably about 2500 feet.

From Bereimi we went due east along the Wadi el Jazi route to Sohar. The villages we passed are marked on the map; there are

* See 'Badger's History of the Imams and Seyyids of Oman' (London, 1871), pp. 230 *seq.*

others at some distance on either side of our path, but I did not get their exact names. It is difficult to understand Arabic gutturals from the mouths of such utterly ignorant Beduins as were our companions. The principal tribes east of Bereimi are the Kenud, Majabil, Showamis, and Beni Haith. These Arabs, as well as those of Bereimi, do not acknowledge the authority of the Sultan of Maskat, but have their own chiefs, and are, alas! nearly always at feud with each other. Every peasant goes armed, and one does not pass even a greybeard riding a diminutive donkey without seeing a rifle, or at least a crooked dagger at his side. Yet, in spite of continual warfare, they cultivate every fertile spot assiduously, and raise all sorts of crops—barley, wheat, sesame, vegetables, and even tobacco. In one village we rested on the wide threshing-floor, where the old-fashioned "threshing instrument with sharp teeth" lay idle. The Oman plough is better than that of Mesopotamia, where they use a crooked stick with a sharp prong to cultivate the loamy soil. In this mountain region the law of the survival of the fittest has given the peasant skill in making a real coulter of iron, fitted to a heavy frame and braced with an upright handle of three bars set at right angles to the frame. The common name for plough is not *miftah*, but *hais*.

It took us exactly twelve hours on camels from Bereimi to Wasit; all the road was level except the last 10 miles, where the ascent of the pass begins. The real entrance to Wadi el Jazi is 6 miles beyond Wasit. All these mountain villages of Oman have great similarity: a cluster of stone-built huts around a larger mosque or sheikh's house, narrow paths between the cultivated terraces, and a background of palms overtopped by fine mango trees. The people are simple, friendly, and hospitable. The veil is absent, and the women enjoy unusual respect and liberty. Nearly all of them belong to the Abadhi sect (also called Biyadhi); this is one of the many Moslem sects that grew on the soil of Persian speculation. They have no special tenets, except that, generally, they are more lax in practice of the ritual and less rigid in conduct toward unbelievers. We were known as Christians, and yet they gave us the village mosque in which to treat the sick, preach, and pass the night!

From Bereimi to Wasit the vegetation of the desert is scarce; the only large shrubs are *mirh* and *ghaf*; in the wadi-bed there were several varieties of wild flowers, but not at all in such profusion as in Yemen. Beyond Wasit, however, the country is more fertile, and continues so all the way to the coast. I have never seen more luxuriant date trees and taller mangoes than at Ohi, just north of Sohar; the gardens were beautiful, and the road was for miles in the shadow of overhanging foliage.

From Wasit to Khan is three hours by camel; from Khan to Ohi fifteen. The latter part of the road is very trying both for beast and

rider; rough rocks, narrow defiles, and slippery boulders make the camel-saddle anything but easy for the traveller. We were quite worn-out when we came to Sohar, and had there been a fair wind, we should have taken our journey by sea to Maskat; but after trying it as far as Saham, we bargained again for camels, and rode the entire distance to Maskat along the Batina, 150 miles. This fertile province has been often visited by travellers, and needs no description by me. It may interest economical travellers to learn that the whole journey overland from Abu Thabi to Sohar and on to Maskat cost me and my companion only Rs.90.

BOLIVIA BY THE RIO DE LA PLATA ROUTE.

By Colonel GEORGE EARL CHURCH.

It seems an absurdity that a country lying on the Atlantic slope of South America should carry on nearly all of its exterior trade by the way of the Pacific ocean, yet such is the case with Bolivia. For three-fourths of a century, she has hoisted her products up the eastern side of the Andes to an immense height, lowered them to sea-level, and sent them to a market by the way of Panama or the Straits of Magellan—the nation meanwhile resting in soporiferous contemplation of the problem of gravitation.

As the result of the wrecking and abandonment of the enterprise which, with ample funds, was engaged in the opening of an Amazon route, by the river Madeira, for Bolivian commerce, the country has found itself despoiled by Chile of its little strip of desert sea-coast, with the ports of Cobija and Mejillones, and has thus become a completely mediterranean state; so that now the unintelligent boundary-lines given to Bolivia by General Bolivar threaten her autonomy more than ever. After the Madeira river route was abandoned, several futile attempts were made to prove that its advantages would be exceeded by connecting the valley of the Mayu-tata by railway with the Aquiry branch of the Purus affluent of the Amazon, an idea which explorations demonstrated to be of no value.

Now, the Government is turning its attention to the Paraguayan side of the country, and has just published, in Buenos Ayres, a work of considerable geographical importance called 'Exploraciones Practicadas en el Alto Paraguay y en la Laguna Gaiba, por el Capitan Enrique Bolland,' an English mercantile officer who, it is stated, has had extensive experience in navigating the rivers of the Plata basin, and who, in the employment of Bolivia, has recently made surveys and founded a port for that country on the Alto Paraguay.

Heretofore the efforts of Bolivia to establish a south-eastern outlet