

Two East Africa stories

These stories don't have anything to do with stamps — though I'll be sure to fit some in as illustrations, eventually. They are stories of long ago and far away — a different time, a different culture. They come from the 1880s and 1890s, when the imperial project was still abuilding in eastern Africa. These tales make absorbing reading in themselves; they also have something to offer today. One tells about perseverance, heroic purpose and human sacrifice in building a steamship and getting it to Lake Victoria — and the costs of expanding empire on the backs of indigenous peoples, but also in the hazards to the imperial agents themselves. The other story explores a king of Buganda whose dastardly deeds, and the execution of dozens of young men and boys, led to the canonization of 22 Catholic saints — the Uganda Martyrs.

The SS William Mackinnon

In 1982, German filmmaker Werner Herzog released “Fitzcarraldo,” a sprawling epic about a fictional Rubber Baron in Peru that involved bringing opera to the jungle, and carrying a steamship over a steep hill. The film starred Klaus Kinski and Claudia Cardinale, and the dramatic narrative of its production was told in

another film, “Burden of Dreams.” Kinski's character was based on a real Peruvian rubber baron, Carlos Fitzcarrald, who actually transported a disassembled steamboat across what is now known as the Isthmus of Fitzcarrald.

No one has made a movie about William Mackinnon — not yet, at least. His effort to bring a steamboat from Scotland to Lake Victoria certainly rivals that of Señor Fitzcarrald.

Mackinnon was the Cecil Rhodes of British East Africa, though I know of no stamp in his honor. Unlike Rhodes, Mackinnon was granted a royal title — 1st



William Mackinnon



Poster for the German release of “Fitzcarraldo”

Baronet of Strathaird and Loup — in part part because of his earlier service in India. Born in Scotland in 1823, he became a successful navigator and trader, founding the British-India Steam Navigation Company, a huge enterprise spanning the Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf and East Africa. In 1888 he founded the Imperial British East Africa Company under a royal charter from Queen Victoria. Mackinnon had been knighted in 1884, and became Baronet in 1889.

The expense of administering some 246,000 square miles along the coast and inland, plus costly projects like railroad building and boat-building, kept the IBEAC in perilous financial straits. By 1893 McKinnon and his successors were ready to turn over administration to the British government. The territory was divided into two protectorates, covering Uganda and the rest of British East Africa (later Kenya.)

One of Mackinnon's dreams was to bring a full-size steamboat to Lake Victoria. The challenge involved transporting the ship parts to the Ugandan seaport of Mombasa, and from there



Indigenous laborers and their imperial colleague working on ship re-assembly.

842 kilometers inland to Lake Victoria — a route, without roads or navigable waters. In Renfrewshire, Scotland, a “knock-down” vessel was bolted together, then the metal sheets and the rest were disassembled into hundreds of pieces and shipped to



The ship nears completion

Mombasa in 1890. The Uganda Railway had not yet completed the link west to Lake Victoria. The ship was placed in storage. Another account has engineers cutting the pieces into 3,000 loads of not more than 27 kilograms, for transport on foot — “portering” — over hundreds of miles of hostile terrain, amid wild animals and rival tribes.

Pieces of the ship were

lost — according to one historian, “mostly dropped by tired or dead porters along the way.” Lord Mackinnon died in 1893, age 70, his dream still unfulfilled.

By 1898, with the railroad nearly finished, the dogged engineers, assisted by 200 porters, had recovered the missing pieces. The toll of this arduous labor was not just on indigenous workers. When engineer Richard Grant returned to Kisumu on the lake with missing parts, he found one engineer had died and another was laid low with malaria. A new engineer was dispatched; the remaining ship parts were taken out of storage in Mombasa and transported to Kisumu. Overcoming all remaining odds, re-assembly of the S.S. William Mackinnon went ahead. The ship was launched in 1900 and put into service a year later — just as the railway link was completed.

EPILOGUE: The SS William Mackinnon was 70 feet long, weighing 110 tons, with twin-screw propulsion and two triple expansion engines. During World War I it was repurposed as a gunboat. The ship had an estimable record of nearly three decades of service. In 1929 the vessel was removed to the deep waters of Lake Victoria and sunk.

“The SS William Mackinnon was loved and almost hated in equal measure,” one scribe recorded. “The haters nicknamed it ‘The Emetic.’ “

NEXT: THE UGANDA MARTYRS



This photograph from 1907 pictures the SS Nyanza, a vessel similar to the Mackinnon. After the railroad from the coast was completed in 1901, it was easier to transport steamship parts.