

**CENTRAL AMERICA  
AND THE TRANSIT  
BETWEEN THE OCEANS**

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Central America and the Transit Between the Oceans by Marmaduke B. Sampson

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NUMBERLESS signs denote that Central America will henceforth be the theatre of some of the most remarkable changes to be wrought by advancing civilization. Three years back its capabilities and distinctive features were almost wholly unknown to the general public; and such volumes as existed with regard to them, were read with no more active interest than would have been excited by travels in Persia or Dalmatia, or any other country with whom the chances of our establishing an immediate and vital intercourse might be most remote. Now, however, there is no quarter of the world to which attention is more actively directed. Statesmen, merchants, navigators, colonizers, and the students of natural science, are all alike awakened to the importance of its future prospects; and, as a consequence of the demand thus created, books and maps are supplied by our geographical publishers, involving an amount of minute detail, which enables us, we may believe, to form a far more accurate knowledge of each point of the territory, than is possessed by one out of a hundred, even amongst the most intelligent of its natives.

Until now, notwithstanding the almost solemn charm that has invariably been felt in its contemplation, the idea of a

communication between the Atlantic and the Pacific, has never been anything more than an interesting engineering problem. That it could be effected without any serious difficulty, has, however, in the face of appearances to the contrary, for many years been placed beyond all real doubt; and the actual point in which projectors have failed, has been simply in convincing the capitalist that it would pay. Appealed to on the strength of sublime estimates of the influences of the enterprise on the destinies of the world, unaccompanied by any data on which reliance could be placed with regard to the per centage in the shape of future receipts, men of business could not be warmed into enthusiasm. In reply, therefore, they have always professed a fear of its impracticability; and, as this was stimulated by the circumstance of each projector abusing the routes proposed by his rivals, it at last became a received belief. They saw all the glory of the project; would be willing to run all necessary risk for its consummation; but the thing was impossible. With a demonstrable dividend before them, every shadow in the shape of a mechanical difficulty would have disappeared.

But the discovery of California has now settled the question of a profitable result; and, in a much shorter time than most persons in England are even yet prepared to expect, not merely a communication, but a choice of communications, is certain to be opened up. These will be respectively at Panama and Nicaragua; the former by railway and steam-boat in the first instance, and ultimately by railway entirely; the latter, chiefly by steam-boat in the first instance, and ultimately by a complete canal both for steam-boats and sailing-vessels.

The Panama line is promoted by Howland and Aspinwall, of New York. It is to consist of a railway from Navy Bay

on the Atlantic to Panama on the Pacific, at an estimated cost of \$5,000,000, or £1,000,000 sterling. At the commencement, however, a portion of the road, consisting of about twenty-two miles on the Pacific side (from Panama to Gorgona), will be constructed and put into operation, and the rest of the transit will be effected by steamers running forty-five miles on the Chagres river, which is navigable at all periods of the year for vessels of light draught. The work, it is estimated, may thus far be completed for £200,000, and the shareholders will be in the receipt of revenue while the remainder is being constructed. The full capital for this portion has been subscribed at New York; the entire line has been surveyed, and the grading of the distance from Panama to Gorgona already contracted for at the price of \$400,000, (£80,000), which is within the original estimate. The grant to the Company by the Republic of New Grenada gives them an exclusive privilege for forty-nine years, subject to a right of redemption by the Republic at the end of twenty years, on payment of \$5,000,000; at the end of thirty years on payment of \$4,000,000; and at the end of forty years on payment of \$2,000,000. This privilege is to date from the completion of the road, for which eight years are allowed; and it is accompanied by a concession of exclusive harbour rights at the ports on each side, and also of the necessary land throughout the line, besides 300,000 acres in perpetuity, for the purposes of colonization. The Company are likewise to be allowed to import iron and whatever may be necessary for the construction of the road, free of duty, including all articles of provision and clothing for the workmen. They may also call upon the Government to furnish them the assistance of three companies of sappers; and the only obligation imposed as to the character of the road, is



that it shall be capable of transporting passengers and merchandise from one ocean to the other in the space of twelve hours.

The parties by whom the survey of the Panama route was effected, instead of encountering the formidable difficulties that had been anticipated, found that they could lay down a line which would not exceed forty-six miles in length, with a summit of less than 300 feet above the sea, and with curvatures, having nowhere a radius of less than 1,500 feet. Their explorations were extended over the whole of that part of the Isthmus, so as to insure the one true point, and there can be no doubt that this has now been selected. Another difficulty which has always been represented as no less formidable than the natural impediments of the route, namely, the procuring a proper supply of laborers able to stand the climate, has also been proved to be delusive. The parties who have contracted for the grading of the twenty-two miles on the Pacific side are, it seems, two American engineers, who have been employed for the last five years in the State of New Grenada, in forming a canal ninety miles long, to connect two branches of the Magdalena river, and which they have completed entirely with native labour. They can bring with them a large number of these workmen, whose training, although at first difficult, was ultimately quite successful; and there is reason also to believe that arrangements for foreign labour might be made, since the experience of the corps employed in the survey of the railway, consisting of forty engineers and assistants, was not discouraging with respect to climate.

The explorations for this survey have led to the discovery of large groves of mahogany, and rich mineral deposits, "the knowledge of which," it is represented, "will be highly

important to the company in locating lands under their grant;" and with regard to the proposed terminus of the railway on the Atlantic side, on the island of Manzanilla, in Navy Bay, we have the following characteristic speculations, which might, perhaps, be taken as nothing more than a rhapsody, were it not for our experience of the way in which these American visions are apt to produce their own realization.

"The harbour is accessible at all seasons, and with any wind perfectly secure, and capable of containing 300 sail. Of the island, Mr. Norris, the chief engineer of the Chagres division, says, 'in ten years I predict the whole will be covered with houses, and the inhabitants enjoying perfect health, with every luxury of a southern clime.' He adds, 'I do consider it the most eligible and perfect site for a city of any size I have ever seen.'"

The second line, which may now be considered definitively arranged, is that of a ship canal in connexion with the lakes of Nicaragua. This work promises an early commencement, and also a rapid progress. On the 27th August last a contract was made between the State of Nicaragua and the Atlantic and Pacific Ship Canal Company, of New York, by which all the exclusive privileges necessary for the undertaking were conferred. According to the contract, the canal is to be completed within twelve years, unless prevented by fortuitous occurrences; and, upon failure of this stipulation, such part as may have been constructed is to be forfeited to the State. The Company agree to pay the State \$10,000 for the ratification of the contract; \$10,000 more annually till the completion of the work; and to make a donation of their stock to the amount of \$200,000. When finished, the State is to receive one-fifth of the net profits for twenty years, and afterwards one quarter. There is also a stipulation that it is to have 10 per cent. on the profits of

any minor line of communication between the two oceans which the Company may open up during the time they are engaged on the grand canal. On the other hand, the privileges bestowed are, not only the exclusive rights for constructing the canal, but also the exclusive right of inland steam navigation; grants likewise are to be made of eight sections of land on the banks of the canal, each section to be six miles square. The concession, as originally proposed, was for eighty-five years, but it has since been extended in perpetuity.

The first payment of \$10,000 has already been made by the company to the Government of Nicaragua; and the general arrangement having been favourably viewed by the cabinet at Washington, there can be no question that the privileges which have been acquired under it may now be regarded as incapable of being upset. It is true that Mr. Barclay, the British consul at New York, has given notice to the Company that in extending the grant to the exclusive right of navigating the river San Juan, the State of Nicaragua has entered into an agreement in regard to places where it has no competence, since "the boundary line of the Mosquito kingdom touches the St. John's river, at the Machuca rapid, about thirty miles below the Lake Nicaragua, from whence to the mouth of the St. John's the navigation belongs to Mosquito;" but this, supposing the English view to be admitted, can in no way affect the main privileges they have obtained. It would necessitate a negotiation on their behalf to obtain from the King of Mosquito, or, in other words, from the English Government, a guarantee of those rights on the San Juan which it is not in the power of Nicaragua to grant; and in this it is to be inferred there would be no obstacle, since it would be impossible to refuse the application, so long