

**SEVEN YEARS IN
AFRICA:
LIBERIA AS IT IS**

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Seven Years in Africa: Liberia as it is by J. J. Fitzgerald

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J. J. FITZGERALD

**SEVEN YEARS IN
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SEVEN YEARS IN AFRICA.

LIBERIA AS IT IS.

BY

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MISSIONARY OF THE S. B. BOARD OF MISSIONS.

WE SPEAK THAT WE DO KNOW AND TESTIFY THAT WE HAVE SEEN.—John 3, 11 v.

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PREFACE.

Having resided nearly seven years in Liberia, engaged in the Missionary work, I have concluded to offer to the public the following account of the country, based upon my own personal observation and experience. I am the more constrained to do so, as I am continually being asked what kind of a country is the West African Republic.

It is to be regretted that those who have hitherto published accounts of the country, have either possessed insufficient information, obtained by a flying visit along the coast (in most instances not spending a single night on shore for fear of contracting the fever), or have been influenced by a desire to promote emigration, to give a one-sided and partial report of the land.

The object of the following chapters is to give the reader a true and impartial account of the country as it is, which my seven years' residence abundantly enables me to do.

Having been destitute of all support from the Board since 1861, in consequence of the American war, and having exhausted all of this world's goods that I possessed, when I gave myself to the work of missions, to sustain myself at my station and work during the last five years, and having returned to my native land destitute, with a family whose health is totally impaired by the climate of Africa, I hope, therefore, while this little work will convey to my friends and the public generally a correct impression of that land, so little known, it will also find sufficient sale to meet our present and pressing wants.



CHAPTER I.

CLIMATE, SOIL, SEASONS, ETC.

Liberia being situated between five and seven degrees north latitude, the sun is almost vertical at noon, and such is its intense heat from 10 o'clock A. M. till 4 P. M., that few persons can endure it without the constant use of an umbrella. Nevertheless, it is quite cool and pleasant in the shade. The sea breeze blows from 9 o'clock in the morning and cools the atmosphere, so that it is seldom sultry. The thermometer generally stands from 80 to 85 degrees in the shade; the nights are also cool, and to people who have the patience or indolence to keep in the shade, Liberia may be said to have a pleasant climate. The days and nights are about equal in length the year round. There is no evening or morning twilight; darkness and light succeed each other with a suddenness that is quite surprising.

There is little or no atmospheric phenomena in Liberia, nothing to compare with what may be seen in higher latitudes. There are no rosy tints or golden hues, morning or evening, but the sun rises and sets in a dull gray mist.

The year is divided into two seasons, called the wet and the dry season. The wet season commences about the middle of May and continues till the middle of November, during which time a vast quantity of rain falls. In the middle of the wet season the rain falls gradually and almost incessantly but in the beginning and latter part of the season the showers are more intermittent, and fall in sheets and torrents, accompanied with the most startling and terrific peals of thunder. There is something astonishing in the suddenness of these showers. One moment there is no indication of rain; the next instant it comes in torrents, flooding the streets, and again the next instant not a drop of rain is to be heard.

The thunder has the same habit of giving no warning of its approach, but bursts instantaneously upon you with terrific and startling power, crash following crash, and peal succeeding peal.

From the middle of November till the middle of May, is what is known as the dry season. In the commencement and ending of the dry season, there are occasional showers, but in the middle of the season there is frequently no rain for two or three months. Earth and sky glow with a fervid and oven-like appearance; vegetation is parched and crisped; water becomes scarce, and, in some localities, unattainable; animals look poor and languid, men feverish and irritable,

and women fretful and peevish. Altogether this exceedingly dry and hot season is the most disagreeable of any in the year.

Liberia has 450 or 500 miles sea board. The soil can not be called rich or fertile when compared with the good lands of America. The natives never cultivate the same land two consecutive years, partly owing to its barrenness, and partly to their want of proper implements of husbandry. As a general rule, the land will not produce more than two years under American cultivation. The only exceptions are low clay lands.

There is no country in the world in which the farmer is liable to so many disappointments and bitter failures. Though there are no frosts or snows to rob him of the fruits of his toil, yet bugabugs, ants and other insects so infest the earth that they frequently devour what is planted before it has time to come up. The soil is deceptive. I do not hesitate to affirm that one acre of this country will go further and produce more for the maintenance of a family than five acres will in Western Africa.

The reports that have been circulated in this country of the wonderful productiveness of the African soil, are but a part of the thousand other misrepresentations resorted to to deceive the colored people of the United States, and to induce them to leave the land of their birth and emigrate to a pestilential climate, where, if fortunate enough to acclimate safely, they will at best, in a few years, sink into a premature grave. The soil is generally sandy, but clay exists in some localities, especially on the St. Paul's river, where bricks are made extensively.

The lands along the rivers and creeks are mostly mangrove swamps, and are subject to inundation at high tide, and emit a most offensive smell when the waters again recede.

One great hindrance to the development of the country is the want of interior navigation, and safe harbors on the sea board.

The rivers are not navigable for more than twenty or thirty miles, and that only for small boats and canoes, and the coast is destitute of natural harbors for the protection of shipping. Ships trading on the coast are compelled to anchor off outside, and there receive and discharge their cargoes. The cost of shipping is at least five hundred per cent. more than at Sierra Leone, and Sherbro, where there are good natural ports, without taking into account the loss of life, which is considerable. In this particular the Colonization Society made the worst possible selection as the site for their colony. No sane white men would ever have made such a choice for themselves, as a place to establish a new nationality, without a river navigable for ships or steamers, and without a harbor on the entire coast line.

The English, in selecting Sierre Leone and Sherbro, looked especially to these two particulars, so necessary and indispensable to the prosperity and development of all new countries, and chose two of the best natural harbors on the west coast of Africa. It is impossible, looking at the choice made by the agents of the Colonization Society, to resist the impression that they were providing for a people for whom they had no regard, and in whom they took no interest further than to remove them out of their sight.

Whatever opinion may be entertained of the good likely to result from the colonization movement, love to the colored race was no part of the motive that gave it being.

CHAPTER II.

PRODUCTIONS—METHOD OF CULTIVATION—PHYSICAL LABOR, ETC.

The productions of Liberia are similar to those of other tropical countries. The natives cultivate rice, cassava, corn, sweet potatoes, pumpkins, edoes, cucumbers, ground nuts and cotton. Rice and cassava being the principal food, are extensively cultivated; the other native productions receive but little attention. The colonists grow coffee, sugar, arrow root and ginger for exportation, and small quantities of corn, sweet potatoes and cassava for their own use. The coffee grown in Liberia has perhaps no superior in the world, and the sugar is of fair quality. Not being acquainted with the cultivation of sugar and coffee in other countries, I can not say whether the yield is large or small, but of other productions, such as corn, sweet potatoes, &c., five acres in Liberia will not produce as much as one acre of the good lands in America. Rice will not average more than ten bushels per acre, and corn less than rice; sweet potatoes not more than twenty-five or thirty. This will surprise many who have heard the soil of Liberia spoken of as of unsurpassed fertility, but I speak from actual knowledge and experience. I do not believe that more than ten bushels of corn have ever been produced from an acre of land in Liberia, from the first settlement of the colony to the present time.

The principal fruits are the orange, lemon, lime, sour-sop, sweet-sop, mangrove, plum, guava, pine-apple, plantain, banana, pa-paw, bread fruit, cocoanut and tamarind. Most of these need no description; with a few we will be more particular.

The sour-sop is a large fruit the size of a man's head. It has a rough green skin, the inner part of a snow white. It is pared, sliced and eaten with a little sugar. The pa-paw is of the size of the sour-sop, and resembles the musk-melon in color and taste, and is eaten with pepper and salt. The bread

fruit is as large as either of the others, and is white and seedless. It is boiled or baked, and is very nutritious food. The butter fruit resembles the pear in color and size, and somewhat resembles fresh butter in taste.

Liberia has many and large fruits, some of which are truly delicious, but those who are used to the fruits of the temperate zones will always have a feeling of disappointment in exchanging them for the fruits of the tropics. Fruit, too, must be used with great moderation, as the too free indulgence in it is a prolific cause of disease in Africa.

METHOD OF CULTIVATION.

The bush (as the forests are generally called) consists of an impenetrable undergrowth, interspersed here and there with a few large trees. It is so thick that you can not see a dozen paces before you, except in spots unusually open. This bush is cut down during the dry season, and when it becomes perfectly dry it is set fire to, and the whole face of the land is burnt over, which, when well done, destroys the wild growth and the insects in the soil. The seed is then put in with the hoe. This is the only method of bringing new lands under cultivation. Great care must be taken that the bush is so cut that it will lie smooth all over the ground, that the fire may act on the entire surface. If the burn should be imperfect, it is quite useless to plant. Having no horses and but few oxen, the plow is never used. The only implement used for breaking up the soil is the hoe. It may be thought that this shows a want of enterprise, but I do not believe that the plow can be used to advantage in Liberia, for neither horses (if they could live, which they can not in that climate) nor oxen could possibly draw the plow and live one season.

In this connection I may as well speak of the effects of the climate upon physical labor. Neither man nor beast can perform one-third of the work in Africa that they could in America. I have no doubt that three months work, such as is ordinarily performed on an American farm, would, in the majority of cases, result in death if done in Liberia.

A native of Africa cannot do as much work in his own climate as an American can do at home. Native laborers will work ten hours a day and at the same time he will not accomplish as much work as could be done elsewhere in five hours. It is useless to attempt to get more out of him, the climate does not permit it. If you force him beyond his strength in a few days he is on the sick list, and your farm without hands. I have often over-worked myself to accomplish a given amount by a given time, and the result was always the same—an attack of fever that compelled me to lay by from all labor for a time. I never, during seven years' residence in Africa, could do one-third of the work that I could have done in this