

# Death of Dr Reginald Koettlitz 100th Anniversary

A A 'Gus' Jones

Author of 'Scott's Forgotten Surgeon' - Koettlitz biography

January 2016 marks 100 years since the death of Dover's famous polar explorer, geologist and botanist Dr Reginald Koettlitz. He died in Cradock, South Africa, on 10 January 1916 within two hours of his wife Marie Louise.

In previous articles for the society magazine I concentrated on his epic polar expeditions to the Arctic (Jackson-Harmsworth) and Antarctic (Discovery with Scott). Here I aim to concentrate on the Weld-Blundell Expedition through north-east Africa from Berbera, Somalia to Khartoum via Addis Abbaba and transiting the Blue Nile in 1898.

In his paper written for the Scottish Geographical Magazine Koettlitz wrote: 'Abyssinia the ancient Ethiopia, historically a land of many mysteries and containing one of the sources of the Nile, glorious mountains and volcanic activity had always held a great attraction for me. Therefore, when I was offered an opportunity for visiting and travel across the southern, less visited portion from east to west and return via Sudan and Egypt the offer could not be resisted.'

The expedition was led by Mr Weld Blundell together with his nephew, Lord Lovatt, Mr Harwood a taxidermist, a valet acting as camp major-domo and Dr Koettlitz. The group met in Aden before crossing the Gulf of Aden to Berbera where 35 camels, mules, Somali animal drivers, servants, four



*Reginald Koettlitz*

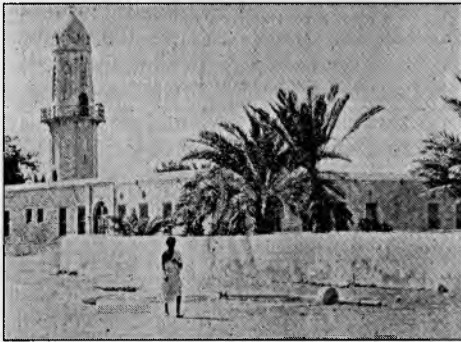
Sudanese soldiers who had fought at the Battle of Omdurman were hired. The group included a donkey as bait for lions.

Berbera was a busy port with a cosmopolitan feel as many merchants from Europe and the Indian continent resided there. There was an impressive mosque in the centre of town.

The expedition set out in the afternoon of 6 December heading inland, the time of departure was timed to prevent the locally recruited staff enjoying the 'pleasures of the town' in the evening.

Koettlitz describes in detail the abundant wildlife and herds of domestic cattle encountered on the march. The area was under cultivation with date palms and rice. Wild animals included antelopes, the elegant Speke's gazelle, ground squirrels and jackals, so hated by the locals. Birds, too many to list, but vultures, eagles, weaver birds, wheatears, rollers, toucans, sunbirds, parrots, Francolin partridge, bustard and guinea fowl were observed or shot for dinner. I often wonder how these areas have changed over time.

They were continually rising in altitude from the plains to the mountainous interior. The only threat to the donkey so far had been a leopard that entered the camp but was driven off by the attendants. Elephant tracks were often seen but no herds sighted. The group camped in an area known as Jeffer



*Berbera Mosque*

Auri or Jejr Medir at approximately 5374 feet. Mr Blundell was determined to bag a lion so took the unfortunate, but as Koettlitz writes 'devoted' donkey, on a mission to shoot local lions. Once again the donkey was spared as no lion were seen.

For the duration of this expedition Dr Koettlitz kept detailed records of the landscape and vegetation. Many plant and rock samples were taken for further research on return to the UK. His journal records the daily temperature, precipitation and other weather extremes which were subject of study by Mr R T Ormond at the University of Edinburgh. The temperature varied from between 80F and 30F at night. Koettlitz wrote, 'Our Somali servants were rather pitiable objects, for until the sun's heat warmed them, as they wore nothing but thin cotton, they felt it acutely.'

On crossing the Abyssinian border which was marked by a stockade compound they headed for Fiambiro, a market place and trading centre. They were now at 6403 feet and the cultivated terraces reminded Koettlitz of the vineyards around the Rhine or Moselle. The camels in particular struggled with the steep ascents and descents into steep ravines. Fiambiro is described as a bustling market town selling all manner of vegetable produce together

with sheep, goats, cattle and donkeys. It was here that the camel drivers were paid off as the terrain was too difficult. There were many requests for 'baksheesh' which Mr Blundell refused to provide! Mules were now to be the means of transportation. These had been sent by Captain Harrington the British representative in Addis Abbaba under the charge of an extraordinary character named, McKelvey the Abyssinian Englishman.

Dr Koettlitz recorded his assessment of McKelvey in the clearest terms. He was captured at the battle of Magdela whilst in the British army in 1868. At this battle a large British/Indian army defeated Emperor Tewodros of Ethiopia with the loss of only two soldiers. McKelvey, following capture, had been tortured and still bore the scars but on return to Alexandria decided he preferred to live as a native in Ethiopia. He dressed as a native and lived in a 'barbarous fashion' with many wives and worked as a merchant and translator for Captain Harrington. Koettlitz remarks: 'Needless to say his morals have sunk, he has both European and Abyssinian vices, there are no redeeming qualities, and he is a plausible humbug and cheat!'

The expedition progressed through Harrar, a walled town of substance with many Greeks, Indians and French merchants and under the control of Governor Ras Makonnen who resided in a fine residence made of red granite. On leaving they moved through fertile undulating country much cultivated. Koettlitz was impressed with the Quolquol tree; some were in bloom with beautiful rose-coloured flowers on the top of long, extraordinary, candelabra-like arms. The group pressed on via Lake Hanamaya and Lake Chercher. They were at an altitude of between 7000 and 8000 feet, the air was clear but cold at night. Birds, black and white ibis, stilts, ducks, coots, teal,

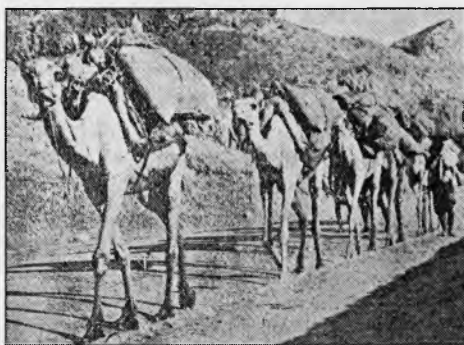
geese, knots and plants were numerous and many specimens were taken for later return to UK. The group continued through this terrain for two more days; small fortified villages were atop the loftiest hills and from a point near the Hawash River a wonderful view was seen towards Addis Abbaba. The Fantalle Hills were crossed, Koettlitz describing their structure as a result of volcanic activity some of which was recent in geological terms.

Addis Abbaba the capital of Abyssinia was the seat of King Menelik who was currently away some 180 miles to the north to resolve a border dispute. The capital was the residence of the British representative Captain Harrington who resided in a walled compound with thatched huts within. Also present were representatives of France, Italy and particularly Russia. Foreign trade was principally undertaken by Greek, French and Armenian traders. Abyssinia was a Coptic Christian country whose people believed they were the only true Christians together with the Russians who shared similar beliefs. The conical thatched churches throughout the region were all surmounted by the Coptic cross.

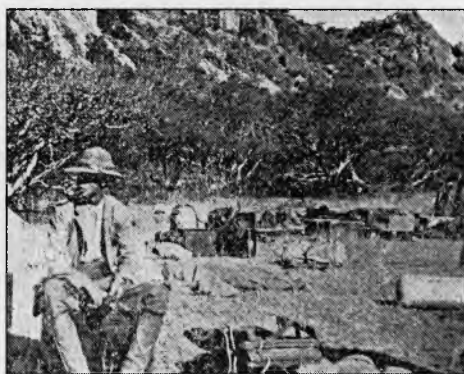
Weld Blundell and Lord Lovat had to obtain the permission of the king before the expedition could precede thereby allowing

Dr Koettlitz the opportunity to visit and examine Mount Zouquala, the Abyssinians' holy mountain forty miles from the capital. The mountain stands at 10,000 feet and is one of a series of volcanic caters in the region. The air is cold and bracing with a large lake at its core. Koettlitz wrote that the Abyssinians thought that by drinking and bathing in the lake miraculous cures were wrought so pilgrimages were made by the sick, maimed and diseased in great numbers. By drinking the stream water women fervently believed it cured sterility. The mountain is dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

At the main church Koettlitz encountered a number of hermit priests deep in prayer. Regular flogging with hippopotamus hide whips was practised. They had a wild, maniacal appearance. He gained entrance to the church and its inner square chamber, the 'holy of holies' with chromo-lithographs representing the Virgin, Christ and the Saints. The Russian influence was obvious but any other foreigner claiming to be a Christian was viewed with suspicion. Koettlitz was quizzed as to his knowledge of the Christian faith and in particular St George the patron saint of Abyssinia. This was his opportunity as he remembered a sovereign in his pocket showing St George.



*Camel Train*



*Camp Jejr Auri*

This was examined with great excitement and compared with their images. Here indeed was a Christian of no mean order, who carried about him an effigy of the Abyssinian patron saint, a talisman against evil and full access was permitted.

On Weld Blundell's return the expedition left Addis Abbaba leaving Captain Harrington and his man, McKelvey, to their 'interesting' existence and headed for the Blue Nile. Koettlitz described in detail the differences between the Shangalla and Galla people they encountered. One being a race displaying almost European features, the other being a truly black African race with totally differing customs within the same country. The Shangalla people were heavily tattooed with gashes to their entire bodies; they carried fearsome weapons but were constantly suppressed by native Abyssinians.

They crossed the Blue Nile at Famaka and made contact with a remote outpost of the Anglo-Egyptian army continuing still with their caravan of mules, porters and specimens to Rosaries and then by gunboat

to Sennaar where they were met by Colonel Lewis, the hero of the battle of Dakla. It took another ten days in a cramped boat to reach Khartoum and Omdurman, arriving on 1 June 1899. They were lodged in the Kaleefa's palace, visiting the Omdurman battlefield before heading by boat and train to Cairo.

The expedition returned to London with a considerable specimen count. Altogether 303 bird species were taken including 16 new to science, numerous species of animal and insect, plants and geological samples. These included a new mollusc species named after Dr Koettlitz - *sepia Koettlitz*. The plants and insects Koettlitz gathered were sent for further study to the Royal Geographical Society and Edinburgh University, his weather records to the Scottish Meteorological Society. The expedition was regarded as a success by the great scientific establishments in London and Edinburgh. But Dr Reginald Koettlitz was destined for colder climes - the Antarctic continent beckoned, he was due to head south with Scott as a member of the Discovery expedition within a year.

## COWGATE CEMETERY

Jeremy Cope

If you are a gardener you will, no doubt, have noticed that vegetation growth this year is very vigorous. The cemetery is no exception but despite this we have made good progress with mowing the grass and pruning the trees. I can report that we found lesser spotted orchids in three places, the first time we have seen orchids for several years. It is a lovely spot with a grand outlook on Dover, shortly to be enhanced with the removal of Burlington House.

My sincere thanks to our band of volunteers. Deborah Gasking is currently using the White Cliffs Explorers website to

try and recruit more volunteers. If you are interested why not give it a try? My phone number is on the front inside cover if you would like to have a chat. Sessions last from 9.00 am to midday. Our preliminary (weather dependent) timetable to the end of March 2016 is as follows:-

Month	Thursday	Saturday
November 2015	5th	14th
December 2015	3rd	12th
January 2016	7th	16th
February 2016	4th	13th
March 2016	3rd	12th