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The Ndebele, Frank Oates, and Knowledge Production in the 1870s

Encounters at the Edge of Empire

Christopher Prior · Joseph Higgins



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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract We consider the challenges, and the virtues or otherwise, of undertaking a systematic analysis of the personal diaries and letters of a European traveller in Africa in the late nineteenth century. Our case study is Englishman Frank Oates, and the context is his interactions with the Ndebele of southern Africa in the 1870s. This case study affords us the opportunity to consider the European/African encounter on the eve of formal imperial rule. We assess the potential to reconstruct this colonial encounter in a manner that gives due weight to African agency. We consider the implications for our analysis of race, contingency, and the provenance of the source base and the intentions behind its creation, as well as taking into account silences and omissions, and that which Oates recorded but did not incorporate into his understanding of the Ndebele nation and its king, Lobengula. We provide historical context to the encounter and delineate how we seek to assess specific components of this encounter.

Keywords Colonial grain · Archives · Race · Ndebele · Frank Oates · Imperial · Encounter · Agency · Knowledge

How does one come to know a place one has never visited before? And how does one acquire understanding of a place in which one has taken a

great deal of excited interest? In the nineteenth century, the African continent was the epicentre of a European mania for exploration. This book concerns the interconnections between engagement with, and understanding of, Africa at the point in the mid-late nineteenth century when European interest in Africa broadly defined was starting to consolidate as an extensive expansion of formal imperial rule. When thinking about what shaped how Africa and Africans were understood by Europeans we cannot, of course, travel far without using the ‘r’ word. Racist ideas of superiority infused accounts of interactions with African peoples in very well-documented ways. Western accounts of the period contain denigrations and denials of African agency or seek to render such agency only insofar as it enabled Westerners to create visions of Africa as chaotic and unstable. For instance, pre-colonial and colonial accounts commonly read indigenous peoples as capricious. This established trope created a mode of Western understanding, wherein the outcome of a set, specific colonial endeavour hinges upon the vagaries of an uncertain or movable African actor.¹

RACE AND RACISM IN SCHOLARLY ACCOUNTS OF IMPERIAL THOUGHT

Given how forcefully present such racism was, it is understandable that scholars have often concluded that European visions of Africans were rather one-note or singular. For such scholars, the power of pseudo-scientific racial thinking meant the dominant motif of European responses to Africa was a uniform condemnation of all before them. For Philip Curtin, the mid-nineteenth-century hardening of a European image of Africa, ‘imbued with the new fashion of theoretical racism ... [provided a] new frame of thought that was to dominate the second half of the century’, proving largely immune to contact with the disparate reality Europeans found there.² The emergence of Social Darwinism in the

¹ Henry M. Stanley, *Coomassie and Magdala: The Story of Two British Campaigns in Africa* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Low, and Searle, 1874), p. 37; William Cornwallis Harris, *The Wild Sports of Southern Africa* (London: Pelham Richardson, Cornhill, 1844), pp. 75, 101–107; Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *The Ndebele Nation: Reflections on Hegemony, Memory and Historiography* (Amsterdam: Rozenberg, 2009), p. 63.

² Philip D. Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780–1850* (London: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 363–387.

late nineteenth-century looms large in accounts of the cultural underpinnings to the European colonisation of Africa, contributing as this did to the development of an expansionist belief in the ‘white man’s burden’, ‘civilising mission’, or ‘manifest destiny’ that seemingly justified control of societies ‘regarded as less well developed than their European counterparts’.³ These shifting, forceful European ideas, Richard Reid points out, go ‘to the very heart’ of the historical relationship between Europe and Africa, where ‘imperialism was the practical ability to act upon these notions’.⁴ A late Victorian combination of ‘pseudo-scientific racism with fashionable canards like the influence of climate and ecology upon cultural history’ means that, for Tom McCaskie, Europeans repeatedly perceiving commonalities across a variety of disparate kingdoms ‘testify *inter alia* to the continuing potency of an imagined Africa in an era of greatly increased factual knowledge’.⁵

Where European conceptions of differences between different African peoples have been considered by historians, this has principally been through emphasis on a Victorian—and then Edwardian—European valorisation of certain ‘martial races’, such as the Zulu and Maasai.⁶ Thus, Europeans judged African societies by whether they were supposedly brave, hardworking and loyal, or cowardly, lazy, and untrustworthy, and such judgments served as the basis unto which colonisation could be enacted and justified. European imperialists are, therefore, considered to have assessed Africans on the basis of the ease with which they were judged capable of assisting in the furtherance of Europeans’ own goals in Africa.

This is all fair enough. But racism—involving a precise, pseudo-scientific, understanding of Africans which held that race was the principal determinant of individual character—was not a fixed absolute in British

³ Akius S. Mlambo, *A History of Zimbabwe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 33–35.

⁴ Richard J. Reid, *A History of Modern Africa: 1800 to the Present: Third Edition* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), pp. 152–154.

⁵ Tom McCaskie, ‘Cultural encounters: Britain and Africa in the Nineteenth Century’, *Oxford History of the British Empire: The Nineteenth Century*, Andrew Porter and Wm. Roger Louis (eds), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 677–8.

⁶ The classic text on martial races in British culture is Heather Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

life. Ideas of race in mid-late nineteenth-century British minds were messy, imprecise, and even contested, for there was not even a consensus on how to define race. As Jose Harris has observed, racial concepts ‘didn’t invariably have the same specifically ethnic and exclusionary connotations that a later generation might suppose’.⁷ Where scientists sought to act as gatekeepers for how the public should use the term ‘race’, preferring that this be understood as a strictly biological term, they proved ineffective.⁸ Ideas about race remained capacious and imprecise. As we shall see, this afforded individuals considerable freedom in interpreting the implications of their sense of superiority.

AGENCY AND CONTINGENCY

And yet whatever the different types of reasons Europeans considered when explaining what they saw of the behaviour of African societies and individuals, clearly this was based on a form of denial of African agency which allowed Europeans to render Africans as inferior to themselves. But there is a challenge here for historians seeking to delineate the underpinning to such negative appraisals. Acknowledging the role power imbalances—caused by coercive violence and other factors that would lead to European imperial control—played in determining what Europeans saw and believed can lend itself only too readily to oversimplification. ‘The difficulty’, as Frederick Cooper argues, ‘is to confront the power behind European expansion without assuming it was all-determining’.⁹ Doing so, according to Daniel Pick, would only flatten ‘out historical differences, contradictions, shifts... [and] abstracts them into singular categories and thus takes, as it were, certain nineteenth-century ideologies at their word’.¹⁰ Similarly, Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni has consistently

⁷ Douglas A. Lorimer, *Science, Race Relations and Resistance: Britain, 1870–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Jose Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: A Social History of Britain, 1870–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) p. 236.

⁸ Douglas A. Lorimer, ‘Race, science and culture: Historical continuities and discontinuities, 1850–1914’, in *The Victorians and Race*, Shearer West (ed.), (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), pp. 16, 18.

⁹ Frederick Cooper, ‘Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History’, *American Historical Review* 99:5 (1994), p. 1517.

¹⁰ Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c.1848–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 38.

argued for the importance of understanding encounters between Europeans and Africans beyond the dichotomy of European domination and African resistance, reminding us that ‘the drama of colonisation was not just a white affair. It was an encounter between human beings, both black and white. The key preoccupation of each was to make sense, and take advantage, of the other’.¹¹ Although we cannot overlook the influence of the development of racism and quite fixed explanations of Africa in the nineteenth century, we can go further in thinking about the consequences of contingency during the colonial encounter. As we shall see, Europeans’ sense of Africans was heavily determined by these Europeans’ personal interactions with such Africans. Can we more closely trace the formation of European knowledge of Africa prior to colonisation through the often quite specific and individual, rather than just generic and Europe-wide, paths taken to developing a conception of Africa?

Doing this is a challenge, and the contingencies of interactions between European and African and their impact upon the construction of knowledge have been acknowledged more in the abstract than fully worked through in practice.¹² A brilliant article by Dorothy Hodgson on British interactions with Maasai in early colonial Tanganyika demonstrates how Britons developed a sense that the Maasai were dominated by men and that women were not public figures, not because of any accurate assessment of Maasai cultural practice, but because protocol required Maasai men to be sent to meet with male colonial officials. African action, filtered through a British psyche already predisposed to expect separate spheres by dint of their own cultural background, led to the creation of a certain way of understanding Africa.¹³

However, this presents a relatively static account of interactions—established colonising predisposition meets established colonised cultural

¹¹ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, ‘Mapping Cultural and Colonial Encounters, 1880s-1930s’, in Brain Raftopoulos & Alois Mlambo (eds), *Becoming Zimbabwe: A History from the Pre-colonial Period to 2008* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2009), p. 41; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, ‘Rethinking the Colonial Encounter in Zimbabwe in the Early Twentieth Century’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 33:1 (2007), pp. 173–191; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, ‘Rethinking religious encounters in Matabeleland region of Zimbabwe, 1860–1893’, *African Journal of History and Culture* 1:2 (2009), pp. 16–27.

¹² McCaskie, ‘Cultural Encounters’, p. 665.

¹³ Dorothy L. Hodgson, ‘Pastoralism, patriarchy and history: Changing gender relations among Maasai in Tanganyika, 1890–1940’, *Journal of African History* 40:1 (1999), pp. 55–6.

practice. This is wholly understandable in the case of a work like Hodgson's, where the focus is on other things. But the question remains and indeed prompts subsidiary questions: what lay within the specifics of each encounter that would lead to different outcomes, to different ways of understanding? What is the place of emotion and serendipity within the colonial encounter? In explaining the bases on which cultural products of the colonial encounter—travelogues, diaries and the like—were constructed, what role was played by elements that have featured less (and which can be much harder to detect) in historical analysis, such as personal state of mind or uniqueness of interaction? Such specificity and individuality are the focus of the present work.

If we are emphasising the personal context informing European mindsets at the moments of interaction with Africans, an obvious point which has long preoccupied Africanists re-emerges. Can we also use a European's account to reconstruct what occurred from the perspective of African communities? Can we do this, even if the European account was not focused on, or was unable to understand, perspectives from within African communities? What if one must deal with European sources that *record* but which do not necessarily *see*, in that they did not consolidate the fragmentary pieces of their encounters with Africans to create new forms of understanding? If Europeans' fragmentary colonial encounters led to interactions with Africans in limited ways and at limited points, are European testimonies capable of bearing the weight of 'reading against the colonial grain', to the point where we can make meaningful conclusions about the changes within individual African personal circumstance and individual African feelings? Can European documents be triangulated, not simply against one another, but within themselves, and to the point where equal weight can be given to African attitudes in explaining why individual European-African encounters played out in the manner they did?

FRANK OATES

In seeking to address such a list of varied questions, our case study is the records and interactions of Frank Oates.¹⁴ Before we go further, it is necessary to get a sense of the sort of man whose records we are trying to decipher. Born 6 April 1840 into a wealthy family of Leeds merchants, landowners, and lawyers, Oates' upbringing and education gravitated towards ornithology, with a typical week involving Oates drawing and painting, or catching or purchasing birds for taxidermy with his two brothers William and Charles.¹⁵ Oates' father Edward was central to encouraging these interests, with his ethos placing less emphasis upon rigorous academic study, and more on the importance of marvelling in the aesthetic splendour of the natural world. Writing in a local periodical, and neatly summarising the ethos of the Oates boys' education, Edward noted that 'so long as we are able to enjoy the beauty of the world we live in... [we] shall then most truly never need employment, but everywhere find interest'.¹⁶ After Frank began reading Natural Sciences at Oxford University, Edward delighted in receiving letters from Frank about 'a little Bird at your window... full of little drawings and family incidents', but lamented the arrival of exams which meant Frank's learning had to be directed towards 'the mere view of passing an examination' rather than 'for its own sake'.¹⁷

A debilitating respiratory illness, however, meant that Oates was forced to abandon his studies in 1863. He would be effectively bound to the family home in Meanwood, Leeds, for the remainder of the 1860s. It would not be until 1871 that, somewhat recovered, Oates travelled across the United States towards California. From San Francisco, Oates sailed

¹⁴ For biographical details on Frank Oates, see C. G. Oates (ed.), *Matabele Land and the Victoria Falls: a Naturalist's Wanderings in the Interior of South Africa: Second Edition* (London: C. Kegan Paul, 1889), pp. xiv-xlii; Eveleigh Bradford, 'They Lived in Leeds: Frank Oates (1840–1875) FRGS: Explorer and naturalist', *The Thoresby Society*, (2012), URL: <https://www.thoresby.org.uk/content/people/oatesF.php> [accessed 12 May 2024].

¹⁵ Gilbert White's House Museum archives, Selborne [hereafter GWHM], OA 10, 2007.146, Punch Pocket Book for 1856.

¹⁶ GWHM, OA 106, 2007.1609a, *The Meanwood Spectator*, No. 10, Vol II, January 1861, p. 8.

¹⁷ GWHM, OA 115, Edward Oates to Frank Oates, 12 May 1864, 5 June 1863 [1864].

to Guatemala and spent several months collecting bird and insect specimens, until a lack of funds forced his return to Britain. Upon returning he was elected a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society in 1872 and his attention was quickly drawn to planning his next expedition. Inspired by accounts of explorers such as David Livingstone, Richard Burton, Thomas Baines, and William Morton Stanley, and keen to establish a career for himself as an explorer and naturalist, Oates departed from Southampton for southern Africa in March 1873.

Arriving in Cape Town the following month and then travelling along the coast to Durban, Oates was accompanied by his brother William to Pietermaritzburg where supplies, waggons, and oxen were acquired along with guides employed to aid their journey. Heading north with the broad intent to make it to the Victoria Falls and to hunt and explore north of the Zambesi River, Oates travelled onwards via Pretoria and Shoshong to Tati (modern Francistown, Botswana) in August 1873. At that point, Tati was a nexus for white traders exploiting a recent but short-lived goldrush in the area. After splitting with William, who hunted in the area before returning to England alone, Frank Oates continued towards Ndebele territory known to Europeans as Matabeleland. After receiving permission to enter, Oates arrived at King Lobengula's capital at Bulawayo (now often referred to as *koBulawayo* or Old Bulawayo, as another Bulawayo was to be built in 1881) in September 1873.¹⁸ Despite receiving permission from Lobengula to travel onto the Falls, it would take Oates several attempts over the course of fifteen months to make it. During the first attempt, made from Inyati (about 75 km NNE from Bulawayo), it became apparent that guides and carriers could not be acquired with the onset of the rainy season and the resultant heightened risk of disease. After two months of hunting in the vicinity of Inyati, Oates returned to Bulawayo and stayed there through December 1873 and January 1874.

With the rainy season still preventing further onward travel to the Zambesi, Oates returned to Tati and hunted in the area until June 1874 when, after receiving renewed permission from Lobengula to travel through Ndebele territory, he made a second attempt to get to the Falls. This time, he was quickly stopped and forced back to Tati by an *induna* (chief or headman) on an order from Lobengula. Lobengula sought to stop all waggons to curb the spread of an outbreak of redwater disease,

¹⁸ Terence Ranger, *Bulawayo Burning: The Social History of a Southern African City* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2010), p. 14.

which could be devastating to cattle. Another attempt for the Falls was made at the end of July—this time Oates being provided with an exemption to travel from Lobengula—but a new order apparently given to halt all waggons again forced Oates to send messengers to Bulawayo to seek clarification and exemption. The delays caused by the outbreak of disease and several waggon breakages, however, meant that it was too close to the rainy season and the attempt was abandoned in September 1874 with Oates returning to Tati. Although Oates received permission from Lobengula to hunt around the Shashani river, illness and wagon repairs further delayed the onward journey until December 1874 when, for reasons that will be examined, Oates made the decision to head to the Zambesi despite the heightened risks. Travelling by waggon to Pandamatenga and from there heading on foot, Oates finally arrived at the Falls on 31 December 1874 and would have likely been amongst the earliest Europeans to see it in full flood. Remaining in the area for about two weeks collecting plant, insect, and bird specimens, Oates began the return journey to Tati. Through January 1875, however, several guides and carriers in his party fell ill and Oates soon contracted a fever. Over the space of several days his condition deteriorated, and he died 5 February 1875, aged 34 (Fig. 1.1).

Matabele Land and the Victoria Falls and Oates' Archive

At the centre of this study are the records produced by Oates during his time in southern Africa, but our concern here is not so much with Oates in his own right. Although he has been the subject of very little scholarly study, we are not seeking to engage in an act of biographical recovery of a neglected figure. Instead, this study seeks to unpick Oates' record of his interactions with Africa and Africans and establish an understanding of the imperial expedition as a series of contingent personal relationships. Some of Oates' words are available to us in published form. In 1881, Frank's brother Charles produced *Matabele Land and the Victoria Falls*, a chronological narrative of Frank's travels. This was then reprinted in a second edition in 1889, which is identical for the most part, barring additional supplementary detail in the appendices provided by specialists tabulating or providing comment on the ethnographic, geographical, and naturalist implications of Oates' travels.

Matabele Land is not a straightforward collation of various elements from Frank's letters and diaries written whilst he was in southern Africa. It is instead heavily extracted material written by Frank, accompanied



Fig. 1.1 Frank Oates, sketch of the Victoria Falls. Reproduced with permission from Gilbert White's House Museum, Selborne

by frequent summarising and editorialising from Charles. Such mediation is in part borne of the necessity of constructing a singular narrative, for Frank's written archive is only ever partial. Thus, if the book was ever going to work as something capable of co-opting the reader as a virtual companion on Oates' journey—and as a means of establishing

some form of emotional connection between the traveller-author and readers—insertions were judged essential.¹⁹

Indeed, Frank had not considered the materials ripe for immediate publication. Charles suggested as much, informing *Matabele Land*'s readers that the letters were 'written with no view to publication'. Now, of course, we do not have to take Charles at his word here. Indeed, Charles seems to have been very careful and calculating in his attempts to frame how the work would be received. He contended that the diaries 'were intended only for the writer's own subsequent use and as suggestive guides for memory'. This can be read as an apologia to preempt any possible criticism on the grounds of literary merit that might come the book's way upon publication. Indeed, Charles even positioned the book as different from the genre's norm. He would argue that it instead provided 'directness and freshness of expressions suggested on the spot'.²⁰

There are grounds for validating Charles' claims as to a lack of intended audience beyond Frank's family. The writing does not contain the stylistic tropes of the genres into which it would have most likely fallen had Oates lived to complete a singular published piece himself. By this stage, and particularly with a growing domestic appetite for tales from Africa, there were well-defined literary approaches to the continent: adventurer/traveller story, naturalist treatise, and missionary tract. These did not have to be adhered to rigidly. Indeed, a 'generic interplay' proved central to the popularity of David Livingstone's *Missionary Travels* of 1857.²¹ But Oates' work lacks colour, and narrative flourishes, which were elements that other travellers, again such as Livingstone, worked very hard to develop in their own works (even if they strove to hide the extent of their care over their efforts from the reading public).²² And so, in sum, the material by Frank that ended up in *Matabele Land* does indeed feel like an *aide memoire*. There is little in the surviving material to suggest that, as Frank travelled, he was writing with the intention of leaving Africa already

¹⁹ The idea of bringing in the reader as a virtual companion is discussed in Justin D. Livingstone, *Livingstone's 'Lives': A Metabiography of a Victorian Icon* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), p. 30.

²⁰ Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. xi–xii.

²¹ Livingstone, *Livingstone's 'Lives'*, p. 24.

²² Livingstone, *Livingstone's 'Lives'*, p. 28; Meriel Buxton, *David Livingstone* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 93–4.

in possession of a first draft of a book, or even of sizeable fragments of one.

Yet whilst there might be support for Charles' justification for his level of intervention in *Matabele Land*, another matter requires consideration. Charles also sought to construct a particular image of his brother. As we shall see, Charles sought to do what he could with the material available to him to create a braver, more proactive, more certain Frank, more in keeping with the contemporary efforts of authors, journalists, and publishers to construct specifically *imperial* men in the public eye who were deemed worthy of admiration and emulation.²³

The only way we are in a position to comment on Charles' editing process is because we have had the benefit of accessing Oates' original letters and diaries, housed in largely uncatalogued form at the Gilbert White's House Museum in Selborne, Hampshire.²⁴ As any historian would appreciate, there is naturally pleasure to be derived from peering 'under the bonnet' at this process of pruning and moulding by which a public figure was created in the late Victorian period. We can therefore not only read Oates' diaries and letters against what was eventually published in *Matabele Land*. We can also read his diaries and letters against one another, to trace changes and inconsistencies in attitude over the two-year period covered by Oates' journey. In so doing, we can evaluate the highly contingent processes by which Western understandings of non-Western spaces were developed.

But we can do more. Besides this, we have the capturing of African perspectives. We have few surviving Ndebele accounts of Matabeleland during the nineteenth century. So, just as many African historians are required to do, we must rely on reading both with and against the colonial grain, navigating the 'archives of repression'.²⁵ Nevertheless, despite

²³ Berny Sèbe, *Heroic Imperialists in Africa: The Promotion of British and French Colonial Heroes, 1870–1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

²⁴ Some of Frank's diaries and letters are held at the National Archives of Zimbabwe, Harare, but a full transcript of his diaries produced by Charles, which this study uses, is kept at the Gilbert White's House Museum. The transcription copied the original exactly bar a very small number of instances where the original was unintelligible, with Charles giving notice of this.

²⁵ Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Colonial Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Daniel Branch, *Kenya: Between Hope and Despair, 1963–2011* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 20.

Oates' ventriloquising, omissions, and elisions, we *can* meaningfully use the material he produced to evaluate African motivations and efforts in managing the European traveller during their encounters. In keeping with the points made above, there is plenty that Oates *recorded* but which, for a variety of reasons we shall explore, he did not really *see*. Even though Oates did not process and incorporate all that he saw into his understanding of Africa, with care we can restore some form of agency to the indigenous peoples with whom he came into contact. We can, for instance, see evidence—sometimes subtle, sometimes less so—of Africans attempting to shape Oates' experiences for their own aims. The process by which we recover such evidence of African agency can only ever be partial. As is invariably the way with historical events of this period, for all we might try, it remains easier to piece together the motivations and experiences of the Europeans involved in this encounter, than it is of the Africans.

That said, and in keeping with what was discussed above, the extreme brevity of some of his diary entries means there are also distinct limits as to what we can say about Oates. Take, for instance, when he finally reached the Victoria Falls, the long-anticipated finale and emotional culmination of his nearly two years in southern Africa. When those few Europeans who had reached the waterfall before Oates described arriving at the site, they had been effusive. For Livingstone, the Falls were so remarkable that no one could 'imagine the beauty of the view from anything witnessed in England ... scenes so lovely must have been gazed upon by angels in their flight'.²⁶ Thomas Baines, reaching the Falls in 1862, wrote 'How shall words convey ideas which even the pencil of Turner must fail to represent ... tell me if the heart of man ever conceived anything more gorgeous than those two lovely rainbows [across the Falls], so brilliant that the eye shrinks from looking on them'. For Baines, anyone viewing the Falls could not but have impressed upon him 'a deep sense of the nothingness of human art in the presence of this mighty work of the Creator'.²⁷ Another traveller, seeing the Falls six months after Oates, described how they were 'wonderful, beautiful... marvellously grand [and] impossible to convey any description of them in words... the impression left by the

²⁶ David Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1858), p. 558.

²⁷ Thomas Baines, *Explorations in South-West Africa* (London: Longman, 1864), pp. 489, 503.

magnificence of the panorama which has been before and around me... can never be effaced. Once beheld it must forever be a cause of wonder, even to the least impressionable man'.²⁸ In contrast, Oates wrote 'Cloudy morning. Hot. Heavy shower in afternoon. Fine evening. After breakfast to Falls with the doctor. A day never to be forgotten'.²⁹ Oates made no further entries during his time at the Falls and recommenced his diary two weeks later whilst on his return journey home. This, then, is obviously quite a significant omission, particularly when compared to the written efforts of Oates' counterparts.

Such omissions occurred in spite of the influence that other authors such as Livingstone had on Oates. During his trek, Oates had spent many hours re-reading Livingstone's work, including right up until he reached the Falls. Indeed, Livingstone was the figure Oates most looked up to and sought to emulate; 'I feel that after all I am not a second Livingstone', Frank had written to his brother William from Colorado in 1871, 'as I half flattered myself I was going to turn out'.³⁰ In the lead-up to his arrival at the Falls, then, Oates would have been constantly reminded of the power that a well-calibrated narrative of such an arrival could have created.

Oates' subsequent diary omission thus occurred even though he would clearly have understood that the arrival at the Falls would have constituted the narrative centrepiece to any published work he was to subsequently produce. As will be highlighted, the brevity of Oates' Victoria Falls entry was not an exception. Indeed, Oates not only missed out days from his diaries, but when he did leave an entry, he often did so by outlining his encounters in only one or two words. He did not always follow a diligent routine of recording the details of each day, sometimes leaving notes for himself to fill in later, but then neglecting to do so. Yet, as we discuss later, some of the diary entries are short for a reason, and so their brevity can be analysed in and of itself. Sometimes, the silence is enough.

²⁸ Edward C. Tabler (ed), *To the Victoria Falls via Matabeleland: The Diary of Major Henry Stabb, 1875* (Cape Town: C. Struik, 1967), pp. 155–160.

²⁹ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 1 January 1875.

³⁰ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 15–17 December 1873; OA 115, 2007.1972/a-c, Frank Oates to William Oates, 12 February 1872.

THE NDEBELE UNDER MZILIKAZI AND LOBENGULA'S RISE TO POWER

Before we go further, some context is required. Oates did not arrive at a static Matabeleland. On the contrary. After splintering or seceding from the Zulu in 1822, the Ndebele under Mzilikazi Khumalo undertook what one scholar calls 'a bold act of frontiersmanship', involving a migration northwards away from the south east of present-day South Africa.³¹ Crossing the veldt, chased part of the way by Zulu, Mzilikazi and his followers entered the Transvaal. There they consolidated their position from 1826 until 1838, at which point conflict with Griquas and Boer trekkers forced the abandonment of these settlements. The Ndebele migrated further northward, across the Limpopo River into what today occupies the southwestern region of Zimbabwe. There, Ndebele hegemony was consolidated in the 1840s through a combination of conquest, incorporation, and assimilation, involving the creation of a Ndebele 'conglomeration' of Nguni, Sotho, and Shona speakers.³²

At the same time, Mzilikazi established himself as the king of the Ndebele nation, and in doing so assumed a multitude of roles including rain-maker, supreme judge, administrator of grain and cattle, and head of a cult of ancestor worship. Nevertheless, the king's power was never absolute, constrained by the necessity to accommodate the realities of non-Nguni numerical dominance and the presence of strong subsidiary chiefs and induna who had independent sources of wealth and power.³³ The Ndebele state, therefore, consisted of a hierarchy wherein power and influence were mediated, rather than decreed or dictated. Whilst the king was at the top of the hierarchy, the *indunankulu yesizwe* (prime minister or principal adviser), *umphakathi* (inner advisory council), and *izkhbulu* (outer advisory council or council of prominent men) advised and deliberated with the king over important matters and served as intermediaries between the king and the wider polity. Allegiance and loyalty were to

³¹ David Chanaiwa, 'The army and politics in pre-industrial Africa: The Ndebele nation, 1822–1893', *African Studies Review* 19:2 (1976), p. 53.

³² Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *The Ndebele Nation*, pp. 60–64; Björn Lindgren, 'The internal dynamics of ethnicity: Clan names, origins and castes in Southern Zimbabwe', *Africa* 74:2 (2004), p. 173.

³³ Julian Cobbing, 'The Ndebele under the Khumalos, 1820–1896', Ph.D. thesis, University of Lancaster, (1976), pp. 54–58.

the king, but the king had to work to cultivate them, whilst competition and rivalries within the Ndebele nation meant they could never be guaranteed.³⁴

The centre of Ndebele authority was the king's capital, of which Mzilikazi had four in the area around modern Bulawayo, whilst the area of 'effective Ndebele settlement' and hegemonic influence extended outwards between 50 and 80 miles from the capital.³⁵ Beyond the capital, Ndebele authority manifested through a series of what Oates and others would give the blanket term *induna* or headman, but in reality constituted a hierarchy of provincial chiefs (*izinduna zezigaba*), headmen (*abalisa*), and homestead heads (*abamnumzana*) that was maintained by the king through a 'patron-client relationship' sustained by the distribution of cattle and land. Power and influence were also grounded by a social hierarchy based in part on their connection to Mzilikazi, with the king and his closest relatives constituting a ruling royalty. The *Zansi*, those who accompanied Mzilikazi when he left the Zulu in the 1820s and their descendants, stood just below the extended royal family in privilege and influence, and this group largely filled the position of senior chiefs, whilst the *Enhla*, who often served as headman under the *Zansi*, constituted those Sotho and Tswana peoples incorporated into the Ndebele polity by Mzilikazi prior to the Ndebele's crossing the Limpopo River. Those last to be incorporated into the Ndebele polity in the 1840s, the *Hole*, which consisted of Kalanga, Rozvi, Nyubi, Nyayi, Birwa, Venda, and other indigenous groups which constituted the majority of the population, were 'subordinated to the *Zansi* and *Enhla* groups socially and politically'.³⁶

As the individual central to the establishment of this new polity, Mzilikazi's death in 1868 naturally posed a major challenge to the stability of the Ndebele nation. Through the 1860s, the question of succession vexed missionary observers because of the waxing and waning position and favour of Mzilikazi's sons, but Lobengula emerged as Mzilikazi's preferred successor by the time of the latter's death. However, rumours of the appearance of an earlier son of Mzilikazi, Nkulumane, divided the

³⁴ Ndlovu-Gatesheni, 'Who Ruled by the Spear? Rethinking the Form of Governance in the Ndebele State', *African Studies Quarterly* 10:2&3 (2008), pp. 71–94.

³⁵ Chanaiwa, 'The army and politics in pre-industrial Africa', p. 55.

³⁶ Ndlovu-Gatesheni, 'Who Ruled by the Spear?', pp. 76–84.

Ndebele polity. Whether or not the person who presented themselves was in fact Nkulumane is debatable, but as Cobbing puts it, ‘there was sufficient strength in a rumour that the “official” heir was alive to prevent the smooth succession of a man chosen by the dead king and backed by the majority of the great chiefs’.³⁷ Without a clear heir apparent, and facing continued interference from Theophilus Shepstone (the Secretary for Native Affairs in Natal), the rival claims of Mzilikazi’s sons and their supporters led to a civil war. Though Lobengula was declared king in January 1870, disaffected supporters of Nkulumane continued to challenge him through to May 1870, whereupon violence finally broke out. Lobengula triumphed, but remnants of his opponents escaped south and remained a threat until January 1872 when an attempted invasion was defeated. Nevertheless, the prospect of rival claimants and pretenders posed a problem for Lobengula through the rest of the 1870s.³⁸ With a new capital at Bulawayo, attempted assertions and consolidations of Ndebele authority via raids and diplomatic engagement continued to pepper the politics of the state during Oates’ time there. The Englishman therefore arrived in a region that had recently undergone considerable flux, and which was still the site of contestation.

But neither was a British presence in the region a static one. Oates’ arrival came at just the point where European interest in Ndebele territory was rapidly intensifying ahead of its eventual incorporation into the British Empire as part of Southern Rhodesia in the 1880s and 1890s. Missionaries had sought to establish a presence amongst the Ndebele without success until 1859, when the Scottish missionary Robert Moffat, who had fostered a close relationship with Mzilikazi since his first encounter with the Ndebele in 1829, established a London Missionary Society station at Inyati. This did not mean that missionaries’ evangelical efforts amongst the Ndebele were especially successful.³⁹ It took two months of deliberation by Mzilikazi and his advisory council before permission to establish the Inyati station was granted, and Mzilikazi was openly dismissive of various aspects of Christian doctrine and preaching throughout

³⁷ Cobbing, ‘The Ndebele under the Khumalos, 1820–1896’, p. 262.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 261–281.

³⁹ Ngwabi Bhebe, *Christianity and Traditional Religion in Western Zimbabwe, 1859–1923* (London: Longman, 1979).

his reign.⁴⁰ Like elsewhere in southern Africa, missionaries were resistant to and intolerant of traditional Ndebele culture, religion, and beliefs because of their aim for wholesale conversion to a prescribed version of Christianity. This was something that the Ndebele and missionaries alike recognised as an existential threat to the Ndebele polity and society. As the missionary John Mackenzie noted; ‘To preach the gospel, in point of fact, was to condemn [the Ndebele’s] whole social system from its very roots’.⁴¹

Lobengula’s approach towards missionaries was similar to that of his father. John Boden Thomson of the London Missionary Society, for instance, received a thorough interrogation from Lobengula in 1870 after requesting permission ‘to teach... the fundamental Christian truths’ amongst the Ndebele. Lobengula was blunt, replying.

You say that [God] made both black & white men & loves both equally, but only showed one the means of salvation. If God meant the black man to be saved in the same way as the white man, he would have sent the same book to both, & it seems to me that it is a great piece of presumption that you, a mere mortal, should come here to alter the working of that God, whom you call good & wise.⁴²

Lobengula nevertheless gave Thomson permission to establish a missionary station called Hope Fountain three miles northeast of Bulawayo. Mzilikazi and Lobengula tolerated the presence of a handful of missionaries within Ndebele territory on secular, rather than religious, grounds, believing that such missionaries could serve practical, political, and diplomatic purposes advantageous to their interests.⁴³

A more challenging and ultimately more dangerous issue for Lobengula and the Ndebele nation was the intensifying white interest in the mining potential of Ndebele territory. Diamonds had been discovered in

⁴⁰ Chanaiwa, ‘The army and politics in pre-industrial Africa’, p. 59.

⁴¹ John Mackenzie, *Ten Years North of the Orange River: A Story of Everyday Life and Work Among the South African Tribes, from 1859 to 1869* (Edinburgh: Edmonstone and Douglas, 1871), p. 332; Richard Price, *Making Empire: Colonial Encounters and the Creation of Imperial Rule in Nineteenth-Century Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁴² Tabler (ed), *To the Victoria Falls via Matabeleland*, pp. 78–79.

⁴³ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *The Ndebele Nation*, pp. 119–137; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, ‘Rethinking religious encounters’, pp. 16–27.

Kimberley in 1867, spurring a massive influx of attention in the southern African region. As this attention shifted northward, a white presence initially centred on the region immediately surrounding the Tati River. There, a short-lived goldrush brought, at its peak, a few hundred white gold prospectors and approximately three hundred African labourers. After the identification of gold deposits north of the Mupfure River by Henry Hartley in the late 1860s, efforts to extract prospecting concessions from Mzilikazi further into Ndebele territory had been unsuccessful. But in 1870 Lobengula granted two concessions. One, the Tati Concession, granted the London and Limpopo Trading Company a large area for prospecting that extended into disputed, neighbouring Ngwato territory, whilst the second granted permission to Thomas Baines, acting on behalf of the South African Gold Fields Exploration Company, to prospect for gold and other minerals between the Gweru and Manyeme Rivers.

Despite the allure of finding significant gold deposits, by the time Oates arrived in 1873, most of the Tati prospectors and labourers had left as the mines were no longer considered profitable. Baines' company had failed in finding significant deposits by the time of his death in 1875.⁴⁴ Despite such economic failure, German explorer Karl Mauch's sensationalisation of the 'Northern Goldfields' as the long-lost 'King Solomon's Mines', combined with tales of big game hunting and the allure of the Victoria Falls, intensified a European sense of the mystery and excitement surrounding the region.⁴⁵ Metropolitan imperial interest just so happened to have focused on this region, and Oates was himself susceptible to this particular interest. With no previous experience of Africa, this was the region he chose. Oates' travels were thus both the consequence of an intensified metropolitan focus on the area, and a contribution to it, a focus that would, in the years after Oates' death, eventually result in its formal colonisation.

⁴⁴ Geoffrey S. Quick, 'Early European involvement in the Tati District', *Botswana Notes and Records* 33 (2001), pp. 27–39.

⁴⁵ M. E. Chamberlain, *The Scramble for Africa: Third Edition* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 74; Andrea L. Arrington-Sirous, *Victoria Falls and Colonial Imagination in British Southern Africa: Turning Water into Gold* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

THE BOOK'S STRUCTURE

There are three main elements to this study, which map directly onto our work's three main chapters. In Chapter Two, we consider some of the ways Oates sought to make sense of a new environment, and in particular how he engaged with the African and non-African people with whom he came into contact. Here we see that the processes by which Oates acquired such understandings of southern Africa were highly relational and contingent. This acquisition was the consequence of the specificities of Oates' sense of place and purpose on the continent, the specific personal relationships he developed, and the assessments that Oates made about his sources of information. In Chapter Three, we focus on the relationship between Oates and King Lobengula. This is the centrepiece of the analysis; when read carefully, Oates' diaries and letters afford us the opportunity to consider each individual's sense of the other, the relationship they had, and how they sought to make use of one another. Lastly, in Chapter Four we consider the power of emotional state and of an individual's telos in complicating or exposing the frailties of understanding. These are factors that, despite recent historiographical advances, still need to be given more credit in any understanding of the ways imperial knowledge was constructed.

This book, in sum, is motivated by the belief that greater attention needs to be given to the peculiarities of circumstance in explaining patterns of understanding in pre-colonial Africa. British knowledge was the contingent outcome of specific forms of interaction and information processing. On the one hand, there were Europeans, who were not fixed in attitude, but indeed whose responses to Africans could fluctuate quite dramatically depending on the immediacies of personal circumstance. On the other were Africans who through word and act alternately refined, rejected, and reconsolidated European ways of seeing for their own purposes. It was the contingent outcomes of interactions between inconstant Europeans and purposeful Africans that explain ways of understanding. Offering a form of decolonised reading, this integrated understanding of historical contingency leads to an emphasis, not on the caprice of the 'natives', but onto the caprice of the coloniser.

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CHAPTER 2

The Contingencies of Understanding

Abstract We consider the processes by which Frank Oates acquired understanding of the peoples with whom he came into contact in southern Africa in the early 1870s, and the Ndebele people in particular. We place emphasis on the importance of ‘intermediaries’, individuals Oates judged not of a place but nevertheless considered experts in it, in shaping the traveller’s macro understandings of the region. We consider the role of social consonance in explaining the alacrity with which Oates accepted ways of reading Africa from some and not others. We also consider the processes by which Oates developed understandings of the flora and fauna of the region, and African guides’ roles in this. We evaluate the impact of factors such as race and gender on the recordings of the colonial encounter, and the areas in which Oates did and did not change his understandings over time. In our emphasis upon the importance of intermediaries, we explore the fragilities and contingencies that lay behind the development of European understandings of pre-colonial Africa.

Keywords Ndebele · Frank Oates · Expertise · Gender · Contingencies · Flora · Fauna · Topography

Oates arrived in Africa in 1873 with no direct experience of the continent. He had experienced it vicariously through his reading, and through being immersed in a cultural milieu increasingly excited about southern Africa's potential as a site for economic exploitation and adventure. But that was it. Oates' early letters home reveal the intersections of pre-African prejudice and assumptions as to what he would find on the one hand, with the newness of his experiences in an unfamiliar but now tangible environment on the other. Take, for example, Oates' attitudes towards African labour. Vivian Bickford-Smith has highlighted the racial prejudices of the European community in Cape Town in the late nineteenth century. These, Bickford-Smith argues, were not as dissimilar from attitudes elsewhere in southern Africa as later inhabitants of the city wanted to believe. Cape Town was no bastion of liberalism.¹ These were the Europeans whom Oates and other newcomers to southern Africa were first to meet on arrival. Oates quickly acceded to these Cape Colony Europeans' racist interpretations of Africans' supposedly low abilities as labourers, seemingly confirming as they did his rather blanket views of a generic non-Western indigenous labour capacity that had been on display during his travels in North America.² The view from the spot coincided with his pre-African assumptions, and such synchronisation precluded the need for much by way of further reflection.

The general sense of Africans as the lowest rung of an imagined racial ladder is an extremely well-delineated component of historical accounts of Victorian imperialism.³ But the consequences of such low assessment—how to go beyond that general sense of a region's inhabitants, and on towards how such peoples were to be navigated—took more time. This process was shaped by the fact that Oates was an individual with very set aims. Above all else, Oates sought to travel through a physical space successfully, meaning the maintenance of his own wellbeing and the fulfilling of his aim of arriving at the Victoria Falls. Oates' sense of purpose and the consequent manner in which he sought to derive meaning from the places through which he passed, would lead him to more than simple

¹ Vivian Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice in Victorian Cape Town: Group Identity and Social Practice, 1875–1902* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

² Oates, letter home, 14 May 1873, in Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 3–6.

³ For example, Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

declarations of racism. As we shall see, Oates' mission would lead him to draw from information provided in a variety of contexts and from a variety of perspectives. For now, it is important to start by considering what influenced the ways Oates derived meaning from the different types of people he encountered. Here, we consider how the type of information Oates took from the people with whom he came into contact, and which was then processed as knowledge, was the direct result of the type of relationship that Oates felt such people had with Africa. This is the purpose of the present chapter.

EXPLORERS' 'INTERMEDIARIES' AS THE ARBITERS OF UNDERSTANDING

Assessing the influence of select intermediaries on Oates' early understanding of Africa and Africans is the first central focus of this chapter. When we use the word 'intermediary', we mean individuals whom Oates judged in a particular manner. The defining source of their influence, we argue, hinged upon their all being felt to possess a common attribute. These were individuals Oates considered knowledgeable outsiders embedded in the region, as opposed to being indigent to the region itself. From their position as intermediaries, they had an outsized influence on how Oates understood what we call the 'macro' information about the region—observations about the character of its peoples, politics, geography, and so forth—which was crucial for developing his broader understanding of the region and his basis for engagement with it. For reasons we shall examine, Oates was particularly receptive to information from these intermediaries over that gained from other sources. This contrasts with the 'micro' information necessary to facilitate travel across the region—finding water, hunting, suitable places to camp, and so forth—that Oates more readily accepted from indigenous peoples he encountered and the African hunters, guides, and carriers he employed.

This is not to say that this binary was static. Instead, the information relationship Oates had with various kinds of people, most notably those Africans he employed to facilitate his journey, was subject to change based on the extent to which he felt himself exposed to, or isolated from, his preferred sources of understanding. Oates' receptivity to information gained from African 'non intermediaries' consequently fluctuated considerably. At times, he would use them as sources of information and debates

about the ecology and natural history of the region. Oates felt that necessity drove modes of interaction that, consequently, would challenge the more straightforwardly colonial relationship Oates had envisaged himself taking with his guides.

There were, however, limits to how far this led to shifts in how Oates came to an understanding of Africa. This is most apparent in his engagement with African women, which illustrates both the challenges of reading against the gendered, colonial grain of the source material, and the rigidity of the mindset Oates brought to Africa. Yet, when it came to Africans encountered on his journey, there are tantalising signs of Oates altering his views of certain African peoples and engaging with them in a way that suggests acknowledgment of their lives and belief systems that, we can only presume, they sought to impress upon the young Englishman on their own terms. In sum, we argue that Oates' early engagement with Africa and Africans, rather than purely or rigidly dictated by presumptions and prejudice, was fluctuating, fleeting, and subject to the contingencies and particularities of the journey and the people he encountered across southern Africa.

OATES AND 'INTERMEDIARIES'

Oates used (and employed) a range of individuals to develop an understanding of the places he travelled through and the people he encountered. But those he most readily sought out for information or interpretations to build his own understandings of his milieu were of a particular type. Despite coming from a variety of backgrounds, they all had a common attribute of being considered by Oates as individuals not *of* the region of Africa through which Oates travelled, but *in* it. Such individuals acted as intermediaries, embedded as observers in the regions travelled through, rather than as guides drawn directly from the communities and places encountered. Such individuals did not *belong*, per se, but had what Oates believed to be the level of expertise in the 'macro' information necessary to help him build the level of understanding of southern Africa he felt he needed to reach the Falls. In other words, Oates obtained from these individuals ways of perceiving that involved an element of abstraction, requiring reflection beyond the immediacies of a given milieu. This was in contrast to the 'micro' information that focused on the temporal minutia observed as he travelled across the region—the next place to take on water, the closest area in which to hunt, that sort of thing. What

is noteworthy about the role of these intermediaries is their disproportionate influence on the ways Oates would henceforth extract and process information from other figures, particularly information obtained directly from ‘non intermediary’ Africans encountered along the way.

Here, some case studies of particular individuals are useful. The four considered here are John Lee, a hunter and trader; Nelson, also a hunter; Hendrik (or Henric or Hendrique in some of Oates’ diary entries), Oates’ servant; and John Boden Thomson, a missionary.⁴ John Lee, a white settler born in Cape Colony, had lived in the region for over 20 years by the time of Oates’ journey and came to function as a type of intermediary between Lobengula and the outside world, to the point where some Europeans felt him the king’s foreign minister. In reality, Lee occupied an uncertain position, with shifting loyalties as he sought to navigate changing political dynamics in the region.⁵ Nelson, described by Oates’ brother William as a ‘half-caste Cape man’, did not have Lee’s level of experience in the region, but had been there for some months prior to Oates’ arrival.⁶ Hendrik was like Nelson in that he was from the Cape rather than Matabeleland, but Hendrik had previously served as a servant to a major English trader in the latter region and, according to William, ‘knows this country well’.⁷ As noted in the introduction, Thomson was appointed by the London Missionary Society, arriving in Matabeleland in 1870 and successfully negotiating with Lobengula to establish a missionary station at Hope Fountain, just outside Bulawayo (Fig. 2.1).

⁴ Of these, John Lee’s life has been given the greatest attention; Lee is considered in Will Jackson, ‘No country for old men: The life of John Lee and the problem of the aged pioneer’, *History Workshop Journal* 87 (2019), pp. 139–159.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 150–151.

⁶ Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 74.

⁷ William Oates, letter 2 September 1873, in Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 34.



Fig. 2.1 William Oates, sketch of John Lee's mission. Reproduced with permission from Gilbert White's House Museum, Selborne

‘INTERMEDIARIES’ AND ‘MACRO’
INFORMATION—UNDERSTANDING
NDEBELE POWER RELATIONS

Oates accepted micro information from these individuals. For example, John Lee taught Oates about the availability of antelope, the buying and selling of oxen and horses, and how to treat sick animals.⁸ But the information Oates was most interested in from these individuals—the material he most evidently attached the greatest weight to—concerned a joining of the dots between the immediacies of Oates’ lived experience on the one hand, and broader abstract or hitherto unseen forces, mostly of a political or military character, on the other. Upon witnessing the remains of Mashona huts destroyed during Ndebele raids, Oates’ October 1873 diary springs into life with Nelson’s account of an apparently atomised people at the mercy of the Ndebele, picked off one by one because they did not rally together. Nelson’s emphasis is slightly different from that offered by others in the region at the time, such as the explorer Thomas Baines—who instead suggested the decimation occurred because the ‘peaceful and industrious’ Mashona were too passive—as well as missionaries in the region, who suggested they were ‘docile’.⁹

In spite of this, Nelson’s picture evidently stuck with Oates, as the hunter related his personal experience of Ndebele hostility towards the Mashona to paint a larger picture about regional military dynamics.¹⁰ Nelson’s account further aligned with similar pictures painted by other intermediaries. In August 1873, when Oates met a ‘destitute’ elderly Kalanga man, Hendrick inaccurately explained the Kalanga’s collective position as ‘outcasts’ and as ‘slaves’ to both the Ndebele and Ngwato,¹¹ whilst in September 1873 Oates recorded a second-hand history of the

⁸ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diaries, 24 January 1874, 6 September 1874; Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 47–51.

⁹ Thomas Baines, *The Gold Regions of South Eastern Africa* (London: Edward Stanford, 1877), p. 26; Monsignor Jolivet to Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda, 19 October 1877, reproduced in Michael Gelfand (ed.), *Gubulawayo and Beyond: Letters and Journals of the Early Jesuit Missionaries to Zambesia (1879–1887)* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968), p. 45.

¹⁰ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diaries, 16 October 1873.

¹¹ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diaries, 25 August 1873 (incorrectly cited in *Matabele Land*, pp. 28–29, as 24 August).

region, as conveyed by Lee from an ‘old man’ who ‘told him the traditions’, which highlighted that several queens had formerly ruled over the ‘Matabele Country’, that a famine and a series of conquests had occurred before the arrival of Mzilikazi, and that San peoples constituted ‘an altogether different race, speaking a different language, and seem, Lee says, to be scattered’ across southern Africa.¹² We will consider later how Nelson, Hendrik, and Lee’s accounts were pushing at an open door in Oates’ head, in that they were in accord with Oates’ image of Ndebele supremacy. But for now, what matters is the readiness with which Oates, on observing people whose physical countenance suggested to him that they were beaten down, accepted intermediaries’ broader explanations of why the people he encountered were in such an apparent state.

‘INTERMEDIARIES’—SOCIAL CONSONANCE AND UNDERSTANDING

Given Oates’ sense of himself as a non-expert, his ready acceptance of these intermediaries as ‘experts’ is understandable.¹³ But these individuals’ interpretations of Matabeleland and the broader region came to be accepted for several other, interconnected reasons.

Firstly, these intermediaries all spoke English, not unimportant given Oates’ persistent lack of other languages and consequent reliance upon an interpreter (which can, incidentally, be contrasted with the intermediaries, all four of whom spoke other languages used in southern Africa). Secondly, Oates evidently felt able to talk to these intermediaries frankly because they were not deemed implicated in the power dynamics of the region. They were felt reliable, and the importance of trust or reliability to Oates is particularly evident in an August 1873 diary entry in which Oates notes how, whilst looking for water, ‘W[illiam] [Oates’ brother, who accompanied him for the first portion of Frank’s journey] rode back and decided to go on with me, so we sent Fick to fetch W.’s waggon. It seems a Bushman had showed them a water hole where they had outspanned and said he knew all the waters and would have gone with

¹² GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diaries, 6 September 1873; Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 49–50.

¹³ Oates’ awareness of his own limitations would have been very clear to him, not least because other travellers in Africa, whose works Oates read, worked so hard to demonstrate their authority, credibility, and trustworthiness; Livingstone, *Livingstone’s ‘Lives’*, p. 27.

them. They saw a camel, and “bushman” reported camel, elephant, and other game’. Here, what is noteworthy is the easy distinction Oates made between the reportage of his brother who ‘sees’, and the local African who merely reported and was, therefore, considered less reliable.¹⁴ In contrast to local Africans, Oates appears to have accepted intermediaries’ readings of the region without apparently pausing to consider how such readings might be compromised. For instance, Lee’s own position meant he had a vested interest in maintaining a status quo in the region from which he had profited to that point, but Oates leaves no record of having considered the impact Lee’s relationship with Lobengula may have had on how Lee talked to Oates about the king. The third reason Oates so readily accepted the interpretations provided him by the intermediaries is that they made it easy for him to make sense of the regions through which he travelled. They provided intellectual shortcuts to Oates’ understanding of his environment, by using common cultural cues readily digestible to him.

We find a perfect example of these factors at play in Oates’ relationship with Thomson. A September 1873 Oates diary entry is crammed with a variety of information provided courtesy of the missionary during time spent at Thomson’s mission. The entry notes the sorts of details Oates evidently captured because he judged them most likely to assist him in reaching the Victoria Falls. Detailed information on rainfall patterns, distances, names of rivers, and so on, were all present and correct. What is notable, however, is how certain pieces of information are then processed. Notes on the number of Africans to be employed, where to buy food, and the sorts of goods to take for trade, to take a few such examples, are each in turn connected by Oates through Thomson to broader attitudes and abstractions about the character and abilities of Africans.¹⁵ The information tumbled from Thomson, and Oates’ hurried list of abbreviated notes attest to an eager receptivity at this point, which contrasts with the sparseness elsewhere in the diaries’ pages.

Meeting Thomson relatively early in his trip, at a point where he was keen to travel quickly, is the most obvious reason why Oates was so keen to absorb such information. But what is particularly notable here is that Thomson was part of a pattern, for Oates recorded the greatest amount of

¹⁴ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diaries, 19 August 1873.

¹⁵ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diaries, 22 September 1873.

information when conversing with people like Thomson. Being of nearly the same age—Oates was almost exactly one year older than Thomson—and from similar educated middle-class social backgrounds, they evidently spoke with relative informality at length and with ease. Thomson read the cues, clearly understood Oates' intentions, and provided a multifaceted, comprehensive set of instructions to facilitate this. Oates and Thomson were on the same wavelength as to the purpose of their interaction. And this was not just the product of an enthusiasm born of a need for information early in the trip. Additionally, Thomson and his missionary station were, in Oates' mind, something important to his sense of position in the world; the familiarities of Thomson and the 'civilized breakfast' he provided meant Oates considered Thomson's mission as one of the 'last outposts of civilization' before reaching the Falls.¹⁶

Thomson was probably the intermediary Oates considered closest to himself. But Oates readily engaged with European intermediaries throughout his trip, such as the two travellers who regaled Oates one July 1874 evening with tales of the dynamics of the Portuguese presence in the region and of the actions of local African elites. Again, then, the macro was woven out of the specifics of intermediary traveller observations and anecdotes.¹⁷

Of course, when we say Oates spoke with any intermediaries 'relatively informally', it is important to stress the word 'relatively', particularly in the context of Oates' servant-master relationship with Hendrik. The dynamics would naturally be different with, say, John Lee than with an employee. But even with Hendrik, there was a frankness to their conversation about the world beyond their trek waggon, which suggests Oates trusted Hendrik on the basis of an intimacy of interaction that was fostered by their both not being of the place through which they travelled. These conversations set aside the more self-consciously performative and circumspective conversational manner that would have typified Oates' interactions with Africans of the region, particularly elite Africans. These intermediaries, in sum, made it easy for Oates to form an understanding of what was going on.

¹⁶ Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 64.

¹⁷ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diaries, 16 July 1874.

INTERMEDIARIES AND THE ‘EASE’ OF ACCESS TO UNDERSTANDING

An emphasis upon ease might initially strike one as puzzling. Why would ease be a key factor here? One might have expected Oates to have eagerly sought as much information about the world around him as possible, taking it from as many sources as possible, sifting and collating in an expansive manner. But Oates was only ever modestly entrepreneurial in how he collected information. In explaining this, we need to consider Oates’ long-standing passions. Oates was principally interested in certain forms of observation and ways of understanding his world than others. Drawing birds and other scenes from life in the natural world, for example, was a perennial passion. But where this sort of activity excited him, the act of studying did not. Perhaps influenced by his father’s educational ethos as outlined in the introduction, Oates was a selective rather than exhaustive reader; despite seeking to position himself as a naturalist, much scholarly work remained a closed book to him. And closed in the quite literal sense; some of the books in his collection concerning naturalism—again, it is worth repeating, ostensibly Oates’ key interest—remain unopened to this day, that is, with pages that remain sealed along either the top edge or fore edge. This is despite the fact that these are central works in the field, and works that were gifted to Oates from various members of his family.¹⁸ Oates was not instinctively intellectually entrepreneurial (Fig. 2.2).

Rather than signalling just a disinclination towards ‘academic’ study (perhaps in both senses of the word!), this was part of a broader tendency to avoid having to work hard to derive understanding of his surroundings. Indeed, Oates’ engagement with his intermediaries’ expertise could tip over into rather performative displays of boredom when he felt they entered into an excessive level of specificity, such as Lee’s ‘droning away about some oxen’ or his ‘discours[e] on locusts’.¹⁹ Oates may have chosen to write with such frankness in his letters because this medium

¹⁸ See, for example, Oates’ copy of Arthur Adams, William Balfour Baikie, and Charles Barron, *A Manual of Natural History for the Use of Travellers; Being a Description of the Families of the Animal and Vegetable Kingdoms* (London: John Van Voorst, 1854), held at the Gilbert White’s House Museum, Selborne.

¹⁹ Oates to home, 1 February 1874, in Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 126–127.



Fig. 2.2 William Oates, sketch of dwarf bittern. Reproduced with permission from Gilbert White's House Museum, Selborne

offered him the outlet through which to vent his feelings without undermining further social intercourse with those in Africa. Or it might have served as a means of maintaining an emotional bond with his letters' recipients back home—'I am telling you things that I would never say to those out here'. But alongside other facets of Oates' character that we shall consider, it appears his relationship with learning means we must not underestimate the importance of Oates' receptivity to intermediaries

as providers of an easy access—of shortcuts that obviated Oates’ need for sustained scrutiny—to ways of interpreting his surroundings.

AFRICAN GUIDES AND ‘MICRO’ INFORMATION

The relationship Oates had with such intermediaries helps in turn to explain his interactions with Africans ‘embedded’ in, or felt of, the region, as well as how information about and from them was collected and interpreted. Like other European travellers, Oates recruited Africans to act as the labourers, carriers, and guides essential to his journey. Their number varied from a low of two or three, to a peak of sixteen when on his final trek on foot to the Falls. At points on his travels when Oates was extracting a lot of information from intermediaries, Oates’ recordings of conversations with his African guides instead centred around ‘micro’ details. These included whether they had spotted something of importance in their vicinity (principally game, water, or other people), making or breaking camp. This was all about the undoubtedly important micro minutiae of keeping a trek going. Initially, this was because Oates could not conceive of the possibility of his African guides being *able* to perceive or engage beyond such temporal, micro matters. Commenting in his diary early in his trip, Oates felt that it ‘must be the case’ that his African guides and carriers could not ‘appreciate beautiful things’ such as a picturesque landscape or skyscape, or the morning chorus of birds at dawn. In Oates’ supposedly self-evident appraisal, such Africans were unable to draw connections between a state of being and an aesthetic judgement rooted in an emotional response to such a state of being. This is a neat example of Oates’ distinction between Africans’ capacity to engage with micro- versus macro-level thinking.²⁰

However, although Oates tended to maintain an intermediary/‘macro’ versus African/‘micro’ dichotomy, this was neither fixed nor absolute. There is some evidence of gradual shifts in his engagement with African guides. This was a conditional process and was connected to the level of exposure to these Africans and, more significantly, to his level of isolation from his intermediaries. During Oates’ first attempt to reach the Falls

²⁰ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diaries, 20 August 1873.

from Bulawayo in September 1873, Oates notes having a ‘long conversation’ and giving beer to an African guide provided by King Lobengula.²¹ Oates did not record the detail of what was said, suggesting a willingness to talk with Africans when there were no Europeans about, though in so doing not necessarily taking the same level of interest in what his interlocutor had to say compared to his intermediaries.

As he moved further north, Oates nevertheless gradually became more susceptible to deliberating with his African guides, rather than just extracting micro information from them. In one entry, Oates ‘complied’ when his guide ‘begged’ him to set up camp in good time before sundown,²² whilst another entry, quoted at length below, hints that a collective decision was taken to pursue elephant tracks before Oates then corrected himself to suggest his sole charge.

Today I overslept myself and found the men had gone out shooting, but not to look for elephant spoor where we intend to look for it. So we should have done it tomorrow if we had stayed, but two men arrive at the waggon to say there are elephant in the thick bush we passed through in coming here, so we I decide to return, and this afternoon we start back, but by the direct short way.²³

We see here the signs of Oates’ colonial mindset coming under pressure as a result of his increasing time and engagement with Africans. However, as tantalising as these signs are, this is not a straightforward tale. As will be discussed further in Chapter Four, towards the end of his time in Africa, Oates’ enthusiasm for his African guides and the information they provided deteriorated significantly, bound up as his acceptance of their information was with his own emotional state.

AFRICAN GUIDES AND THE ACT OF IDENTIFICATION AND COLLECTION

Another dynamic of the information relationship between Oates and his African guides was their role in understanding the flora and fauna of southern Africa. The topic was the principal interest for Oates besides

²¹ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diaries, 28 September 1873.

²² GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diaries, 9 October 1873.

²³ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diaries, 13 October 1873.

his making it to the Falls. Many of these guides would have joined Oates to be able to hunt big game, and at repeated instances Oates records their exasperation with Oates sleeping in and being late to go on hunt when ‘their way of hunting is to go before daylight’.²⁴ Though they may have regarded Oates as a not especially capable hunter, they did recognise that Oates was in Africa for other reasons. In addition to his own labours, Oates relied on theirs to find specimens of a wide variety of animals, insects, and plants of interest to add to his natural history collections. The dynamics of their role here is not always specified by Oates, but from his diary there is an air of spontaneity to such specimens being *brought* to Oates by his African guides as opposed to Oates repeatedly making requests for them to *find* such specimens. Even where such requests were given, Oates relied on the knowledge of his guides to act on those requests. There is one entry recording Oates having ‘sent Echle to shoot a specimen of the gregarious birds that make the hanging nests. He brought me a sort of canary’ (Fig. 2.3).

It is of course possible that Oates gave general instructions to find such specimens of animals, insects, and plants. But it is just as likely that, throughout Oates’ time in Africa, his guides had their own sense of the kinds of specimens that he, as a naturalist, might have been interested in, which they could collect whilst out hunting for food for the whole camp. An October 1873 entry delineates each party’s role. During a trek, Oates writes, ‘men brought me some fine red flowers growing many small ones making one large head like a daisy... and I found a new pea-shape lilac on t[rek]’.²⁵ Jacob and Charles, for instance, are recorded bringing Oates various butterflies and moths, whilst others are recorded bringing various birds and their nests.²⁶ Furthermore, the kinds of information Oates received from his African guides about the flora and fauna they encountered extended beyond just collecting specimens. Hendrick at one stage corrects Oates’ description of a korhaan-like bird as in fact a thick knee dikkop.²⁷

²⁴ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diaries, 13 October 1873, 29 October 1873, 9 November 1873.

²⁵ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diaries, 8 October 1873.

²⁶ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diaries, 14 October 1873, 23 October 1873, 15–16 November 1873, 14 January 1874, 30 March 1874.

²⁷ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diaries, 9 August 1873.

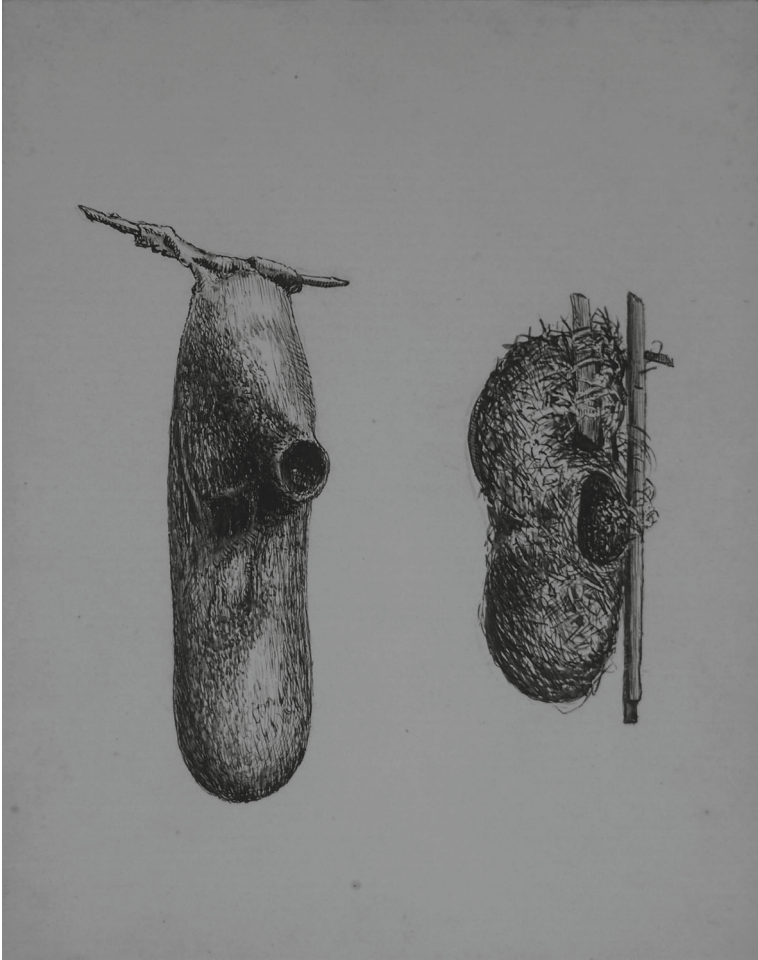


Fig. 2.3 William Oates, sketch of bird nests. Reproduced with permission from Gilbert White's House Museum, Selborne

Seeing it as his own area of expertise, Oates would deliberate with intermediaries and African guides alike over issues of natural history and the ecology of the areas through which they travelled. Beyond identifying

specimens, in one entry Oates states he ‘disproved H[endrick]’s confident avowal’ that a hyena they had killed was hermaphrodite, whilst also noting Hendrick’s comments on its condition and that ‘they are always found where the lions are, which they doubtless follow for food’.²⁸ In another entry, Oates details how, when a large snake was killed, those in his party ‘were evidently in dread of his bite, but the men all say it is harmless and will not bite even if trodden on. It gets big enough to swallow a Roebuck, the horns sticking out whilst digestion goes on and finally dropping off’.²⁹ These, however, are somewhat isolated examples, and we are limited by what Oates chose to record of such deliberations, or what his African guides’ opinions on natural history might have been. The reasons for these limitations will be discussed further in Chapter Four. Nonetheless, though the labours of Oates’ African guides and the knowledge they provided were not fully acknowledged in *Matabele Land* and were indeed explicitly denied by Charles Oates, they played as much a part in collecting specimens and information about African natural history as Oates.³⁰

For the most part, however, the information relationship between Oates and the Africans he employed was powered by the fact African labour was the main means by which Oates’ journey was able to happen. Though at various stages Oates did partake in the various tasks necessary for waggon travel, Oates viewed himself occupying a typically colonial leadership role. The delegation of labour to Africans was more significant to Oates than his seeing these guides as sources of information in their own right. An account in *Matabele Land* of one of Oates’ waggons getting stuck and its disselboom breaking suggests that it was Oates who laboured to get the waggon clear. An omitted part of the original entry shows, however, that Oates had in fact taken two of his dogs for a

²⁸ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diaries, 3 November 1873.

²⁹ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diaries, 13 October 1873; Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 75. Charles Oates changed ‘in dread’ to ‘afraid’ and omitted the additional details when editing this entry.

³⁰ ‘You kindly altered the title from ‘Birds’ to what is now is to meet my wishes; but perhaps ‘Birds’ or ‘Ornithology’ would be better after all, as it is understood all the natural history objects treated [here] were collected by my brother.’ GWHM, OA 104, Charles Oates to R. Bowdler Sharpe, 12 August 1886 [potentially unsent].

walk, hunted a hornbill bird, and attempted to catch butterflies whilst his African labourers unstuck the waggon and fixed the disselboom.³¹

Though Oates may have seen himself in an overseer and leadership role, those in his employment were not immune to challenging him. In one instance, one African and one Dutch recruit began being 'very nasty and swearing' at Oates when he insisted on leaving their draft oxen loose to feed, upon which they escaped and had to be rounded up. 'I am liable to make mistakes', Oates wrote in his diary, 'However, I mean always to give orders and be firm. Quite sure I shall more often be right than wrong, and that I shall be the gainer'.³² Even if it aided Oates in his journey, the information input of his own guides was secondary to Oates' perceived need to exercise a particular type of self-styled leadership as employee. In many ways this was an attitude that Oates brought to Africa. However, as we shall see, this was by no means a fixed view.

GENDER, AESTHETICS, AND OBSERVING AFRICANS

Beyond the intermediaries and African guides that accompanied Oates, there is little evidence that Oates consciously and overtly saw the various African peoples he encountered as providers of information that could then be processed as knowledge about them and African society. Instead, Oates confined himself to aesthetical observation of such people and then, invariably, judgement of them too. Given that Oates was an amateur artist this is not necessarily surprising, but it is important to note that it was on this basis that Oates configured his engagement with most Africans. This made it difficult for him to look beyond his initial impressions and establish meaning or understanding of the society he encountered independently of those provided by intermediaries. This was especially the case with Oates' recording of his encounters with African women and girls, which were based almost entirely on aesthetical observations and judgements shaped by pre-existing attitudes of the metropole. Take an early entry from June 1873; 'Some fine looking girls came'; and later entries; 'Pretty little girl', 'Pretty girl with malt', and 'fine girl'.³³ These details (or

³¹ Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 117; GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diaries, 29 January 1874.

³² GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diaries, 21 June 1874.

³³ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diaries, 3 June 1873, 26 November 1873, 8 December 1873, 20 December 1873.

lack thereof) highlight how Oates' aesthetic judgement of these women was nearly the sum total of what he judged worth recording of such encounters. At most, Oates would consider the items brought to him by women or girls to be traded, but even this ran in conjunction with observations objectifying their physical appearance. One longer entry, written during the 1874 *inxwala* (discussed below) at Bulawayo, is emblematic of this,

Strings of girls bore huge calabashes of beer, under the weight of which some of them staggered, to the kraal. For the most part they were magnificent specimens of shapely young Kaffir women. A tall handsome girl, who has been sometimes begging at my waggon, was a looker-on, and presented a fine picture of a well-developed savage woman. She seemed fully aware of her own striking appearance.³⁴

Whilst much later in his trip, Oates records girls who

were very profusely ornamented with beads. The thickly - matted hair, plastered together with black wax-like cement, is disposed of in three principal locks; one falling over the forehead to between the eyes, and one in front of each ear, surmounted with brass rings. The ears are pierced with small rings. Round the neck hang massive chains of beads, tastefully arranged and blended. A leather kaross, or dressed skin, is worn as a robe, and this is hung with long strings of beads; long strings of beads, too, hang round the hips, and in front are long strips of leather. Round the waist are numerous brass rings and bead rings also. The girls are by no means shy.³⁵

The key consequence here is not just that the kinds of information Oates sought and recorded were limited, but that the extent to which meaning was extracted from his engagement with African women was also limited. The consistency of the focus of Oates' descriptions is reflective of eighteenth and nineteenth-century European attitudes towards women of colour as solely objects of curiosity, ridicule, or prurient and scientific interest.³⁶

³⁴ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diaries, 5 January 1874.

³⁵ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diaries, 21 June 1874.

³⁶ Rachel Holmes, *The Hottentot Venus* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007).

But what can we extrapolate from these fragments to go against the grain of Oates' recording of these interactions with African women? There is a glimmer, faint as it is, of the personalities behind what Oates chose to record. Some of Oates' writings focused on trade, and the regularity and breadth of goods being traded indicates that such relationships were a well-established fixture of African women's engagement with the increasing numbers of white travellers by the time Oates was in the region. Though many of the encounters are framed only in relation to how much attention these women gave to Oates, the clearest personality we can make out is that of Mncengence (referred to as Nini or Nina by Oates and other white writers).³⁷ Mncengence was, as Lobengula's full sister, the most important and influential women in the royal household. She served as the most senior queen whilst Lobengula was, at the time of Oates' presence, without a principal royal wife. Presiding over the royal capital as '*Unina Womuzi*' or 'Mother of the Homestead', Mncengence possessed significant influence as adviser and counsellor to Lobengula.

But despite living in a predominantly patriarchal society, she had some political power in her own right, the clearest manifestation of which being her leading dance during the 1874 *inxwala*. Referred to as the 'Great Dance' in Oates' account, the *inxwala* was the most important Ndebele ceremony, marking the start of a new year and the first fruits of a new harvest. It also had important religious, military, and political dimensions, whereby the 'ritual dominance' of the king as the 'medium for national communication with the hierarchy of ancestral spirits' was asserted and the loyalty of the Ndebele polity demonstrated.³⁸ Whilst Oates wrote of Mncengence's physical appearance and dress in some detail, her participation in the 1874 *inxwala* led only to his impression of it as 'something like the appearance of a prima donna at the opera, or the leading spirit in some gorgeous pantomime', and he left no record of the potential significance of what he was observing.³⁹ Similarly, he limited his recording of most of his meetings with Mncengence and some of Lobengula's other sisters to curt entries of 'nina [sic] calls', 'Nina', '1st sister', '2nd sister', or simply 'Sister', suggesting that Oates did not recognise Mncengence

³⁷ Marieke Faber Clarke with Pathisa Nyathi, *Lozikeyi Dlodlo: Queen of the Ndebele* (Bulawayo: Amagugu Publishers, 2011), pp. 34–48.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *The Ndebele Nation*, pp. 87, 103–104, 112.

³⁹ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diaries, 8 January 1874.

and other women as significant or noteworthy figures beyond a cursory understanding of their pre-eminence in relation to Lobengula who, as will be discussed in Chapter Three, remained the central focus of his understanding of the politics of the Ndebele.⁴⁰ That being said, there is evidence that Mncengence did not accept the parameters Oates sought to impose on the encounter between them, and instead endeavoured to configure engagement with Oates on her own terms. In an entry of one of his early meetings with Mncengence, Oates gives a relatively greater level of detail:

(King's first sister calls with an Induna. Keeps me a long time. Give her limbo and ask meat.) ... John and I to 1st sister. Sit whilst meat is selected. She asks if it will do, being lean. Gives me beer. Asks if I did not know she is King's sister. Go to 2nd sister.⁴¹

It may well have been Mncengence's intention to impress upon Oates her particular importance and status against Lobengula's other sisters, whilst the repeated meetings in the course of one day suggest that Mncengence was fulfilling her role as 'Mother of the Homestead' by engaging with and hosting Oates as visitor to the king's capital. But, as far as can be discerned, Oates' apparent ingratitude after being afforded plenty of beer and meat by the most important women of the Ndebele polity appears to have frustrated Mncengence. This did not, however, deter her from continuing to fulfil her role being a welcoming host; she would later invite Oates to join in with singing and dancing in the days leading up to the *inxwala*.⁴² Whilst Oates leaves us with limited record, glimmers of Mncengence's personality and importance within Ndebele politics can be discerned.

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

Oates was predisposed to limit his recording, of and reflecting on, his interactions with African women especially, but we see similar examples of this in Oates' encounters with San peoples. In Oates' first recording of San

⁴⁰ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diaries, 17 September 1873, 5–9 December 1873.

⁴¹ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diaries, 8 December 1873.

⁴² Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 97.

peoples hunting for leopard on the Serule river between Shoshong and Tati, and relying heavily on Hendrick's characterisations, Oates recorded them to be, 'an inferior grade... one... came [the] next day wearing the tiger [leopard] skin looked very striking with it thrown gracefully over his well-formed person. A necklace of large lavender beads round his neck'. Later, he recorded that the San were, 'I suppose, the original inhabitants. Hendrick says they are slaves to the others. They certainly are outcasts'.⁴³ In another encounter, where ostrich eggs and feathers were bought in exchange for a knife, scissors, handkerchiefs, and lead, Oates focused his attention on how the San were 'ornamented with beads and had necklaces of cut ones and skins. They were ugly and the girls immodest'.⁴⁴ These kinds of observations extended to Oates' recording of specific behaviours of San peoples he observed, such as fire lighting or eating berries.⁴⁵ But the importance of the relationship between aesthetics and an appraisal of 'racial' capabilities comes across quite clearly from a consideration of the differences by which the Ndebele and San women were described. It would be nearly ten months into his time in southern Africa before Oates recorded details of San peoples that extended beyond his initial impressions or the information provided by his intermediaries, when he briefly noted that he conversed with one San who 'say [sic] his prayers/rush about madly (his god)/live all over country ... keeping principally near waggon road, to get hunting jobs and bits of meat/no fixed abode or crops. rough huts/3 wives. no chiefs. this one/is working for a gun. He/speaks his own tongue'.⁴⁶ Here, we can see hints of Oates establishing a sense of information about the place of San peoples within the wider society. Yet these notes, haphazardly jotted down, did not form part of a concerted effort to document the peoples he encountered and learn more about them, beyond what he learnt from intermediary figures such as Hendrick.

This did not preclude Oates from adjusting his viewpoint on certain Africans under certain circumstances, a process that changed the kinds of information he recorded and the way this was interpreted. It would be

⁴³ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diaries, 15 August 1873, 24 August 1873.

⁴⁴ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diaries, 20 August 1873.

⁴⁵ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diaries, 26 August 1873, 4 [2] March 1874.

⁴⁶ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diaries, 13 February 1874.

eighteen months into his journey before Oates began to note some kind of broader, macro understanding and meaning behind the behaviours of, for example, San peoples and their position within southern Africa. Whilst in the company of a group of San peoples, he noted that he ‘felt I was amongst the true children of the forest, resembling more the North American Indians than the usual Kaffir races of this country’.⁴⁷ Earlier in his trip, his first impression of Monyama, an Ndebele induna whose kraal served as a key stopping point for European travellers en route to Bulawayo, was to note his ‘shabby old hat’ and ‘squalor and dirt’. When Monyama gave him a pumpkin the next day, he quickly ‘felt less hostile to the old creature’, even though Oates still considered him ‘really a miserable-looking, ugly, and filthy creature’.⁴⁸ His early observation that ‘I do not admire the Matabele particularly. They are independent looking and well made, but I do not like their countenances’, (which he saw fit to justify on account of other attributes such as their apparent propensity to ‘eat like dogs greedily’) might be juxtaposed with Oates’ observation only a week later that ‘I like the Matabele better than I did at first. They are good-natured and jovial, and seem to understand a joke’.⁴⁹ An initial judgement based on aesthetical observation could shift in light of a judgement based on engagement with characters and personalities. So, there was at least limited room for an adjustment of Oates’ viewpoints on the Africans with whom he came into contact. Oates’ views could be fleeting and subject to change, as he became exposed to Africans as individuals and not just as accessories to his traversal of the region.

CONCLUSION

The potency of prejudicial attitudes that Oates brought to southern Africa shaped his engagement with information about the people and places he encountered. Principally, it kept his focus away from seeking information or meaning about the interior lives of Africans he encountered and instead viewed them as ancillary, but not central, to his reaching the Victoria Falls. It also tended to mean the focus of his recordings of his encounters with

⁴⁷ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diaries, 24 October 1874.

⁴⁸ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diaries, 8–9 September 1873; Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 51–53.

⁴⁹ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diaries, 4 September 1873, 10 September 1873; Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 45, 54.

Africans was on aesthetical observation and judgement. Oates' processing of information about the region further relied on the liminary, contingent encounters he had with a particular set of intermediaries which, on the one hand, fed (deliberately or otherwise) these attitudes.

But, on the other, these intermediaries played another, influential role. They were the figures Oates considered as embedded—rather than local—experts, offering what Oates regarded as impartial, macro pictures that helped him make sense of the micro interactions and information encountered on his travels. Despite the relatively contrasting backgrounds of these intermediaries—a mixture of employed guides from the Cape, a Boer settler, and a Scottish missionary—they shared an attribute of offering Oates informal and easy routes to making sense of what he encountered as a first-time visitor to southern Africa. The power of Oates' acceptance of their testimonies, coupled with his relative unwillingness to explore further, would make it difficult for Oates to reconfigure his intermediary-derived understandings in light of new information from different kinds of sources, not least local Africans themselves. Changing his views required separation, over space and time, from these intermediaries, and closer engagement with Africans themselves. Oates could alter his views based on subsequent encounters and information but, as the following chapters will further demonstrate, the contingencies of his initial engagement with information about Africa and Africans had a disproportionate influence over the shaping of Oates' understanding of what he observed.

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Frank Oates and King Lobengula

Abstract We focus on how Frank Oates and King Lobengula of the Ndebele experienced one another and how this impacted the nature and understandings of their resulting encounters. Oates' sense that he had developed an effective, transactional relationship with Lobengula instilled confidence that his journey could be transacted without major difficulty. Furthermore, Oates' sense that the king's word was absolute obviated the traveller's need to seek to understand the broader Ndebele polity. In Oates' mind, Lobengula provided the traveller with a mental shortcut to the way he could successfully complete his journey. Conversely, Lobengula did not consider this a transactional relationship but primarily as a relationship that had to be navigated with care, weighing up the balances and risks involved. Careful management saw Lobengula manage Oates' sense of royal authority, even as the monarch was seeking to use the traveller in the development of that authority in the broader Ndebele polity. Lobengula's interactions with Oates were also determined by Lobengula's sense of Ndebele concerns arising from disease management and European incursions from the south.

Keywords Lobengula · Frank Oates · Monarchy · Royal authority · Stereotyping · Knowledge collection

The previous chapter has provided us with a sense of the ways that, however much his encounters were quite specific, Oates came to experience and perceive of different sections of African societies as generalities. We now turn our attention to the encounter between Oates and a specific African, the African to whom Oates naturally attached the greatest significance during his time in southern Africa. This was King Lobengula of the Ndebele. As noted in the introduction, at the time of Oates' arrival, Lobengula was newly installed as monarch at what continued to be a fluid moment in Ndebele authority in the region. One of the things that we should consequently be on the lookout for is the extent to which Oates did or did not consider the nuances or contestations of kingly rule, and if he did, the manner in which he understood their causes or implications. How much did Oates turning his attention from a society to an individual engender a change in ways of understanding?

There are immediate, interconnected problems when it comes to accessing and assessing this encounter. First, of course, we are reliant on Oates' account as conveyed in his diaries and letters as the sole written record. Second, we face the aforementioned brevity and lack of details of this record. Even his brother Charles regarded Oates' meeting Lobengula as 'one of those more striking episodes in the journey' but had to admit that the portions of the diaries covering his time at the king's capital were 'the most wanting, where the reader would naturally expect and desire to find it the fullest'.¹ Nevertheless, following the grain of Oates' diaries and letters leads to a particular reading of their relationship in *Matabele Land*. We have a king eager to please his white guest, resulting in an initially positive relationship. This relationship, Oates suggests, later soured due to the 'caprice' and 'obstructiveness' of the king and his people, which hindered his movements. This reading was encouraged by Charles in his construction of *Matabele Land* itself, and contemporary reviews suggest that the work's late Victorian readership took this interpretation of a changing, souring relationship away with them.²

Reading against the grain, however, reveals a different picture. In undertaking this reading, it is important to start by considering the process by which Oates constructed meaning of the king in the first

¹ Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 58.

² Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. xxxvi, 61, 125; C. G. Oates (ed), *A selection from the notices of Matabele Land and the Victoria Falls: From the Letters and Journals of the late Frank Oates, F.R.G.S.*, (unpublished, produced Edinburgh: R. & R. Clarke), pp. 1–8.

place. Oates evidently regarded his relationship with Lobengula as purely transactional, i.e. the *means* by which his journey to the Falls could be transacted. This conception of the relationship helps explain the decisions Oates made on what to record and what not to record. The resulting brevity of Oates' written accounts of this encounter is, in itself, an important dimension to understanding Oates' perspective of this encounter and to how we might endeavour to surmount the account's limitations. Oates was only ever a partial observer, by which we mean he constructed records of his encounters without showing a predisposition to consider the implications of what was witnessed and make any adjustment to his perspective as a consequence.

As a partial observer, Oates' view was limited by a highly distorting sense of monarchical authority and the wielding of such authority in African politics. Where some aspects of his understanding of Africa were flexible, his conception of Lobengula as in a commanding, almost absolute, position of authority was his strongest-held view. It proved the most impervious to adjustment. And yet for all of this, if we use Oates' partial record, but do not apply his limited view of the dynamics between a monarch and their subjects, we find ourselves in a stronger position to outline some of the core elements of Ndebele politics, sovereignty, and relations, even though we are still drawing principally on sources that never put forward such a commentary. As we shall see, we can then hopefully be in a stronger position to flesh out some of the nuances and complexities of Lobengula's political position.

This chapter examines the encounter between Frank Oates and Lobengula from each of their perspectives in turn. First, we consider the formation of British preconceptions of Lobengula's father and predecessor Mzilikazi, as depicted in early accounts of European encounters with the Ndebele, which then formed the first experience Oates had of Ndebele royalty prior to his arrival in Ndebele territory. We consider this context in relation to the first meeting Oates had with Lobengula at Bulawayo in September 1873 and examine how this meeting helped to solidify Oates' preconception of Lobengula's authority, the key consequence of this being that the meeting rendered awareness or engagement with nuances of the Ndebele polity or Lobengula's authority as defunct. Considering Lobengula as an absolute monarch was an intellectual shortcut of the sort that, as we have seen in Chapter Two, Oates favoured. For his onward journey, this sense of the Ndebele monarch greatly simplified Oates' understanding of the relationship between the

two as transactional. The process of Oates making it to the Falls could be distilled to the simple exchange of goods for permission to traverse Ndebele territory.

We then turn to the encounter from Lobengula's perspective. In contrast to Oates, Lobengula did not see or consider the relationship as purely transactional. Still relatively early in his reign, Lobengula recognised that engaging with Oates presented a balance of opportunities and risks. Oates could be utilised, seemingly without the Briton realising, to gain a range of information about the wider region and help assert Lobengula's authority across Ndebele territory outside the immediate vicinity of the capital. We argue that, through careful management of the presentation and terms of the encounter, Lobengula deliberately played into British preconceptions of his authority. We can also discern that Lobengula had to manage a delicate balance between domestic concerns of the Ndebele about white presence and fear of cattle disease against the risks of managing white travellers that might escalate tensions with the colonial government further south. In sum, from a fragmentary and partial record, it is clear Lobengula had a much clearer understanding of the encounter than Oates did, and could much more effectively utilise the encounter to advance his own ends.

The force with which Oates maintained his sense that Lobengula possessed total authority was the result of a combination of self-reinforcing factors. It was in part a consequence of ideas about the Ndebele developed prior to Oates' arrival in Matabeleland, in part a consequence of the impact of intermediary figures' perspectives upon Oates' expectations, and in part a consequence of the specificities of the forms of the initial interactions Oates had with the Ndebele state.

THINKING ABOUT AFRICA BEFORE BEING IN AFRICA

Let us start with Oates' pre-Africa ideas about the region. This element might be said to be the most inchoate, which is perfectly in keeping with a British cultural imagination that was increasingly turning its attention to Africa in the final third of the nineteenth century, but which rendered Africa opaquely as being in a state of primitive homogeneity. Lobengula did not really feature in the British media until the second half of the 1870s and would only become well known in Britain a little later—at which point he became very known indeed, due to the First Matabele War

of the 1890s and the Ndebele Kingdom's eventual dissolution in 1897.³ When the Ndebele were known in the British cultural imagination, this was principally the result of the actions of Lobengula's father, Mzilikazi, rather than Lobengula himself. Mzilikazi (invariably spelt Moselekatse at the time) was known in the British media on the basis of his interactions with David Livingstone and other missionaries passing through the region in the 1850 and 1860s.⁴ As for the characteristics Mzilikazi was felt to possess, for the most part there was no consensus. Some, such as big game hunter Captain William Cornwallis Harris, who encountered Mzilikazi in the 1830s, depicted the king as greedy and cunning. Harris evokes a king holding up the hunter's path through the monarch's territory for financial reasons, 'hoping by these means to effect a monopoly of [trading] traffic'.⁵ Others, such as missionary Robert Moffat, depicted a thoughtful monarch, concerned for the welfare of his people and apparently keen to welcome missionaries into his territory to aid in this.⁶

We can therefore see the consequences of the commentators' differing aims and reasons for being in Africa for how the king was rendered. The one thing the accounts agreed on, however, was Mzilikazi's authority. Livingstone called him a 'ferocious chief' whose name, John Mackenzie opined, 'was a terror far and near'.⁷ By the time of Oates' travels, Mzilikazi had 'entered the colonial imagination in the early nineteenth century, when tales of the absolute authority he commanded over his people achieved fabled proportions'.⁸ Here fascination tipped sometimes into awe and sometimes into (relative) respect. As elsewhere in Africa, the leaders Britons felt the strongest and the most inclined towards the

³ See, for example, 'South Africa', *The Times*, 3 February 1877, p. 6; 'Foreign Intelligence', *John Bull*, 25 January 1879, p. 51; Sadiya Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire, and Anthropology in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 230–4; Bill Schwarz, *The White Man's World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 161–4.

⁴ There are many articles discussing Mzilikazi in relation to Livingstone, and indeed to Protestant missionary activity more generally, such as 'Missionary expedition to Central Africa', *Leeds Mercury*, 9 June 1855, p. 11.

⁵ Harris, *The Wild Sports of Southern Africa*, ch. xi, quote at p. 136.

⁶ 'Christian enterprise in Africa', *York Herald*, 29 May 1858, p. 11.

⁷ Livingstone, *Missionary Travels*, p. 110; Mackenzie, *Ten Years North*, pp. 303–304.

⁸ Yuka Suzuki, *The Nature of Whiteness: Race, Animals and Nation in Zimbabwe* (Washington DC: University of Washington Press, 2017), p. 27.

authoritarian and hierarchical—and therefore the ones who oversaw the most ‘ordered’ kingdoms—were the ones most admired and the ones that loomed largest in British thinking, as well as the ones with whom British imperial administrators would later seek to collaborate closest when running colonies.⁹ Ancillary to this sense of the Ndebele as warlike could have been a vague or imprecise contemporary British sense that they came from the same sorts of roots as King Shaka, who gripped British metropolitan imaginations as a powerful ‘martial’ leader.¹⁰ Indeed, where the Ndebele were discussed as possessing a collective sensibility, it chimed with this attitude towards the Ndebele leader; ‘War is the prevailing passion of the Matabili’, wrote Harris, and ‘they burn with an insatiable thirst for the blood of their enemies’.¹¹ The imprecisions of the source trail prevent us from adumbrating causality with any certainty, but Oates keenly read Livingstone, and so likely arrived in Africa already possessing a sense of the scale and strength of the Ndebele state. This was then reinforced once in southern Africa by Oates’ conversations with intermediaries. For instance, John Lee provided Oates with a potted history of the region, in which the arrival of Mzilikazi’s Ndebele heralded the destruction of local polities.¹²

If Oates’ initial sense of the Ndebele was, then, of a polity defined by a strong leader channelling a collective, ostensibly martial, strength of his subjects, the forms of encounter that Oates initially had with the Ndebele nation consolidated the idea of a strong hierarchy with an adjacent emphasis upon order. Most importantly, the systems Oates faced that regulated his entry into and across the region only strengthened a sense of a state defined by processes clearly directed from the centre.¹³ For instance, when Oates first arrived at a border kraal on the edge of the king’s territory, he received explicit instructions that he could not

⁹ The Ganda are one of the most notable instances of this; see Jonathon L. Earle, *Colonial Buganda and the End of Empire: Political Thoughts and Historical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 16–7.

¹⁰ Carolyn Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

¹¹ Harris, *The Wild Sports of Southern Africa*, p. 137.

¹² GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diaries, 6 September 1873.

¹³ Enocent Msindo, *Ethnicity in Zimbabwe: Transformations in Kalanga and Ndebele Societies, 1860–1990* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2012), p. 37.

proceed to see the king until he had been sent for.¹⁴ To be sure, this was not an experience that led Oates to consider the Ndebele state to be in any way comparable to a European one in terms of imagined racial ability. Nevertheless, that the regulation of Oates' own physical movement, from outside a defined geographical border to inside it, was determined by the king's explicit intentions for him, meant Oates registered the Ndebele state as distinctive within the region. This distinctiveness was on the grounds that it had markers of state activity that were out of keeping with his experiences of Africa up to that point, but which were in accord with Oates', and broader European, expectations of national cohesiveness and hierarchy.

OATES AND LOBENGULA'S FIRST MEETING, SEPTEMBER 1873

On 15 September 1873, Oates finally met with Lobengula for the first time. Oates' sense of the Ndebele state as defined by method and convention was only compounded by the nature of the physical space in which that first meeting took place. On his arrival, Oates was faced with a clearly delineated royal enclosure; modern archaeology confirms Victorian accounts of a roughly circular enclosure approximately 100m in diameter, entered by what modern archaeologists led by Christopher Gaffney suggest was an 'elaborate' entrance, with storerooms and houses surrounding Lobengula's large private home.¹⁵ All of this meant that Oates was far from unique amongst Europeans in feeling that Lobengula was 'coming quite up to the standard'.¹⁶ Lobengula was well used to the idea of Europeans seeking hunting rights in his territories, having seen his father grant such requests on many occasions.¹⁷ Oates was not a novelty to Lobengula.

Lobengula was, however, a novelty to Oates. Oates' reading of his first meeting only served to reinforce the picture of Lobengula he had been

¹⁴ Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 51.

¹⁵ C. Gaffney, G. Hughes, and J. Gater, 'Geophysical surveys at King Lobengula's Palace Bulawayo, Zimbabwe', *Archaeological Prospection* 12 (2005), pp. 31–49, quote at p. 49.

¹⁶ Suzuki, *The Nature of Whiteness*, p. 29.

¹⁷ J. M. MacKenzie, *The Empire of Nature: Hunting, Conservation and British Imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), pp. 94–5.

developing up to that point. Lobengula embodied both the bearing and precision of monarchical ritual that Victorians had come to expect from royalty.¹⁸ In a letter home, Oates wrote that the king was ‘very gracious, and placed meat and plates before me, and inquired what sport I had had coming up’, all whilst enforcing the proper decorum befitting of his status: ‘I was going out of the hut legs first, when he pulled me back and made me go head first’. Oates’ preconceptions—his hopes for what he would find from his interactions with the king of the Ndebele—were in the main fulfilled. Lobengula was, Oates summarised, ‘the picture of a savage king, just as one might have imagined’.¹⁹

The power of Oates’ wish for what he wanted from an evocative and picturesque engagement with an African leader was strong. It was such that any deviations from anticipated norms inspired revulsion. When Lobengula later departed from a ‘savage king’ archetype by wearing European clothes, Oates regarded it as ‘ludicrous’ and an affront.²⁰ Later generations of European colonial administrators would castigate ‘trousered’ Africans on the grounds that such clothing indicated a loss of touch with what was ‘authentic’ or ‘traditional’ and becoming a threat to the imperial state by imbibing western ideas (chiefly, nationalism) deleterious to Britons’ own standing in the continent.²¹ With Oates, the cause of the revulsion was similar, though not identical; it seems the vociferousness with which Oates expressed his consternation stemmed from his sense that, in this brief moment at least, Lobengula was not giving him what he wanted from the encounter. For a man whose self-identity was built upon the desire to seek out the ‘exotic’, this similarity blunted the ‘otherness’ Oates desired of the encounter. There was, after all, no innate blanket hostility to perceived markers of difference about Lobengula. Indeed, the perceived difference of Lobengula’s appearance

¹⁸ The key statement as to this point remains David Cannadine, ‘The context, performance and meaning of ritual: The British monarchy and the ‘invention of tradition’, c.1820–1977’, in *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm and Ranger (eds), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 101–64.

¹⁹ Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 63.

²⁰ ‘King ludicrous dress. Very gracious. He is a good fellow/his remarks to Mandy about me. (I object to niggers in clothes.)’ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diaries, 19 December 1873.

²¹ David Daltry, letter to mother, 6 May 1927, Weston Library, University of Oxford, Mss.Afr.s.2222/30.

seems to have marked him out as a leader in Oates' mind; Oates believed it worth noting in his diary, with little further comment, that Lobengula was 'one of the darkest-complexioned people I have seen belonging to this nation',²² presumably feeling that the Ndebele people would have shared Oates' assumptions as to Lobengula's distinctiveness.

However, of greatest importance to us here is that, deviations into the wearing of 'European' garb aside, a combination of factors created Oates' sense that Lobengula was an archetype of African 'savage' kingly authority. At the same time, Oates was not particularly interested in spending time with the king for the sake of observing a king. Unlike many of his counterparts, Oates was uninterested in anthropological reflection in general and he had, of course, an overarching reason to be interacting with Lobengula in the first instance. In seeking to reach the Falls, Oates' propensity to observe the subtleties, complexities, or extent of Lobengula's political authority was limited. Close observations of other elements or nuances to Lobengula's authority, or challenges to it, are missed or simply not recorded, and most of Oates' diary entries from the king's capital are brief. One simply reads 'Visit from King'.²³ After noting the arrival of some of promised guides and carriers, another entry reads, 'King's daughter', whilst a third from July 1874, when Oates sought additional permissions and protections from Lobengula, reads 'King with Charles. King with Phil'.²⁴

KINGLY STEREOTYPES AND TRANSACTIONAL INTERACTIONS: THE ENCOUNTER FROM OATES' PERSPECTIVE

A sense of Lobengula as the archetypal authoritarian king left Oates feeling he was able to take a series of intellectual shortcuts, principally about Lobengula's relationship with his subjects. In particular, Oates focused on the consequences of this relationship for Oates' own position as a traveller through the Ndebele state. Foremost amongst these shortcuts was the belief that Lobengula's word could be taken as the ultimate

²² GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diaries, 8 December 1873; Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 103.

²³ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 21 September 1873.

²⁴ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 25 September 1873, 10 July 1874.

determinant of affairs within the state. Oates conceived of Lobengula as ‘really a powerful monarch and feared far and near. He lives in [a] perfect savage-royal state’.²⁵ The actions of all other Africans were, in the main, a reflection of Lobengula’s wishes; in Oates’ mental geography of the region, Lobengula’s word was coterminous with Ndebele deed.

Thus, once Lobengula’s authority over Matabeleland had been understood as close to absolute, meeting the challenge of traversing the region on the way to the Falls could be simplified in Oates’ mind to meeting the challenge of establishing a transactional relationship with a single figure. By providing Lobengula with a gun, ammunition, and any ivory hunted along the way, Oates felt that access through Matabeleland to the Falls could be transacted. This was a process in which Oates believed Lobengula was willing to engage. A large part of the reason Lobengula was rendered in positive terms (in extremely *relative* positive terms, it must be stressed) was because of assessments about his attitude towards Europeans. A common refrain amongst Europeans more generally in the region in the 1870s was that Lobengula was a ‘friend of white men’.²⁶ Oates used the phrase too. Oates’ belief that a transactional relationship could be established in the first instance was a consequence of his belief that a friendship of sorts could be established with Lobengula because of the calculations Lobengula was making about how he might benefit from European travellers’ presence in the area.

To be sure, Oates was not alone in conceptualising his relationship with Lobengula as transactional. Here, Oates’ actions might be profitably juxtaposed with those who had a different type of aim for their time in the region: missionaries. Jesuit missionaries arriving in Ndebele territory in the later 1870s found themselves with an uphill struggle; Protestant missions were already established in the region, and so the newly-arrived Catholics sought to ‘make further progress in the chief’s favour’, by trying to be as ‘helpful’ to him as possible. They set about spending time in the area, showing their good intentions, which they sought to demonstrate by putting a new canvas cover on Lobengula’s waggon, so as to, in the

²⁵ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diary, 16 September 1873; OA 111, 2007.2311, Frank Oates to William Oates, 25 September 1873; Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 58–63.

²⁶ Augustus Law, diary entry, 3 September 1879, in Gelfand, *Gubulawayo and Beyond*, p. 110.

words of the Jesuit missionaries' historian Michael Gelfand, 'make it the most attractive waggon that Lobengula had ever seen'.²⁷

Given that others during this period were more predisposed to analyse Lobengula's behaviour in greater depth than Oates, it might be suggested that Oates' sense of his relationship with Lobengula was the outcome of the convergence of his relationship with Ndebele territory—as a place to be passed through, and as a place to be known insofar as it was felt necessary to facilitate a passing through—and to his own intellectual predisposition. The relative depth of Baines' 1869–1872 diaries' descriptions and analysis of Lobengula and the politics of the Ndebele during a tumultuous succession, for instance, was shaped by Baines' desire to secure a gold concession and pass on intelligence to the colonial government in Natal.²⁸ Baines, in other words, had reason to observe Lobengula more closely than Oates did. Yet other British figures, with a very similar transactional understanding as Oates and travelling through Ndebele territory at almost the same time, go further in documenting the substance and content of their encounters with Lobengula. Henry Stabb, who was in Matabeleland in 1875, recorded considerable detail of his meetings with Lobengula and recognised the differing significance of his first meeting being 'merely a visit of ceremony' and his second meeting consisting of a substantive discussion of the terms necessary to secure permission to hunt.²⁹ The manner in which Oates approached the king was, therefore, not simply a straightforward reflection of a particular type of encounter.

Besides a lack of desire to engage in sustained reflection on the Ndebele state, Oates' diaries do suggest there is, again, also perhaps something personal and emotional to the alacrity with which Oates accepted the possibility of his interaction with Lobengula being conducted in such a transactional fashion. Amidst obstacles and (relative) privation, here Oates was faced with an individual who through a single transactional interaction was held to promise a straightforward solution to his own principal challenge. During an early interaction, Oates received Lobengula's word

²⁷ Gelfand, *Gubulawayo and Beyond*, p. 107.

²⁸ J. P. R. Wallis (ed), *The Northern Goldfields Diaries of Thomas Baines: First Journey 1870–1871: Volume Two* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1946), pp. 317–325. The index entries on Lobengula (written as Nobengulu) in Volume Three are extensive.

²⁹ Tabler (ed), *To the Victoria Falls via Matabeleland*, pp. 67–84; see also *ibid.*, pp. 88–112, 191–204, 213–228.

that he would be provided with two guides and up to thirty carriers who would ensure that, throughout the journey, he would be ‘kept from all annoyance, as they have strict orders to conduct me properly’.

Lobengula was, from Oates’ perspective, seemingly relaxed about giving the necessary permission and guidance to head to the Falls. In mid-September 1873, Lobengula informed Oates that the Falls could be reached in ten days from Inyati and that there were still two months of favourable weather. Nevertheless, the risks of travel so close to the onset of rainy season meant that Lobengula urged ‘all possible haste from the moment the subject was first mentioned’. Oates’ interpretation of Lobengula as being ‘exceedingly obliging’ and ‘so anxious... that no white man should come to grief in his country’ was based on Oates’ belief that the terms of a transaction were indeed being established.³⁰ In the wake of Lobengula’s promise, the specificity of Oates’ interactions with Lobengula, rooted in Oates’ single-minded transaction over access, made for oversimplification in his recording of those interactions judged ephemeral to the completion of his goals. In the traveller’s mind, Lobengula effectively sanctioned Oates’ predisposition that further sustained reflection on Ndebele politics was unnecessary.

USING THE EUROPEAN AND KEEPING THE PEACE: THE ENCOUNTER FROM LOBENGULA’S PERSPECTIVE

Let us turn next to the interaction from Lobengula’s perspective. There was an element to Lobengula’s engagement with Oates that certainly was transactional. Lobengula desired trade in ivory and guns, being in receipt of the requisite gifts necessary for access to be granted through a formalised process, even if Lobengula did not deliberately monopolise trade with whites.³¹ Lobengula’s proclamation to white hunters and travellers soon after his coronation, as drafted by Baines, stipulated that entry would be permitted for the fee of ‘one gun of the value of £15 British Sterling, one bag of powder and one box of caps’.³² However, Lobengula

³⁰ GWHM, OA 111, 2007.2311, Frank Oates to William Oates, 25 September 1873; Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 62–64.

³¹ Ngwabi M. B. Bhebe, ‘Ndebele Trade in the Nineteenth Century’, *Journal of African Studies* 1:1 (1974), p. 96.

³² Wallis (ed), *The Northern Goldfields Diaries of Thomas Baines: Second Journey, 1871–1872: Volume Three*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1946), Appendix V, p. 805.

was not looking to play the role of a simple service or licence provider to Oates or other travellers.³³ Instead, the king's assessment of the role and function of travellers was multifaceted. These travellers had to be carefully managed. Travellers simultaneously offered the king the potential means for the furtherance of his own agenda, regardless of whether the traveller was or was not aware of their function in this regard. A core component of this management can be seen through Lobengula's engagement with Europeans in Matabeleland through the political theatre of an audience with the king. After they had obtained permission to enter Matabeleland, Europeans' engagement with Lobengula via a relatively formalised and well-rehearsed process served several functional purposes: to project political and personal authority; to ascertain the intent of the white traveller; and to gain information and intelligence about a range of issues.

In the first instance, travellers had to be managed because of their implications for the king's relationship with the outside world. The king's concerns about white travellers moving across Matabeleland speak to an acute and long-standing awareness of the wider benefits, risks, and ramifications of regulating access to Europeans, particularly as their numbers in the region increased from the 1850s. Lobengula, like Mzilikazi before him, would have been conscious of this and thus white entry into Matabeleland was not always a given. In 1857, the hunter William Baldwin and a party of Boers sought permission to hunt elephants in Ndebele territory. The party was kept waiting for four months because of Mzilikazi's concerns about the presence of some Boers already within territory he considered his. Fearing for his territorial integrity, and with Baldwin's resources dwindling and horses beginning to die, Mzilikazi stymied the Baldwin party's efforts. Baldwin was oblivious to the king's real reasoning; Baldwin resolved not to travel with Boers again, not because he sensed Mzilikazi's concerns, but because he did not like their limited conversations on trek. Baldwin simply interpreted the hold-up as evidence of a king trying to scupper the movement of Europeans away from him for the self-interested reason of keeping wealthy travelling traders nearby.³⁴

After permission to enter through permitted routes was established, almost all accounts, including Oates', of white travellers' first meeting

³³ GWHM, OA 111, 2007.2311, Frank Oates to William Oates, 25 September 1873; Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 63–64.

³⁴ Elements of the Baldwin story are well covered in Mackenzie, *Empire of Hunting*, p. 107.

with Lobengula describe a relaxed, friendly reception where he would greet and entertain European newcomers upon their arrival, invariably providing beer and sharing a meal of beef, and initiate engagement. Oates' intermediary Thomson had thought as much when he first met Lobengula in April 1869, some four years prior to Oates. The king, Thomson wrote at the time, 'has a very good-natured face, and is very affable, and fond of a joke. He likes Europeans ... He certainly promises to be a good king'.³⁵ As Ndlovu-Gatsheni points out, feeding any traveller or visitor is a well-established feature of Ndebele life.³⁶ But for Lobengula, doing so served several advantages in terms of managing white travellers. In the short and long term, the initial favourable impression almost invariably recorded in European accounts solidified preconceptions of Lobengula being a 'friend of the white man'. Travellers such as Oates and Baines interpreted the sharing of a meal at this initial courtesy meeting as the sort of 'public acknowledgment of friendship' necessary to publicly legitimise the perceived transactional nature of their interactions with him.³⁷ This could then in turn be utilised by Lobengula for his own advantage, particularly for extracting information from them. As one traveller put it in 1875, Lobengula asked 'a great number of questions' about a range of issues including Cetshwayo and the Zulus, Transvaal commando raids, and the spread of cattle disease.³⁸ Wrapped in the informality of enquiring about Oates' journey, Lobengula sought to ascertain as much as he could. Furthermore, in playing the part of a generous host, Lobengula ensured that visitors felt indebted to him. When Oates asked for beer a few days after their first meeting, Lobengula 'refused, saying he wanted some himself and thought of coming to me for some'.³⁹ It is evident that Oates laboured under these pressures long after his initial encounter, recording in his diary that 'he [Lobengula] does all I wish. I do nothing he wishes'.⁴⁰ The picture of a king at ease, secure in

³⁵ Thomson, cited in Richard Lovett, *The History of the London Missionary Society, 1795–1895* (London: Henry Frowde, 1899), p. 627.

³⁶ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *The Ndebele Nation*, p. 117.

³⁷ Wallis (ed), *The Northern Goldfields Diaries of Thomas Baines: First Journey, 1869–1870: Volume One* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1946), p. 255.

³⁸ Tabler (ed), *To the Victoria Falls via Matabeleland*, pp. 70–71.

³⁹ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diaries, 24 September 1873.

⁴⁰ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diaries, 8 December 1873.

his capital, acting as a wealthy, hospitable host, helped instil a sense of his authority in Europeans. Comparatively few accounts record or comment on any unease or insecurities during these initial meetings, with one 1875 account noting that the meal was first tried by 'slave girls' to ensure that they had not been 'trifled with'—a hint that Lobengula was at that time concerned about the possibility of being poisoned.⁴¹ The political theatre of this initial encounter, therefore, played an important role in configuring the encounter on terms set and controlled by Lobengula.

European travellers were often impressed by Lobengula's grasp of affairs in neighbouring territories. Yet fewer reflected on the role they played in being a source of that information, even whilst they had a sense of themselves as being more well informed about the 'outside world' and could thus 'teach' the Ndebele leader about it. The missionary Robert Moffat was praised by Mzilikazi, amongst other things, for being a reliable informant.⁴² As such, Europeans attempted to play on Lobengula's perceived ignorance of the world beyond his borders to secure greater respect or opportunities for themselves, sometimes exaggerating or playing on an apparent official status and self-perception of 'upholding the prestige of the white man in southern Africa'.⁴³ But Lobengula could and did see through these pretences. A few years after Oates' time in the region, traveller Richard Frewen sought to present himself as a 'great chief' after being intercepted for straying into Matabeleland without permission. Frewen suggested that he would 'return with an army and eat [Lobengula] up' if he was not treated in accordance with his self-anointed status. Bluntly dismissing Frewen, Lobengula warned other white travellers that they should not mix with 'officious individuals who came blustering into his country and tried to bounce him with threats that they never intended to do, or could carry out'.⁴⁴

But for all the perspicacity with which Lobengula saw Europeans overstating their place in the world beyond Matabeleland, Lobengula's

⁴¹ Tabler (ed), *To the Victoria Falls via Matabeleland*, p. 68.

⁴² Wallis (ed.), *Matabele Journal of Robert Moffat: Volume One* (London: Chatto and Windus: 1945), p. 96, cited in Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *The Ndebele Nation*, pp. 126–127.

⁴³ Richard Brown, 'External relations of the Ndebele Kingdom', in Leonard Thompson (ed), *African Societies in Southern Africa* (London, Heinemann, 1969), p. 274.

⁴⁴ Tabler (ed), *Zambezia and Matabeleland in the Seventies: The Narrative of Frederick Hugh Barber, 1875 and 1877–1878 and The Journal of Richard Frewen, 1877–1878* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1960), pp. 106–109.

engagement with whites over access still has ‘to be seen in the context of the external relations with white governments’.⁴⁵ In large part, this was due to the continued potential threat posed to Lobengula by rival claimants and pretenders after he had successfully fended off an invasion by supporters of Nkulumane in 1872. Indeed, Frewen had lobbied the colonial authorities in Cape Town for their direct intervention to stop ‘outrages’ against whites and to seek Lobengula’s replacement with Nkulumane.⁴⁶ Such claimants, tentatively aided by British authorities in Natal, were a persistent influence on relations between Lobengula and white colonial governments in southern Africa, and Lobengula consistently sought to mitigate this threat. Lobengula’s awareness of the challenges he faced here is certainly in keeping with the tone of a later, though only reputed, quote from Lobengula, when he came to the conclusion that the balance of interests could no longer be maintained; ‘You white men are like the chameleon’, he is said to have informed a missionary, ‘he creeps on slowly, step by step, then makes a pounce and seizes the fly. That will be my fate’.⁴⁷ But, at any rate, Lobengula clearly appreciated that individual white desires had to be managed lest they turn into indignities. So, whilst Oates was not as attuned to this context as he might have been, Lobengula was certainly aware that the Englishman, and other European individuals in Matabeleland, could pose a risk to the balance of these relations.

NDEBELE INTERNAL POLITICS

Despite the brevity of much of Oates’ commentary on the internal politics of Matabeleland, we can nevertheless use this to help discern the nature of Lobengula’s position and authority in the wake of a turbulent succession following the death of his father. Through the early 1870s, as Lobengula’s power was gradually consolidated in the wake of his accession, it seems the king was increasingly confident in permitting the presence of figures such as Oates. He became less concerned about potential domestic tensions that could arise from their presence. But this does not mean that such tensions ceased to exist, or that Lobengula no longer had to address

⁴⁵ Brown, ‘External relations of the Ndebele Kingdom’, pp. 273–276.

⁴⁶ Tabler (ed), *Zambezia and Matabeleland in the Seventies*, pp. 194–195.

⁴⁷ Cited in Gelfand, *Gubulawayo and Beyond*, pp. 107, 433.

them. The most prevalent issue from 1874 was the risk of the spread of disease amongst cattle, principally Redwater disease and lung sickness, both of which had had a devastating impact across southern Africa. Lobengula would have been aware—in a very forceful and present way—of the extreme ramifications of such illnesses. The Xhosa cattle killings of the 1850s were an example in the then-recent past of livestock disease and resulting destabilisations in community and economic health. Lobengula would only have been too aware of the broader political consequences of this, as Europeans, seizing on such destabilisations, found it easier to pursue the acquisition of more territory.⁴⁸ Closer to home, Mzilikazi's farmers had been battling lung sickness prior to Lobengula's accession, with an 1861 outbreak being the 'first known highly contagious disease of European origin to occur among local livestock in pre-colonial times'; the Ndebele were to lose many cattle due to missionaries' introduction of diseased draught oxen to the area.⁴⁹ Serious concern abounded about the prospect of disease being introduced and spread by white people, and thereby posing an existential threat to Ndebele society.

Oates was stopped twice because of such concerns in June and July 1874, and his diary entries reveal something of their extent and Oates' inability to reform his understanding of Lobengula's authority in light of them. On both of those occasions, Oates records that orders had been given by Lobengula to stop all waggons heading to the Zambesi 'on account of sickness' and that, should he proceed, his African guides and carriers would be killed. Oates' guides and carriers, now directly threatened, feared that 'a white man's protection is little use now that the people think white men bring sickness'.⁵⁰ On the first occasion, Oates returned to Lobengula who 'seemed rather amused... and told me the Makalakas had been trying to frighten me, and that he had never sent them any order to stop waggons. I believe, however, he is the one to blame, and had probably neglected to send word to the Makalakas to

⁴⁸ J. B. Peires, *The Dead Will Rise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-killing Movement of 1856–7* (Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Press, 1989).

⁴⁹ Wesley Mwatwara and Sandra Swart, "If our cattle die, we eat them but these white people bury and burn them!" African livestock regimes, veterinary knowledge and the emergence of a colonial order in Southern Rhodesia, c.1860–1902', *Kronos* 41 (2015), pp. 125–6, quote at p. 125.

⁵⁰ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 18–19 June 1874, 21 June 1874, 7 July 1874.

let me pass'. Oates requested and received a representative of Lobengula to accompany him to ensure his continued passage, though this was not sufficient to prevent Oates being stopped a second time.⁵¹ Incidentally, whilst these interactions evidently took away from Oates' belief that his initial transaction with the king made for a more straightforward journey—and from his belief that as this was a straightforward transaction the chances of royal duplicity were reduced—they did not take away from his sense of Lobengula's authority. Instead, there was no chance that these individuals were stopping Lobengula for independent reasons. Rather they had, in Oates' mind, misinterpreted or not heard Lobengula's instructions.

We are, of course, entirely dependent on Oates' account here. Oates gave little attention to any fear of the spread of disease amongst Ndebele cattle beyond it disrupting his onward attempts to reach the Zambesi. We also have the problem of the brevity of Oates' diary at key moments, particularly his interactions with Lobengula after being stopped the first time. There are also omissions; we do not have a record of Lobengula's response to Oates' written request for extra protections after the Englishman was stopped a second time, other than the fact that Oates recommenced his journey a fortnight later.

It is nevertheless possible to tentatively, though not conclusively, entertain how Lobengula sought to balance domestic pressures created by the threat of disease with his own stance towards permitting white access to Matabeleland. What is clear is that the threat of disease was taken seriously by both local indunas and Lobengula. It seems likely that Lobengula did issue orders to the effect of seeking to contain the threat of disease and to publicly address (but not necessarily share to the same extent) Ndebele fears that white people were responsible for their spread.⁵² In a diary entry omitted from the published version of *Matabele Land*, Oates records how the African carriers of another white trader named Stoffel, 'wanted [him] to stop, having heard the report of the King's order, but S[toffle] refusing, they had left him'. These carriers were then apprehended, 'taken to the King and killed'.⁵³ With actions such as this, Lobengula had the

⁵¹ Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 186, 207–208.

⁵² A parallel can be drawn here with Baines' recording of Lobengula's response to indigenous concerns about the flying of flags by white travellers. See Wallis (ed), *The Northern Goldfields Diaries of Thomas Baines: Volume Two*, pp. 321–322.

⁵³ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 27 July 1874.

means to immobilise white travellers without posing a direct threat to them. Such a public action might have been intended to enhance his authority and leadership, even if the intent behind the orders was not as restrictive as their enforcement by those Ndebele figures and factions more suspicious of, or hostile to, a white presence. Lobengula could not dictate or decree the regulation of whites in Matabeleland and had to respond to public pressure when making decisions of state.⁵⁴

Yet Lobengula could continue to offer private, individual assurances and exemptions of access to white travellers. Oates repeatedly received permission to continue his journey to the Zambesi, and other white traders record receiving similar permissions after 1874.⁵⁵ Lobengula may well have sought to maintain a fine balance between being seen to be taking what was believed to be a necessary precaution on the one hand, and avoiding any direct targeting of white travellers, and thereby incurring any consequent risks with external powers, on the other. This was a difficult balance to achieve, and Lobengula's capacity to do this was not constant. Whilst big game hunting in the region was already becoming popular by the time of Oates' arrival there, popular accounts by big game hunters, such as Frederick Selous' work *A Hunter's Wanderings in Africa* (1881), really opened the floodgates of metropolitan interest.⁵⁶ Thus, whilst Lobengula might have had some success during Oates' time in southern Africa, by the 1880s it became increasingly difficult for the king to balance the competing demands of white hunters and of Ndebele factions unhappy at the hunters' growing intrusion.

In addition to the ways Ndebele external and internal relations determined the subtleties of Lobengula's engagement with Oates and other Europeans, we can also discern hints of the ways Lobengula utilised Oates for the same purposes. Oates was caught in the middle of dynamic relationships between the Ndebele and their neighbours, and relationships that were not as one-sided as Oates' conception of Lobengula's authority naturally suggested. For instance, in spite of continued Ndebele raids, Kalanga authority remained predominant in some areas, wherein Kalanga worked with Ngwato as spies or played Ngwato and Ndebele

⁵⁴ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *The Ndebele Nation*, pp. 74–78.

⁵⁵ Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 187, 208; Tabler (ed), *To the Victoria Falls via Matabeleland*, pp. 36–37, 70–72.

⁵⁶ Angela Thompsell, *Hunting Africa: British Sport, African Knowledge and the Nature of Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), pp. 1–2.

off against each other, thereby maintaining some autonomy and avoiding the enforcement of loyalty to the Ndebele.⁵⁷ Oates missed details of the relationships between Lobengula and his neighbours, just as he had missed the subtleties of Lobengula's position within Matabeleland, and of Lobengula's position with Europeans.

Despite this, Oates did not simply play a passive role in this diplomatic story, being co-opted by some African elites to assist in the management of inter-ethnic interactions. Travellers such as Oates were used as a communications channel between, for instance, Lobengula and Ngwato settlements. Whilst at Shoshong, Oates was asked by Kamane (son of Sekgoma and brother to Khama) via another white trader to intercede to stop Ndebele raids and 'tell the Matebele ... that he wishes for peace and to [speak] with them'.⁵⁸ This could have been because using a European as a proxy reduced the chance of being killed in Ndebele territory, or because sending an intermediary made one look stronger, or because Kamane bought into ideas of European military strength or neutrality as a possible aid to his own struggles against Lobengula. Regardless of the complexities beyond our view, we can see enough to conclude that, in Oates' vision of Kamane's Ngwato supplication, the European missed the ways African elites used him as a conduit for complicated diplomatic games played above his head (Fig. 3.1).

Similarly, there are hints in what Oates records that Lobengula might have taken the opportunity to use Oates to extend his authority domestically beyond the king's immediate proximity without Oates fully realising how he was being utilised. Oates left for Inyati from Bulawayo in late September 1873 on his first attempt to reach the Falls with a principal guide called Matlauli (sometimes spelt Macloule or M'cloule in Oates' diary), a cousin of the king and nephew of Mzilikazi. Having to wait a few days at Inyati whilst recruits were sought, Oates was informed by Matlauli that the induna could not recruit any of the promised carriers. Matlauli advised that carriers could be gained by going back to Bulawayo, but also revealed after questioning that, Oates writes, 'he would not have been hired to go but had no choice in the matter and must go with me, as the King had told him'. The risk of fever so close to the onset of the rainy season was readily apparent to Oates, with one of his other guides

⁵⁷ Msindo, *Transformations*, pp. 43–5, 49.

⁵⁸ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 25 April 1874, 9 June 1874.



Fig. 3.1 William Oates, sketch of mission at Shoshong. Reproduced with permission from Gilbert White's House Museum, Selborne

telling him that he would have to 'go [through] hell and damnation' to get to the Zambesi.

Yet Oates, frustrated by having to abandon his first attempt to reach the Zambesi in time, instead became occupied with the apparent insubordination, conspiring, and prevaricating of the induna and his guides.⁵⁹ After carrying out his own enquires, Oates determined that the induna had not sent for recruits at Inyati and began to 'suspect my own chief man [Matlauli] of plotting' with the induna to scupper the attempt to reach the Zambesi. Believing that Lobengula should be informed of his

⁵⁹ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 29 September 1873, 1–3 October 1873; Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 69–71.

suspicious, Oates sent messengers to tell the king that he suspected the induna, complaining that the king's order to provide carriers was not being followed, and sought permission to hunt in the surrounding area.

In some senses Oates' perception of Lobengula's sway over the people and territorial expanse of Matabeleland was shared by other Europeans. A Ndebele guide called 'Gleite' appointed by Lobengula to travel with another traveller, Henry Stabb, sought to simultaneously assert Lobengula's authority over San peoples in what is now the Hwange district of Zimbabwe through extracting tribute. This impressed upon Stabb that Lobengula's authority extended far beyond his presence. Similarly to Oates, Stabb did not reflect on this further, even when faced with situations that demonstrated the limits or contingencies of Ndebele authority. His Ndebele guide, for instance, would intercede to stop Stabb escalating a dispute over a goat, relying on the presence of Gleite to do so, into a conflict not worth staking Ndebele authority over.⁶⁰ What is particularly notable with the case of Oates, however, is that his recourse complaint to the king highlights his central belief in the absolute authority of Lobengula, whilst playing the role of an informant *for*, rather than just complainant *to*, Lobengula. The induna and Matlauli's lack of ability and/or willingness to recruit carriers demonstrates the difficulties Lobengula had in ensuring orders were being followed by deputies beyond his immediate presence, and Lobengula's response (as recorded and seemingly accepted by Oates) did not seek to draw attention to this. Instead, Lobengula emphasised the fear of fever around the Zambesi as the reason it was difficult to find recruits. Lobengula also provided Oates with more carriers straight from his capital, and permission to hunt.⁶¹

Lobengula, meanwhile, took the episode as a signal that he needed to keep a tighter rein on his deputies and Matlauli later confided to Oates that he could no longer go with him as a guide to the Falls because, Oates wrote, 'the King does not wish him to go again with me, also he must get back to his fields'.⁶² Beyond this example, we are limited by what Oates records. We nevertheless see further evidence of Lobengula pushing to assert himself whilst Oates was in Matabeleland. Oates recorded in May 1874 that Lobengula 'has killed a lot of his Indunas for telling him what

⁶⁰ Tabler (ed), *To the Victoria Falls via Matabeleland*, pp. 138–180, 165–166.

⁶¹ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 5 October 1873.

⁶² GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 6 December 1873.

he must do. Bengula says he will show them who is king'.⁶³ We see Oates failing to look beyond this understanding when writing home about an encounter with a 'rebellious induna' who had survived an execution on Lobengula's orders in late July 1874. Oates reasoned that 'if they presume too much on their authority they are put to death without much trial. Some of them would be insufferable in their conduct to white men if the king did not keep them in order'.⁶⁴ Entries such as this are typical of how little Oates reflected on his initial understanding of Lobengula's authority and its implications for the political dynamics of the Ndebele nation.

Yet in what Oates chose to record, we see that he understood the assertion of Lobengula's authority not as a contingent part of a wider politics of the Ndebele nation in the wake of a turbulent succession, or the consequence of tensions created by the presence of him and other Europeans, but as an inherent feature of an archetypal African kingdom. Such features, he felt, facilitated and validated his own presence in southern Africa. For Oates, that connection was a test of the enforcement of the transaction he believed he was engaged in. Like other white figures in Matabeleland, whenever Oates came into conflict with his guides or indigenous peoples, he believed that recourse to Lobengula's authority as the guarantor of his presence in Matabeleland was always sufficient to subdue such conflicts in his favour. When a pay dispute with one of his guides arose, for example, the offer of having it judged before Lobengula was utilised by Oates to quell it.⁶⁵ When confronted by a small group of Ndebele men he 'told them if they had anything against me to go to the King, and all seemed settled quietly... I knew the king was not likely to go against me, even if the worst came to the worst'.⁶⁶ On occasions where Oates did place disputes before the king, such as over the pay of one of his carriers, Lobengula did little to live up to Oates' expectation that he would always decide in his favour.⁶⁷

Regardless of this, the intensity of Oates' belief that Lobengula's principal interest was the security and privilege of European travellers

⁶³ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 20 May 1874.

⁶⁴ Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 209; GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 3 August 1874.

⁶⁵ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 27 August 1874.

⁶⁶ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 24 May 1874.

⁶⁷ Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 112.

increased to the point where Oates may well have felt somewhat invincible against challenges to his presence in Matabeleland. Oates believed, for example that, despite Ndebele threats against them, his non-Ndebele guides and carriers had little to fear because ‘the king holds everything belonging to white men sacred, and his people dare not commit any violence on Kaffirs protected by a white man’.⁶⁸ In another instance, Oates’ initial failure to notify an Ndebele impi that he had provided the requisite payment to Lobengula for permission to go to the Zambesi is indicative of Oates’ increasing belief in the inherent validity of his own presence in southern Africa.⁶⁹

CONCLUSION

Oates was evidently influenced by the accounts of white travellers who had encountered the Ndebele during the reign of Lobengula’s father, Mzilikazi. These invariably highlighted the dominant, martial power Mzilikazi was believed to have held over the Ndebele polity. Oates thus came to Africa preloaded with an expectation of Lobengula as a powerful, almost absolute ruler following in his father’s footsteps. The initial encounter with the Ndebele state and with Lobengula himself seemed to live up to these expectations. This, in turn, cemented in Oates’ mind the idea that Lobengula’s authority over people and place could be transacted into a tool that Oates could use to traverse Matabeleland. Since, in Oates’ mind, all that mattered was Lobengula’s power, further observations or reflections about the dynamics of political power in the Ndebele polity became redundant.

Yet the formation of Oates’ understanding of Lobengula as king of the Ndebele is not as straightforward as Lobengula seemingly conforming to an archetype of African kings produced within the British cultural imagination. It was also framed by what Oates sought to gain from his encounter and relationship with Lobengula, namely that he sought to transact his passage through Ndebele territory to make it to the Zambesi and on from there to the Falls. But crucially, it was the ease with which this was seemingly achieved during their first meeting that definitively

⁶⁸ Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 185.

⁶⁹ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diary, 7–8 September 1874; Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 198–199, 214–215. [The published account neglects to mention this detail.].

established, in Oates' mind at least, Lobengula as the hegemonic figure whose word was sufficient to guarantee the desired outcome. With this transactional understanding of their relationship, the subsequent problems Oates faced on his first attempt to reach the Falls did not dispel the idea of Lobengula's absolute authority, nor did it force him to negotiate his traversal of the region with a greater degree of attention to the political and social intricacies of the Ndebele nation. The problems instead reinforced it.

Oates' understanding of the encounter was, of course, partial and oversimplified. As far as can be discerned from the extreme limitations of the source material, Lobengula had a firm grasp of how to manage Oates. Lobengula's careful management of the initial meeting was a well-rehearsed process of presenting himself in such a way as to assert his authority and, in a sense, deliberately live up to white expectations of kingly authority. But beyond this, doing so configured encounters with white travellers to extract as much advantage as possible, namely through utilising them to advance Lobengula's own ends. This is evident in the ways Lobengula sought to assert his authority beyond his capital through figures such as Oates, using him as an informant to monitor the actions of his subordinates. We see Lobengula being even more assertive through the course of 1874, which is perhaps indicative of his growing confidence that he could act in such a manner without Oates recognising quite what was happening.

We also catch glimmers of the internal politics of the Ndebele nation soon after Lobengula's ascension. We see that Lobengula was, by and large, more secure in his position in 1873 than he had been two or three years previously, yet had to remain constantly vigilant for potential threats. The spread of disease amongst cattle was of considerable concern throughout Oates' time in Ndebele territory, and here Lobengula faced a particularly acute challenge. The king had to carefully manage domestic discontent fuelled by fears that the increasing white presence was to blame on the one hand, and on the other guard against the potential risks of targeting whites in a manner antagonistic to the neighbouring colonial powers. Lobengula's authority, though in the ascendancy after a difficult succession, still needed to be cultivated and reinforced in the face of a precarious balance of emerging challenges.

Yet we see little sign of Oates adjusting or reframing his understanding of the nature of Lobengula's hold over the Ndebele nation in light of circumstances that did not fully conform to this understanding. Nor do

we see any reflection of how Oates' own presence in southern Africa might have impacted the internal dynamics of the Ndebele polity. Having distilled his relationship with Lobengula to a simple transaction, Oates led himself to maintaining an understanding of kingly authority that was, ultimately, self-serving in justifying the inherent validity of an increasing white presence in Matabeleland.

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The Emotional State and Knowledge Production

Abstract Furthering our focus on the fragilities and contingencies at the heart of colonial knowledge acquisition, we consider the role of Oates' changing emotional state in how he took on evidence from the outside world and processed this as understanding. We assess Oates' sense of self-fulfilment and the way this led to changes in his interactions with the African landscape and the peoples within it. We consider how one episode that affected Oates' sense of self-esteem led to a radical reconfiguration of his relationship with Lobengula. We also consider the intersections between the power of telos and of specific encounters in explaining what changed within the hitherto risk-averse Oates that led to the sudden 'dash' for the Falls and his death.

Keywords Frank Oates · History of emotions · Telos · Self-esteem · Specimen collection · Self-fulfilment

So far, we have considered the ways Oates recorded his engagement with Africa and Africans without always being able to fully comprehend the peoples he was travelling amongst. In this chapter we shall explore a little further why this was. At various stages, we can see in Oates' diaries and letters prejudicial thinking typical across the accounts of white travellers in Africa. But there is a complicating factor at work. The somewhat

defiant tone of Oates' writing was not simply the result of a straightforward racist belief in white superiority and of a faith in Lobengula's authority—as powerful as these were to Oates' thinking—but was also the consequence of a certain emotional state. This state is an important factor to consider, especially in its impact upon how information about Africa was being processed as knowledge. Evident in Oates' writings, and his unpublished diaries in particular, is an emotional frailty and volatility. This is at odds with how explorers of Oates' time are sometimes understood. The edited, published portrait sought to smooth away some of this. As an endeavour, this seems to have been met with success in Oates' case, given one contemporary reviewer of the final book felt Oates possessed 'all the best qualities of a plucky Englishman'.¹ The unpublished materials, however, show a much greater degree of fluctuation in Oates' mood, fluctuations with profound implications for the way he engaged with Africa.

This chapter will examine these fluctuations and assess their influence on Oates' ability to process information, his engagement with Africa and Africans, and his broader understanding of his purpose in southern Africa. Though his preconceptions of Africa were important, we note that Oates' diary reveals a clear, conscious self-awareness as to why he held these preconceptions, and that his fluctuating emotional state could dramatically alter how he understood and responded to what he encountered. There were nevertheless limits to this self-awareness, and as many other European travellers experienced, the mundanity of waggon travel gradually wore down and eventually broke down his receptivity towards and relationship with those Africans who accompanied and encountered him. But we also argue that there were a number of contingent reasons for the changes in Oates' ability to process and understand information during his time in Africa. We note a very particular episode between Oates and Lobengula which was to dramatically alter Oates' opinion of Lobengula and the nature of his intentions and power over the Ndebele polity. Lastly, we examine the reasons Oates abandoned his previous caution to make a 'dash' for the Victoria Falls, which serves as a means for assessing Oates' ability to process information from different sources. In large part, we argue that this process was influenced, on the one hand, by a growing and overbearing power of telos over Oates and, on the other, by a series of

¹ C. G. Oates (ed), *A selection from the notices*, p. 8.

chance encounters that propelled him to make his ultimately fatal journey to the Falls.

FULFILMENT AND OATES' STATE OF BEING

Oates' emotional state was naturally shaped by a range of factors. For our understanding of Oates and of how his understanding of Africa developed, the most pertinent of these factors centre on what he felt about whether or not his expectations and understandings of Africa were being met. Lacking interest in much of the interior lives of Africans, Oates' measure of Africa came in large part from his perception of the flora and fauna around him. When it came to wildlife, Oates' desired naturalist activity did not lie in the minutiae of classification. With his interest in hunting, a key determinant of his emotional state was how far a promise of bagging big game was being fulfilled.

Prior to his arrival in Africa, Oates had a strong preconception of southern Africa as verdant and brimming with large reserves of wildlife. His reading provided a clear steer. He made extensive notes on the hunting accounts of Europeans who preceded him in Africa, such as James Chapman, William Stanley, Thomas Baines, Richard Burton, William Baldwin, Charles Payton, and David Livingstone.² In contrast to his lack of interest in most other topics connected to Africa that such Europeans commented on, hunting was evidently a facet of their narratives that excited Oates the most. In the written record available to metropolitan Victorians, the region into which Oates would travel lived as an embodiment of a more generalised African abundancy. The area around Tati, where Oates spent the most amount of time, had been described by an early missionary, Reverend Thomas Morgan Thomas, as containing innumerable wildlife.³

Oates encountered large amounts of wildlife in certain regions. In August 1874, he recorded seeing a large herd of hundreds of quagga and wildebeest in the area around the Ramokgwebana river.⁴ Similarly,

² GWHM, OA 10, 2007.195, Notebook; Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 15–17 December 1873.

³ Thomas Morgan Thomas, *Eleven Years in Central South Africa* (London: John Snow & Co, 1872).

⁴ It is possible, potentially probable, that Oates confused quagga with zebra. His entry for 20 September 1874, for example, reads: 'Tonight, as last night, sat at Brown's talking.

during the approximately two months he spent hunting around Inyati in October and November 1873, Oates' diary entries come alive with details. These details are not just of hunts of elephants, hyena, snakes, and quagga, but also of his engagement with the landscape and his African guides and carriers. Descriptions of 'fine... Park like country, [with] trees bursting into brilliant green',⁵ 'sweet perfumes from flowering shrubs',⁶ and 'excellent' fruits show Oates at his most ebullient.⁷ Such descriptions accompany entries on Nelson's discussions of Mashona huts cited above and the rare recording of some of the names of individual carriers accompanying Oates; we learn he was accompanied by 'Sukelana' or 'Skukilana', 'Semimclua', 'Moqueula', 'Echle', 'Tom', and 'Sam'.⁸ That Oates only really went as far as acknowledging his carriers' names shows any sudden or belated consideration of them as individuals worthy of note in his diaries is relative. Beyond their names, we also gain limited glimpses of their internal lives and beliefs. During a lunar eclipse, Oates records that Ectli, a 'native hunter', 'did not like to see it' after briefly looking at the eclipse through a telescope, a hint at the wider folklore, mythology, and religious significance of the Moon within indigenous cultures.⁹ Nevertheless, Oates' receptivity to his African guides and what he openly considered their 'wonderful knowledge of the locality' was directly influenced by his emotional state and his sense that he was fulfilling his purpose in southern Africa.¹⁰ When he sensed he was achieving what he set out

We discuss some questions in natural History. B. says the true zebra, tho' scarce, is found here and distinguished from the quagga by being stripped down to the hoof, and the stripes all over being black, whilst in the quagga they are brown. I however don't think it all. He may have noticed a difference which exists between male and female, or old and young quagga.' GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 20 September 1874; see also GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 12 August 1874; Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 194.

⁵ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 19 October 1873.

⁶ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 7 October 1873.

⁷ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 29 October 1873.

⁸ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 23 October 1873, 24 October 1873. The faintness of these entries makes the spelling of names difficult to discern.

⁹ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 3 November 1873; Alan Barnard, *Hunters and Herders of Southern Africa: A Comparative Ethnography of the Khoisan Peoples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 83–84, 252–255.

¹⁰ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 9 November 1873.

to do, he was at his most enthusiastic or receptive towards those he felt were supporting this.

But this enthusiasm for the region, and this commensurate relative level of receptivity, were not constant, because Oates' environment was not a constant. The region did not remain a fixed Eldorado for those keen to collect animal specimens. There had been a retrenchment of wildlife in southern Africa from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards, and from the early nineteenth century onwards in particular.¹¹ But this retrenchment intensified just prior to Oates' arrival. The enthusiastic accounts on the region's abundance would contribute to making the region less abundant. Economic factors also played a part. Africa's earliest gold rush began around Tati in 1867. This resulted in a significant escalation of Europeans in the region. Over 250 went out in 1868–1869 alone. Whilst these prospectors were drawn to the region for the purpose of rare metal mining, they also pursued hunting opportunities whilst there, the intensive nature of which meant that large amounts of wildlife were killed or frightened off.¹²

It is therefore easy to see both why Tati appealed to Oates, and why he was so disappointed once he got there. Armed with heightened expectations of southern Africa's potential as a site for untrammelled hunting adventure *en route* to the Falls, there was much that Oates found wanting. This tarnished even his engagement with instances of abundance, as their rarity compounded his sense that he had just missed the perpetual sense of spectacle and opportunity after which he sought.¹³ Even when in August 1874 he encountered large numbers of wildebeest in the area around the Ramokgwebana river, this was tainted with a sense of what could have been:

for the first time I seem to realize some of my old visions of S[outh] African sport. ... It was a beautiful sight. ... It was a scene such as I used to fancy must be common, and which probably was so when the accounts I have read were written, and may occur often still in more remote districts.¹⁴

¹¹ MacKenzie, *Empire of Nature*, ch.4.

¹² Quick, 'Early European involvement in the Tati District', p. 30.

¹³ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 29 August 1873; Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 29–30.

¹⁴ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 12 August 1874; Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 194.

This entry could not provide a clearer illustration of the impact of Oates' preconceptions of southern Africa on his sense of fulfilment once there.

Oates was consequently in a low mood for much of the journey and given to introspection. As Oates' reference to 'a scene such as I used to fancy must be common, and which probably was so when the accounts I have read were written' suggests, Oates had the self-awareness to recognise that such visions of what Africa was had been directly inspired by earlier European accounts. Similarly, Oates demonstrated an awareness that his perceptions were heavily determined by his emotional state. This was also shaped by his sense of the aesthetics of his environment. After the often-picturesque scenes of the southern African veldt painted by European texts, Oates again became disappointed by his reality. He did not generally enjoy southern Africa as a visual spectacle. As Terence Ranger points out, Oates' perceptions of and emotional response to, for instance, the Matopos—with its balancing granite rock formations, ancient rock art, and indigenous religious significance—were fleeting and fluctuating.¹⁵ That southern Africa was not a 'nice' or 'pleasant' place through which to travel became self-evident to Oates; one evening, he wrote 'Lovely evening as we trekked, but after all it is South Africa, and one cannot feel poetical'.¹⁶ Oates' self-awareness comes through in diary excerpts such as where he suggests that the landscape was 'sadly dull and monotonous, and I believe the influence is a bad one, and the loss of scenery has a depressing effect on the spirits. One's imagination is never called into play'.¹⁷ Such self-awareness was such that he recognised inconsistencies in his own aesthetic judgement. In October 1873, after a day trip that left him 'hot and uninspired', upon his return to where he was camped he felt 'The view looked very grand when I came to the place out of the thick bush, but today it disappoints me'.¹⁸

But there were limits to this self-awareness. Before arriving in Africa, Oates was readily familiar with the idea that the mundanity and burdens of travel infringed upon any idealised and romanticised preconceptions.

¹⁵ Ranger, 'Making Zimbabwean Landscapes: Painters, Projectors and Priests', *Paideuma: Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde* 43 (1997), pp. 59–73.

¹⁶ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 5 September 1873.

¹⁷ Oates, *Matabele Land*, entry from 4 September 1873, p. 46.

¹⁸ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 30 October 1873.

Whilst travelling across the Americas, he wrote that St. Louis, Missouri, ‘has rather disappointed me as I had always had a romantic idea of it as the capital of the west’.¹⁹ By the time he reached Colorado in November 1871, rather than having begun ‘a very great episode in my career’, he found that ‘things are becoming very matter of fact to me’.²⁰ As it did for some other mid-late nineteenth-century travellers, the monotony, mundanities, and slow pace of waggon travel in Africa quickly impressed themselves on Oates. Less than two months into his travels in southern Africa, he was already writing home declaring that ‘one day here is almost exactly like another, and the country hitherto the same day by day’.²¹ Oates’ focus on aesthetic and topographical continuities meant his experience of the landscape was defined as either lacking in excitement or, at least, development. This sense of continuity must have been compounded by the anticipation of difference at the point of arrival at the Falls; until this point, Oates felt he was biding his time with landscapes that were principally to be passed through. This constituted a necessary commitment on the way to what promised to be the emotional release of witnessing the Victoria Falls’ splendour at his journey’s conclusion.

This all shaped the way Oates engaged with the overwhelming majority of the African landscape and indigenous peoples.²² Although his brother’s edited collection suggests Oates was quite happy to travel slowly between Bulawayo and Tati after gaining leave from the king to hunt in early 1874,²³ his unexpurgated diaries demonstrate a frustration with slow progress. He was, for instance, irritated at being stopped by ‘imprudent’ women and children looking to sell tobacco, mealies, mile, salt, and Rhinoceros horn. This is despite the fact that Oates welcomed such goods at other points on the trek.²⁴ After over a year in southern Africa, and still yet to achieve his goal of reaching the Falls, Oates became, as he put it, ‘wearied out principally with worry and the dissatisfaction of finding time

¹⁹ GWHM, OA 108, 2007.1963, Letter written from St. Louis to unknown, [Oct 1871].

²⁰ GWHM, OA 115, 2007.1972, Frank Oates to William Oates, November 1871.

²¹ Oates, letter home, 27 June 1873, in Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 13–4.

²² Jeffrey A. Auerbach, *Imperial Boredom: Monotony and the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

²³ Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 116.

²⁴ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diary, 27 January 1874.

so miserably wasted'. With his propensity to introspection, he added that 'Partly I admit the fault is with me, or rather my temperament'. But he focused his frustrations on the 'Packing, unpacking, stooping, watching lest things are stolen, and having one's patience tried in buying off the niggers, putting up with their disagreeable presence and impudence, to say nothing of the annoyances one is subjected to by one's own servants. I am not patient or industrious enough for waggon life'.²⁵

Frank's brother Charles hid from public view some of the impatience that Oates displays in his diaries. He had cause. After all, stoicism became an increasingly key component of literary and political conceptions of imperial masculinity in the last third of the nineteenth century.²⁶ In spite of his brother's literary efforts, we can see Oates was clearly frustrated by this point. It seems that, even whilst on his way to the Victoria Falls, Oates was already looking to the next 'adventure'; Oates' brother certainly evokes a restless individual seeking something of a 'more ambitious kind' upon returning from the Falls, whilst his other brother William's letters to him toyed with plans for a second trip to parts of Africa 'where no white men had been and abounding in game'.²⁷ Not only does this suggest restlessness, it also compounds the sense that Oates already registered his trip as a failure of sorts, and that he next sought to improve on it to ensure Africa might yet live up to his own expectations of it.

EMOTION AND OATES' ATTITUDES TOWARDS AFRICAN GUIDES

When and where his sense of fulfilment was lacking, the fragility of Oates' already limited receptivity to his African guides becomes apparent. In contrast to his first six months in southern Africa, Oates' attitude towards his African guides became more impatiently domineering. Early in his travels, his brother William had suggested that 'The niggers are idle and insolent. It is said the only way to treat them is to thrash them well, and though we have never resorted to this, I have often felt inclined to do

²⁵ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 20 August 1874; Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 197.

²⁶ John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 174.

²⁷ Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. xxxv; GWHM, OA 109, William Oates to Frank Oates, 15 March 1874, 2 June 1874.

so'.²⁸ By 1874, that line between intention to cause violence and acting on this intent disappeared. Whilst violence was of frequent importance to the maintenance or performance of white authority in the modern era, what is particularly notable is how willing Oates became to use corporal punishment, and to do so off the cuff and with little premeditation. He struck one guide with a whip 'for laughing at me', 'knock[ing]' a 'disgusting servant' after they were 'bothering [Oates] for a snuffbox', and getting 'too angry' with his guides when they were unwilling to go hunting (despite several successful hunts in the days before).²⁹ This was despite both Oates' limited self-reflection (he had become 'too' angry) and his recognition of the futility of such actions. The use of force, Oates reasoned, 'is supposed to attach a boy to you. The worst of it is none of my boys are much afraid of me'.³⁰ Oates' violence was bound up in his adherence to other travellers' suggested methods of conduct; the use of force was 'supposed' to strengthen his relationship with his 'boys', and it was thought problematic to anger those outside of one's own party. A traveller who, in Baines' words, wishes to pass peacefully on his way, ideally sought to be 'as far as possible, in friendship with all he meets'.³¹

Oates' violence was not simply an innate outcome of a performance of white supremacy. It was for some; the accounts of the white traveller John Duncan suggest habitual violence towards his African guides was intimately connected to his own ideas of racial superiority.³² Instead, for Oates it was a particular expression of such supremacy as shaped by his emotional state, namely his highly and repeatedly frustrated state of mind. Oates striking those who were within his travelling party, or venting his anger and frustration with the world beyond his travelling party in his writings, were both expressions of his powerlessness to bend his journey to suit his demands. 'Demands' here is multifaceted. We are considering demands both in terms of time—Oates' wish to make this an efficient transactional relationship with the continent of Africa—and in terms of

²⁸ William Oates, letter, 1 July 1873, in Oates, *Matabele Land*, p.13.

²⁹ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 31 January 1874, 20 August 1874, 16 August 1874.

³⁰ Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 153–154.

³¹ Baines, *Explorations in South-West Africa*, p. 96.

³² John Duncan, *Travels in Western Africa, in 1845 & 1846, Comprising a Journey from Whydah Through the Kingdom of Dahomey to Adofoodia, in the Interior*, Vol. I (London: Richard Bentley, 1847), pp. 154–163.

stimulation—Oates' desire to witness landscapes and engage in interactions that accorded with his expectations of Africa as exotic or exciting, rather than as rendered familiar or mundane from repetition.

This attitude subsequently shaped the ways information from his guides was interpreted. Over time, entries in Oates' diary noting knowledge gained from his guides became more sporadic and demonstrate an evolving perception of Africa. Whereas earlier entries describing indigenous fruits, for instance, imply knowledge gained from his guides,³³ later entries show Oates picking and eating fruits without input from his guides. These later entries also show a developing meaning of his engagement with indigenous flora; 'With cultivation', he wrote about one such specimen, 'I think it would make a fine fruit'.³⁴ Whilst this can be attributed to Oates' growing confidence in his own abilities, the corollary of this and of his growing antipathy towards the Africans with whom he travelled meant Oates became increasingly suspect of any reliance on his guides as the principal means of getting to the Falls.

At the same time, Oates was facing troubles in retaining the Africans necessary to keep the waggons moving. Oates had employed John as a waggon driver and interpreter since September 1873. Whilst camped at Tati in July 1874, John began to have doubts about the prospect of safely making it to the Zambesi. He refused to continue to accompany Oates. This was likely because of the threat of disease. Simultaneous threats by three of Oates' African carriers to abandon him, taking guns as payment, imperilled a July 1874 attempt to reach the Falls before the onset of the rainy season.

That is, until a German trader interceded and offered to guide Oates instead. Christoffel Schendehutte (recorded as Stoffel Kennedy or 'Stoffles' by Oates) had previously made it to the Falls and, according to Oates, 'knows the country well'. Aside from knowing where the 'poison-plant' and tsetse fly was located, Oates' impression was that Stoffel was 'to all intents and purposes an Englishman'. Thus, Stoffel became another valued intermediary, to be celebrated on the basis of apparently shared cultural codes, a celebration heightened on the basis of Stoffel's standing in as a means of Oates' reconnection with home by proxy at a point when

³³ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 18 October 1873, 23 October 1873, 29 October 1873, 4 November 1873.

³⁴ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 11 February 1874, 20 February 1874.

the Englishman was increasingly weary of his environment. Furthermore, Stoffel's appearance at this later point in Oates' time in southern Africa afforded him a special importance in Oates' eyes because it coincided with and reinforced Oates' diminishing receptivity to information, especially from Africans, that would seemingly hinder progress to the Falls.³⁵ By October 1874, his receptivity to African company had diminished to the extent that Oates, writing home, regarded the 'loathing with which I regard these people is in itself sufficient to deter' his moving through the more heavily populated parts of the region. Africans, Oates believed, were increasingly considered an obstacle to his long-standing object of being in—and drawing a sense of value from being in—Africa.³⁶

EMOTION IN OATES' REAPPRAISAL OF LOBENGULA

In Chapter Three, we discussed the positive way Oates initially appraised his relationship with King Lobengula. This was to change. The influence of Oates' emotional state, combined with certain specific events, caused shifts in Oates' understanding of Ndebele politics. Crucial here is the impact of a humiliation by Lobengula. After the first failed attempt to reach the Zambesi, Oates lingered around Bulawayo from 5 December 1873 to 26 January 1874. As summarised by his brother, this was on account of heavy rain, 'trouble with his servants', and to watch the 'Great Dance' of the *inxwala*.³⁷ Throughout that time, Lobengula pressured a reluctant Oates into exchanging ivory for his horse as an implicit condition for allowing Oates to depart for Tati.³⁸ Further exchanges of muskets for ivory took place, but Oates' persistent requests to return to hunting in the area surrounding Inyati reportedly irritated Lobengula. 'He was very crusty', Oates writes, 'and asked if I wanted to die. I told him I would take my chance ... However, he said, if I wanted to die, why could I not die somewhere else, and not in his country, and made so many difficulties I

³⁵ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 16–20 July 1874; Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 188–190.

³⁶ Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 221–222.

³⁷ Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 92.

³⁸ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 8 December 1873, 12 December 1873, 22 December 1873, 24 December 1873.

had to give it up'.³⁹ When it came time for Oates to deliver his horse and depart, Lobengula asserted that the saddle and bridle should be included. Initially resistant, Oates sought to sell them separately for 35 and then 25 ostrich feathers, again irritating Lobengula: 'He said I was always asking for feathers and he had after told me he had not any. I told him I wanted them for the English girls. What did I want with the girls? I chaffed in return but it came to nothing'.⁴⁰ Oates felt forced to concede. He gave Lobengula the saddle and bridle. Yet upon departing, Oates recorded his 'great annoyance [Lobengula] has offered me no present, after accepting the saddle from me. I consider this very mean, as the saddle and bridle were worth £10 or £12. This leaves an unfavourable impression on my mind'.⁴¹

In giving up a valuable item for seemingly such little return, Oates' understanding of his relationship with Lobengula as fundamentally transactional in nature suffered a considerable blow. Even though Lobengula would not have necessarily been aware of this, Oates was low on resources and the lack of reciprocity greatly exacerbated the intensity of Oates' frustrated reaction. Yet Lobengula had gone further than this. Lobengula had also targeted and mocked Oates in the Englishman's efforts to enact the explicitly performative masculinity that powered so much nineteenth-century exploration. Oates would have been only too aware of the Victorian enthusiasm for ostrich plumage as part of a woman's wardrobe. Such 'fashion feathers' acted as powerful signifiers of aristocratic wealth and opulence.⁴² In his efforts to source these goods to gift women on his return home, Oates was obviously seeking that which would allow him to demonstrate his masculinity in a way he felt would earn these women's approval. On receipt of the feather, they would have a reminder of Oates' supposedly daring endeavours in an Africa that remained highly exoticised in the metropolitan imagination. The reference to Lobengula's chiding would be omitted from *Matabele Land*, but it seems that this aspect of the encounter had just as strong an impact

³⁹ Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 142.

⁴⁰ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 21 January 1874, 22 January 1874.

⁴¹ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 23 January 1873, 26 January 1873.

⁴² Robin W. Doughty, *Feather Fashions and Bird Preservation: A Study in Nature Protection* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975), p. 18.

on Oates' attitude as the king's taking of the saddle and bridle.⁴³ Lobengula was unafraid to mock, and in so doing he may also have pressed at another sensitive topic—Oates' status as a bachelor in search of a wife.

Given the nature of the source base, we must take care to not engage too heavily in pop psychology. Nevertheless, the episode evidently had a profound effect on Oates and he continued to dwell on this encounter with Lobengula for the remainder of his time in southern Africa. On the one hand, Oates' reflections reinforced certain aspects of his assessment of Lobengula. Given Lobengula had been able to exercise his authority over Oates, Oates' sense of the Ndebele king's authority over his own people was confirmed. Oates continued to believe Lobengula ruled 'with an iron rod', holding sway over all before him. On the other hand, whereas Oates had initially seen Lobengula's authority as aligned to white interests, having been on the receiving end of the king's rhetorical barbs, Oates now cast Lobengula as the central antagonist malevolently conspiring against Oates achieving his aim of making it to the Falls. Writing to his brother in January 1874, Oates had begun to retrospectively reimagine that it was in fact 'the king [who] was at the bottom of' why no carriers had been forthcoming when he had first attempted to reach the Falls the previous October. He had originally understood this lack of carriers to be because of the risk of disease. The circumstantial risks, he now came to believe, had only been 'partly' to blame. Instead, Oates felt he could have made it to the Falls 'had I not trusted ... [Matlauli] the man given me by the king'. Lobengula, Oates felt, had been controlling his progress through Matlauli.⁴⁴ By July 1874, Oates no longer considered Lobengula the perfect example of a decorous king keen to administer to European needs on a transactional basis. Oates now concluded that Lobengula was 'little better than the generality of Kaffirs, and certainly I have experienced anything but generous treatment at his hands—indeed scarcely fair play'.⁴⁵

Thus, the circumstances that triggered the breakdown in the relationship between Lobengula and Oates, when combined with pre-existing prejudice, left few routes for Oates' sense of the king to go. Oates

⁴³ Tosh, *A Man's Place*, Part Three; Tomás Bartoletti & Bernhard C. Schär, 'Formative Spaces of Empire: Masculinities and Outdoor Experiences ca. 1860–1960', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 52:2 (2024), pp. 215–230.

⁴⁴ Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 141.

⁴⁵ Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 187.

reassured himself by being equally sure that, rather than seeing Oates' persistence as something of a nuisance, Lobengula was still 'very much afraid of anything befalling white men in his country, either from sickness or any other cause'.⁴⁶ But the consequence of this desire meant Oates considered Lobengula's attitude to the Englishman's journey differently. Where once Lobengula was understood as motivated by a desire to do what it took to ensure Oates' safe passage through his territories, now the king was felt to possess a supposedly misguided desire to protect Oates from the dangerous implications of such a safe passage. Emotionally exposed, where he had seen reciprocity, Oates now saw conspiracy.

THE POWER OF TELOS

But Oates' emotional responses to Africa and to Africans did not simply shape how he understood their impact on him and his travels. A further complicating factor that shaping his progression through Africa was the power of telos. More specifically, his desire to reach the Falls, which had naturally always been there, would now as 1874 progressed grew into an all-consuming, aching desire. After many months in the area, Oates could suppress this desire no longer and acted on it at speed. Oates headed in the direction of the Zambesi at the start of December 1874, arriving at the Falls on 1 January 1875. On his return journey, Oates contracted a fever and was dead a little over a month later.

This sudden dash for the Falls goes against so much of what we understand of Oates' approach to travel in Africa up to that point. The decision requires further investigation because it was so out of keeping with the received wisdom he had maintained, and maintained quite fervently. Since early in his trip, Oates had been led to understand that a visit specifically to the region immediately surrounding the Falls, and specifically during the time of rains between January and March, would be a visit during 'the really bad season'.⁴⁷ It was received wisdom amongst Europeans in the 1870s that this was the very worst time to be travelling through the subtropical Zambesi region *en route* to the Falls. Various Europeans, such as a trader in Tati, had 'very strongly urged' Oates not to pass through

⁴⁶ Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 221–222.

⁴⁷ Oates, *Matabele Land*, 5 October 1873, p. 71.

the subtropical Zambesi region—which lay between Oates and the Falls—during the rainy season.⁴⁸ The constraint of roughly a quarter of each year being off limits for travel to the Falls did not initially present itself to Oates as a major problem. After all, it left the majority of the year still intact. At any rate, Oates had commenced his travels in a rather risk-averse frame of mind. He was quite calculated in weighing up his chances. ‘If I find that I am delayed and cannot reach the Falls as quickly as I had hoped’, Oates had written home six months into his travels, ‘I shall very likely turn back without accomplishing my object, as I am desirous not to run any foolish risks’.⁴⁹

Considering Oates’ own poor health since childhood, this risk aversion is wholly understandable. Having abandoned his degree at Oxford, Oates had withdrawn from society when his health deteriorated after repeated respiratory infections. He was highly aware of the limitations of his own body. He would also have been highly aware of broader consequences of falling ill in Africa. In the late nineteenth-century European mind, contracting a fever such as malaria or trypanosomiasis came wrapped up with broader fears. The development of germ theory from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards led to an increased confidence in British society that Western science would increasingly effectively diagnose and treat disease.⁵⁰ But concerns remained as to what would happen if one actually did fall ill. Worries about the negative impacts from disease contracted in tropical or subtropical environments were tied, at mildest, to fears that this would leave one more open to tropical neurasthenia, which might involve ennui, anger, ‘nerves’ and other forms of behavioural change.⁵¹ It was also considered a source of emasculation, threatening imperial masculinity, with bestselling authors of the day such as H. Rider Haggard considering malaria the blight of racialised ‘others’, and not the

⁴⁸ Gelfand, *Gubulawayo and Beyond*, p. 106; GWHM, OA 109, William Oates to Frank Oates, 12 October 1873.

⁴⁹ Oates, *Matabele Land*, letter home dated 25 September 1873, p. 65.

⁵⁰ Dane Kennedy, ‘The perils of the midday sun: Climatic anxieties in the colonial tropics’, in *Imperialism and the Natural World*, John Mackenzie (ed.), (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 120.

⁵¹ Anna Crozier, ‘What was tropical about tropical neurasthenia? The utility of the diagnosis in the management of British East Africa’, *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 64:4 (2009), pp. 518–548.

truly hardy, plucky Englishman.⁵² At worst, tropical illness could lead to insanity—in popular and medical culture of the Victorian period, fevered states of consciousness arising from fever could slip over into madness.⁵³ Oates' sense of his own physical limitations and of the potential implications of the environment through he was seeking to pass would have doubtless combined in his head to present travels through the region immediately surrounding the Falls at the 'wrong' time as constituting the single biggest risk to his safety in southern Africa. And yet, where caution had previously prevailed, Oates now chose at the end of 1874 to head to the Falls. Why?

Oates' brother Charles put a positive spin on the decision. Charles informed *Matabele Land's* readers that Frank's experiences in 'this two years' travel, must still have further convinced him ... of those evil effects of attempting too many things, which his Oxford career had previously warned him of.⁵⁴ He would no longer, Charles suggested, be sidetracked by anything else, but return to a purity of intent. But whatever the gloss, compounding this was an evolving attitude towards what constituted a 'successful' trek. In the earlier stages of his time in southern Africa, Oates appeared reconciled to the possibility that he might not make it as far as the Falls. In a letter to his brother in October 1873, Oates said he had 'given up the expedition', noting 'It is annoying to have so narrowly missed the grand end of my travels in S[outh] Africa, but perhaps it is for the best so I make the best of it and expect the day after tomorrow to leave here for the elephant country'.⁵⁵ This is coming off the back of the aforementioned letter the month before, in which Oates noted that any delay would see him turning back, and that he was 'desirous not to run any foolish risks'.

But he would not abandon the idea. By April the following year, he was again intending to head for the Falls, writing home to say that he was prepared to wait a few months to go to the Zambesi en route to the Falls because 'I did not like the idea of leaving the country without

⁵² Jessica Howell, *Malaria and Victorian Fictions of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), chap. 2.

⁵³ Emilie Taylor-Pirie, *Empire Under the Microscope: Parasitology and the British Literary Imagination, 1885–1935* (Cham: Palgrave, 2022), pp. 201–2.

⁵⁴ Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. xxxv–xxxvi.

⁵⁵ GWHM, OA 111, Frank Oates to William Oates, 5 October 1873.

accomplishing my object'.⁵⁶ Here, we can see his resolution to reach the Falls growing across 1874. Indeed, Charles Oates may have had a hand in encouraging this attitude, replying that 'I think you are quite right to go on to the Victoria Falls ... anything is better than leaving the country without seeing them—that is if you can do so without any intolerable bother or much danger'.⁵⁷ Regardless of whether or not he felt any peer pressure from his sibling, Frank did not at this point consider a few months delay was sufficient to necessitate turning back. Oates maintained a cautionary approach, but this cannot mask a rather notable shift in tone. The longer Oates spent in the region, it seems, the more a sense that he needed to reach the Falls to vindicate his trip only intensified. This intensification of a particular emotional urge speaks to the inextricable connections between state of mind and the creation of knowledge.

First, we might turn to Oates' growing impatience. Oates sensed a difference in approach to his journey from the Africans around him; changes in his sense of time and purpose both informed and were reinforced by his growing sense of disconnect from his guides. That Africans had a different approach to time was not an uncommon attitude amongst European travellers of the era who wrote of the 'pain' of 'inaction', powered by a commonly held racialised frustration that Africans did not march to the same sort of beat.⁵⁸ One explorer of West Africa of the 1850s had spoken of Africans' 'want of appreciation of the value of time',⁵⁹ whilst in 1862, Baines told Africans he encountered close to the Victoria Falls that 'our time is not like theirs, of no value, and that we cannot afford to waste it without an object'.⁶⁰ So too did Oates write in February 1874 of his frustrations of the 'slow' movements that depended on 'the caprice of natives' that, seemingly, could only be rectified with 'severity'. Yet at the same time, early in 1874 Oates considered the achievement of his goal of reaching the Zambesi 'would repay one

⁵⁶ Oates, *Matabele Land*, letter home, 16 April 1874, p. 154.

⁵⁷ GWHM, OA 109, Charles Oates to Frank Oates, 3 July 1874.

⁵⁸ James Hamilton, *Wanderings in North Africa* (London: John Murray, 1856), pp. 220–1.

⁵⁹ Thomas J. Hutchinson, *Impressions of Western Africa* (London: Longman, 1858), p. 259.

⁶⁰ Baines, *Explorations in South-West Africa*, p. 479.

for much sacrifice of time and patience'.⁶¹ But the time spent without achieving his goal was beginning to weigh on his mind. By the July of 1874, he was reflecting that 'after all the time I have spent in order to get to the Zambesi... the best thing would be to embrace' any opportunity that might arise to finally make it to the Falls.⁶²

Why? Was this growing impatience due to shortness of funds? Oates was indeed perpetually mindful of his limited resources, but if his actions were in part fuelled by a sense of dwindling funds, Oates still had sufficient means to employ over a dozen carriers for his final attempt in December 1874.⁶³ Was this growing impatience simply an inevitable tendency in all explorers? To be sure, his impatience was, in one sense, typical of nineteenth-century European attitudes towards time and travel—he wanted progress in order to achieve his goal and be recognised for it. But we are still faced with the suddenness of Oates' *volte-face* in the wake of his previous aversion to heading for the Falls during the rainy season. Evidently, we need to be more precise as to Oates' reasoning. We will start by considering the evolution of what Oates considered to be his purpose in Africa.

A DWINDLING SENSE OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR FULFILMENT

In Oates' case, the shift to an urgent 'dash' for the Falls was tied to his sense that he had now done all else he set out to do in Africa. By the time we get to later in 1874, Oates' sense of purpose was weighing on him. He had 'completed' his self-allocated task of collector. This was collection of a particular sort. Oates was not so much a collector of information; given what we have seen so far of Oates' interactions with Africans generally, of his diminishing consideration of knowledge from Africans over time, it will come as no surprise that he was not interested in acting as an amateur anthropologist. This set him apart from those European who spent extended periods of time with a particular community, facilitating the creation of the sort of anthropological study that powered imperial

⁶¹ Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 125.

⁶² Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 189.

⁶³ On Oates' financial situation see, for example, OA 115, Oates to mother, 25 July 1872; OA 111, Frank Oates to William Oates, 17 April 1874.

knowledge in colonial Africa.⁶⁴ Indeed, given Oates' low assessment of the places of southern Africa through which he passed, he was never particularly interested in spending time in any one place. Instead, this was about collecting various types of specimens.

But when it comes to the collection of physical items, by late 1874, Oates had no real need of more animal and plant remains. To be sure, the collection of more ivory would increase his wealth. Yet despite Oates' sense that southern Africa was not the place of abundance he had initially expected, by late 1874 he had spent a long time in the region, and so had cumulatively ended up doing plenty of hunting. He had collected hundreds of bird, insect, plant, and reptile specimens, particularly during the extended periods of 1874 he had spent in between various aborted attempts to reach the Zambesi. Even by the rather rapacious standards of the time—Frederick Selous recorded a total of 548 head of game shot over a four-year period—later collectors seeking rare specimens of their own in the same area as Oates considered him thorough in this regard.⁶⁵

The one notable exception that by late 1874 still eluded Oates was the collection of physical remains, namely human bones. Oates' education had exposed him to scientific and pseudo-scientific discourse on anatomical variation and racial hierarchy. Even though he was not interested in nuances and the details of anatomical study, a generalised desire to contribute to scientific understanding through collecting remains of San peoples and removing these to Europe, as many travellers did before and after him, may well have enhanced his sense of purpose to his time in southern Africa.⁶⁶ Whilst Oates was visiting John Lee's farm in September

⁶⁴ Helen Tilley with Robert J. Gordon (eds), *Ordering Africa: Anthropology, European Imperialism, and the Politics of Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

⁶⁵ Frederick Selous, *A Hunter's Wanderings in Africa* (New York: Macmillan, 1907), p. 497; Tabler (ed), *Zambesia and Matabeleland in the Seventies*, p. 49.

⁶⁶ From Oates' collection, see M. Milne Edwards, R. Knox (trans.), *A Manual of Zoology* (London: Henry Renshaw, 1856), pp. 174–178, 245–252; R. G. Latham, 'Varieties of the Human Species', in *The Circle of the Sciences: A Series of Treatises on the Principles of Science, With Their Application to Practical Pursuits. With An Introductory Discourse on Object, Pleasures, and Advantages of Science by Henry Lord Brougham, Vol I: Organic Nature* (London: Griffin, Bohn, and Company, 1860), pp. 305–376; Arthur Mangin, *The Desert World* (London: Nelson and Son, 1869), pp. 514–517; see also Patrick Harries, 'Warfare, Commerce, and Science: Racial Biology in South Africa', in Nicolas Bancel, Thomas David, and Dominic Thomas (eds), *The Invention of Race: Scientific and Popular Representations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 170–182.

1873, they had discussed a service Lee seemingly provided in locating and delivering skeletons for export on behalf of hunters and traders. Initially referring to rhinoceros' skeletons, Oates records in his diary that Lee 'would not mind boiling down a bushman for me—he would cut him in two'.⁶⁷ This brief entry, omitted from *Matabele Land*, does not provide details of whether Oates had enquired about such a service, or whether Lee was advertising this service in the belief that Oates would be interested. Even though Oates did not take up Lee's offer—which may of course have been a form of joke made in extremely poor taste—Oates evidently became increasingly interested in acquiring human remains. Upon hearing of a group of San peoples killed in 1873 by a Ndebele raid, by the time Oates was back at Lee's farm in the February of the following year he began 'arranging a foray' to retrieve them.⁶⁸

Yet it would not be until mid-November 1874, just over two weeks prior to his decision to head for the Falls, that Oates happened upon San remains between the Tati and Ramokgwebana rivers, northeast of modern Francistown on the Botswana-Zimbabwe border.⁶⁹ Oates took the remains of at least six individuals from the site.⁷⁰ This episode reveals important tendencies. The first of these is that the delay in recovering the remains likely contributed to Oates' diminishing receptivity towards Africans as reliable interlocutors and guides. The second of these is that Oates' search is evidence of the power of such a goal over Oates, to the point where he showed a notable lack of awareness of the wishes and interests of those around him. Oates did not reflect on the validity of, and controversy surrounding, such a goal. His attempts to recruit African guides who could take him to the remains were unsuccessful, in his eyes,

⁶⁷ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 6 September 1873.

⁶⁸ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 11 February 1874, 13 February 1874, 18 February 1874.

⁶⁹ The location, in DMS coordinates, is given as Latitude South 20° 54', Longitude East 27° 42' (In decimal degrees, Latitude -20.9, Longitude 27.7). It is not clear which side of the modern border they were taken. We do not know the names of the individuals, or exactly which group or community they belonged. Oates, *Matabele Land*, Appendix I: Ethnology, p. 275.

⁷⁰ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 15 November 1874; Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 232–233, 275. The present location of each of these remains is hard to discern, but one adult cranium held at the Oxford Museum of Natural History under reference Zoology. ZC-23277 was collected by Oates.

because of their preference to go hunting; Oates was unable to understand why recruiting African guides for the purpose of acquiring human remains might not have been an attractive prospect for them.⁷¹ Word of Oates' intentions had spread, and when confronted by a Ndebele man asking 'What business was it of *mine* [Oates] to visit the bones?' and a threat to 'complain of my conduct to the king', Oates did not reflect on what he believed to be an inherently valid pursuit.⁷² Neither did he pause for thought when his European guides were equally reluctant. Oates had to persuade, by way of offering 'shares in the profit', his 'lukewarm' and 'nervous' Dutch driver Van Rooyen—evidently aware of the risks and controversy of doing so—to guide him to the location of the remains.⁷³

THE 'DASH' FOR THE FALLS

The power of telos over Oates' (in)ability to process information and in shaping his sense of purpose in southern Africa is also of significance when we consider it in the context of his decision to make a dash to the Falls. After retrieving the human remains, Oates may well have felt something akin to a vindication of the belief that he could still achieve his goals despite warnings of risk or danger from those interlocutors who provided Oates with information about the region. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, after his 'success' in recovering San remains, most of the means by which Oates might have claimed a successful expedition had thus been accomplished or fallen away. All that remained was to make it to the Falls. It burned all the brighter now that the human remains had been collected. In Oates' mind, Africa could now no longer be enjoyed even in small part as a sensory experience, it was never really a place from which to learn, and now it was no longer an environment he had to be in of necessity in order to collect things. What, then, was there left to do?

At the same time as Oates made a 'dash' to acquire the human remains in November 1874, he had been deliberating for some time over whether to make a 'dash' to the Falls during the onset of the rainy season. Two

⁷¹ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 18 February 1874; Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 136–138.

⁷² GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 24 May 1874; Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 166–168.

⁷³ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 15 November 1874; Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 232–233.

additional cumulative factors are most apparent in shaping Oates' ability to come to a decision on whether to go to the Falls. As previously noted, the lack of elephants in the areas surrounding the Tati river—blamed by Oates on the presence of San peoples—meant that, even laden down with specimens as he was already, he thought there was little to be gained from remaining to wait out the rainy season to bag more lucrative ivory.⁷⁴ Whilst this lack of opportunity now meant less to Oates' sense of self than it might have done earlier in his journey, the lack of big game hunting opportunities caused disquiet amongst Oates' remaining African guides. Two of Oates' guides, Memoka and Umfanimbozi, began demanding early release and payment, further jeopardising the likelihood of Oates being able to make it to the Falls.⁷⁵ All of this served to break down the influence of the intermediaries who had advised against travelling to the Falls during the rainy season.

This is despite the fact that Oates was provided with plenty of evidence that travelling to the Falls at this time markedly increased the risk of serious malarial infection. Van Rooyen, employed by Oates since May 1874, had 'tried to dissuade' an attempt to reach the Falls that season, and less than a week before Oates departed for the Falls, he encountered a hunting 'party of Griquas' who reported 'sad tales of the Zambesi fever, of which many of them have died'. This group planned to wait out the rainy season, Oates recorded, at a spot that was 'comparatively healthy' before heading back to the Zambesi in April or May—a plan rejected by Oates on at least one previous occasion for involving too long a delay.⁷⁶ After departing, Oates noted he had met two European hunters, escorted back from the Falls by a doctor. One of the hunters was 'still very sick, deaf, and weak, and can scarcely eat anything. He says fatigue, hunger, and sickness, and the impossibility of keeping dry was fearful'.⁷⁷

Oates' letters home from December 1874 read as though Oates was trying to convince himself just as much as he was those back home that all would be well. He wrote of how it was actually the period between

⁷⁴ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 24 October 1874, 21 November 1874.

⁷⁵ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 30 October 1874, 2 November 1874, 6 November 1874, 23 November 1874.

⁷⁶ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 13 November 1874, 25 November 1874; Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 226–228.

⁷⁷ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 24 December 1874.

February and April that was the dangerous season, and that it ‘seems to be’ that ‘people moving about are better off than those who have to remain stationary in one place’.⁷⁸ Despite the fact that Oates’ papers record repeated insights into the dangers of fever around the Zambesi, during this period he suppressed any negative reflections as to the implications of any travels to the Falls for his own personal safety, pursuing his remaining goal in a manner out of keeping with his previous attitude.

In this instance, serendipitous encounters with other white hunters added urgency and potency to the power of telos over Oates’ decision-making. Oates had received permission from Lobengula to hunt around the Shangani river on 19 October 1874, but the arrival of several groups of hunters at Oates’ camp at Tati alluringly promised the possibility of hunting elephants and other big game around the Zambesi, *en route* to the Falls. One group had ‘bagged’ 12 elephants, including one with tusks weighing 60lbs each, whilst another had hunted elephants and successfully made it to the Falls.⁷⁹ But when at the beginning of November Oates was offered the chance to head straight to the Falls, returning by the end of January to ‘get out long before the really unhealthy time begins’, Oates was still ‘in some perplexity’ as to what to do.⁸⁰ Even this late on, Oates remained split between his desire to get to the Falls and his residual desire to avoid an increased risk of illness.

His indecision would not last. On 2 December 1874, Oates met two men just returned from the Falls, one of whom was the aforementioned hunter Frederick Selous. When considering if Oates should head to the Falls immediately or wait until the rains had ceased in April, the pair suggested the former. The risk of fever, they explained, would not be as great, and Oates could ‘easily’ move quickly to spend as little time as possible in dangerous areas.⁸¹ Selous was by all accounts a rather larger than life personality, so although in 1874 he was in the relative infancy of a long hunting career, there is perhaps a case to be made that the

⁷⁸ Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 248.

⁷⁹ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diary, 21 October 1874, 26 October 1874, 31 October 1874.

⁸⁰ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates’ Africa Diary, 3 November 1874, 14 November 1874.

⁸¹ Oates, letter home, 2 December 1874, in *Matabele Land*, pp. 240–241.

force of his personality helped make Oates' mind up for him.⁸² Oates' diary provides scant detail as his thoughts after meeting Selous, but from what limited insight is available of their conversation, Oates was evidently taken by this advice. He departed in the direction of the Falls the very next morning. Given his deteriorating opinion of his African guides, and Africans more generally, the 'very competent advice' Oates believed he had received from another Englishman highlights Oates' prejudicial disposition.⁸³ It also plainly demonstrates Oates' confirmation bias; a susceptibility to any information that in the face of all others proffered the hope that he might yet achieve his main aim in southern Africa.

In addition to this chance encounter, the chance recruitment of one of Selous' guides to aid Oates' journey to the Falls highlights some of the developments in Oates' engagement with Africa. Similarly to Hendrick and Nelson, John Mackenna (or Makennie, as Oates spelt it in his diary) was a man from the Cape whom Oates would rely on as principal guide to get him to the Falls. Not being of the Ndebele nation, whilst still being knowledgeable of the region and the road to the Falls from his experience as a guide and waggon driver to white hunters, travellers, and traders,⁸⁴ Oates' description of Mackenna as 'a coloured individual, certainly, but [he] appears a very intelligent and capable fellow' points to the narrower and selective criteria by which Oates chose intermediaries and engaged with the information they provided.⁸⁵ But his choice would likely have been shaped by his sense of Mackenna as a service-provider with whom the goal of getting to the Falls could be transacted. Where previous attempts to transact safe passage with a seemingly untrustworthy Lobengula had failed, here was a knowledgeable intermediary, vetted by Selous, whom Oates felt could offer safe passage. This frame of mind at a moment of heightened tension and deliberation greatly simplified the achievement of Oates' ultimate goal to a transaction with a service-provider, making it seem as if his onward journey through to the Falls was all but guaranteed.

⁸² See, for example, 'A mighty hunter', *Hampshire Telegraph Supplement*, 27 October 1900, p. 1.

⁸³ Oates, letter home, 2 December 1874, in *Matabele Land*, p. 242.

⁸⁴ Tabler (ed), *Zambezia and Matabeleland in the Seventies*, p. 132.

⁸⁵ Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 241–242.

Unlike how he had been with Hendrick and Nelson, however, Oates was far less receptive to Mackenna's guidance. They disagreed, for instance, on how far they should follow fresh elephant spoor into an 'unhealthy' area, and fell out over Oates' decision to continue trekking from, rather than waiting at, the Deka river in order to reach Pandamatenga, the final stopping point before the on-foot trek to the Falls. They also fell out over Oates' decision to ignore an induna's demand they camp with them before proceeding to the Falls.⁸⁶ Oates instead recalled Baines as an authority for navigating a potentially dangerous African landscape, writing in a letter home that he thought 'Baines is said to have stated that he would rather be on the Zambesi in January, the height of the rainy season, than in May'.⁸⁷ Oates recalling details he had read from the accounts of other white travellers was accepted over the word of an African intermediary who acknowledged practical limitations, dangers, and negotiations with local elites over access, all of which might have inhibited big game hunting or delayed the onward journey to the Falls. Oates was gripped by a burning desire to achieve his goal and was no longer in any mood to listen.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary readers of the carefully curated *Matabele Land* envisaged Oates as steadfast in the pursuit of his goals and a reliable travel companion. Yet Oates' unvarnished diaries reveal that his engagement with Africa and Africans was heavily shaped by his fluctuating emotional state. Initially, the single biggest determinant of Oates' emotional state was whether or not his expectations of being able to hunt abundant big game or encounter aesthetically appealing landscapes were met. These expectations had been invariably informed by those accounts of white travellers he had enthusiastically read prior to and during his time in Africa, and there was a very strong correlation between these expectations being filled, his emotional response to Africa, his openness to engaging with Africans, and his demonstration of such receptivity through his recording of details about them in much greater depth.

⁸⁶ GWHM, Transcript of Frank Oates' Africa Diary, 17 December 1874, 21 December 1874, 22 December 1874; Oates, *Matabele Land*, pp. 251–252.

⁸⁷ Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 248; GWHM, OA 10, Notes on Thomas Baines, *Explorations in South-West Africa*; Baines, *Explorations in South-West Africa*, pp. 390–419.

What is perhaps particularly noteworthy here is that these changes occurred even though Oates possessed a degree of self-awareness of the limitations of his own perceptions. Oates was conscious of the influence of his preconceptions of Africa and how he acquired them and was explicitly aware of how his fluctuating emotional state directly impacted how he perceived his surroundings. And yet despite this, there were nevertheless limits to this self-awareness, and Oates' diaries reveal that he became increasingly ground down, in large part by the mundanities of waggon travel through southern Africa. One of the consequences of this was a significant decrease in his receptivity towards Africans and information from them. As we have seen, Oates' own racial prejudices played a role here. But there were other factors at work. The extent to which he was isolated from other whites or the extent to which his sense of purpose was fulfilled correlates with his receptivity towards information from Africans, and this was especially the case whilst Oates was hunting around Inyati. His deteriorating attitude towards Africans was, in many respects, dependent on the proximity and availability of other white travellers from whom he increasingly preferred receiving information—especially when it helped align with his broader goals or came from those with whom he felt a personal, national, or cultural affinity.

One of the other notable consequences of Oates' fluctuating emotional state was his altered understanding of his encounter with Lobengula. Though Oates maintained his sense of Lobengula as a powerful figure, a dispute over a saddle eventually altered Oates' sense of whether Lobengula was, in the terminology of the time, a 'friend of the white man'. That this might strike one now as a small matter only serves to highlight the role of unforeseen events in changing perceptions one might assume were fixed firmly in amber by racial prejudice. Furthermore, Lobengula's toying with Oates forced the latter to question what constituted a 'successful' trip to Africa. This was a question that weighed increasingly on Oates' mind through 1874 as a result of his repeated inability to make it to the Falls, and the declining opportunities for him to live up to his expectations of his time in Africa constituting the start of a career as an explorer and naturalist.

The culmination of these pressures and contingencies played a crucial role in altering how Oates was able to process information about his surroundings. This, it is clear, played an influential part in Oates' decision to make the fateful 'dash' to the Falls during the rainy season, despite the known and evident risks of doing so. The chance encounters that finally propelled Oates to the Falls built on the increasingly shifting ways Oates was able, and not able, to process information about Africa.

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Conclusion

Abstract We pull together points from across the preceding three chapters to consider pressing matters in imperial historiography. We evaluate the complexities that lay beneath Frank Oates' racism, as well as the roles played by contingencies and African agency, in explaining the traveller's sense of the Ndebele and King Lobengula. We also consider the broader implications of this case study for what it tells us about late Victorian British imperialism. We finish by looking to what happened next, with the destruction of an independent Ndebele nation and the coming of empire.

Keywords Race · Historiography of empire · Agency · Contingency · Colonialism · Imperialism · Southern Africa · Matabeleland · Rhodesia

Let us return to the question posed at the very start. How does one come to know a place one has never visited before? And how do we as historians make sense of the processes by which this happened? In considering how knowledge was constructed in nineteenth-century Africa, we obviously need to grapple with the actions of European travellers. We need to consider their encounters, and the lives of those with whom they interacted, doing so largely armed only with the records these Europeans left behind. Developing these assessments has been possible when the archive

as a collection of materials (constructed, in this case, by Oates and his immediate family) is read in a particular way. There are, of course, clear limits about what this archive can reveal of the perspectives of Africans. The archive is emblematic of the frustrations historians must navigate when left with an imperfect, one-sided record that omits innumerable details of encounters on the colonial frontier. And yet, with careful reading of what fragments remain, certain aspects of the nineteenth-century European-African encounter can be reconstructed on a more equitable footing. To achieve this, the pattern of omissions we might observe within the archival record is as much an important component as the pattern of inclusions. Furthermore, the brevity of parts of the record highlights areas where Oates recorded but did not fully see or comprehend what he encountered, but that can nevertheless be reconstructed from our modern vantagepoint.

Consequently, whilst what follows is necessarily partial, we hope that we have demonstrated that the sources can meaningfully be examined not as the basis for another biography of a Victorian traveller, but as the basis for a meaningful interrogation of the encounters, negotiations, and contingencies that powered the development of meaning and understanding on the borders of empire, at the point where the 'pre-colonial' was rapidly becoming the 'colonial'.

Let us also return to the 'r' word, again noted from the outset as the most obvious starting point in determining how Oates understood (or did not understand) his encounters. Oates was racist, in that he believed in the innate superiority of white Europeans over the other peoples he encountered in southern Africa in the 1870s. After Oates' arrival in southern Africa in April 1873, these prejudices were initially reinforced by the European communities he met in Cape Town, Durban, Pietermaritzburg, and elsewhere. They were then further shaped by Oates' relationships with varied intermediaries who played a key role in his liminary engagement with southern Africa.

RACISM'S VARIED FORMS

But if Oates' racism was the consequence of attitudes developed prior to arrival in Africa which were then seemingly confirmed by his experiences of Africa, this is only the beginning of how we should seek to understand the processes by which Oates came to consider Africa and Africans, rather than the end. It is apparent that racism encouraged different people

to run in different directions. For some, it powered an intense desire to classify, rank, and measure in painstaking (though obviously completely misguided) detail. Hence the rise of pseudo-scientific racism, closely intertwined with practices such as a global rise in phrenology over the course of Oates' lifetime.¹

But this was not what Oates was interested in. Racism did not spur Oates to a frenzied pursuit of racist classification. Racism led Oates down a different path. Oates was no traveller-scholar. His intellectual life beyond the matter of race or the matter of Africa shows us this general predisposition. In keeping with this, a low opinion of Africans did not power in Oates further reason to investigate the inner lives of those he judged inferior. Quite the opposite. Racism could instead be used by Oates to justify a certain type of intellectual laziness. It generated a disinclination to look further. Oates generally did not consider or perceive Africans themselves as having interior lives that as an outsider he might seek to gain access to through close engagement. The sense of Africans as simple and inferior that racism created in Oates' mind pre-empted any need for him to countenance the possibility that he was interacting with complex and dynamic societies. Racism could therefore be used to vindicate, to Oates' mind, an approach to his travels that accorded with his broader *modus operandi*.

And there are further specificities in Oates' character that perhaps help explain why he was predisposed to approach Africa in a certain manner. Oates' archive—his childhood drawings, his letters, the books he read—is full of evidence that, like many in mid-nineteenth-century Britain, he had been enthralled by the possibilities for adventure in parts of the natural world less well known to Europeans, and that he saw further opportunities to advance something of a career for himself in scientific discovery. This predisposed him to consider engagement with Africans as ancillary. The non-European world more generally, as an exotic other, was the arena in which Oates sought to make his name. His journey through the Americas prior to his arrival in southern Africa is testament to this. The travels we have considered in this book were the consequence of the region being one of the latest to come under a European gaze at just the moment Oates was seeking a new avenue for his passions. Oates' pressing imperatives were to hunt game, collect natural history specimens, and make it

¹ James Poskett, *Materials of the Mind: Phrenology, Race, and the Global History of Science 1815–1920* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

to the Victoria Falls, rather than to seek to understand more about the people and societies he encountered.

Consequently, Oates was only interested in Africa and Africans insofar as he could extract something from it and them. At various points during his journey across southern Africa, Oates leant on these prejudices when these expectations for a career-defining African adventure were not met (insofar as they ever *could* be met). This was especially the case with regard to the effects of the mundanity of waggon travel, the lack of success in hunting, repeated failed attempts to reach the Falls, and the perceived intransigence of Africans which Oates believed was to blame for many of his woes.

AFRICAN AGENCY, CONTINGENCY, AND THE IMPERIAL ENCOUNTER

But these predispositions are only part of the story in explaining the forms of knowledge produced at the nascent colonial frontier. This book has emphasised that, though certain attitudes Oates brought to southern Africa played a role, the nature of the encounters that led to knowledge creation on the colonial frontier were shaped as much by the inherently contingent form these encounters took as they were by any predetermined nexus of an imperial, white European ‘us’ and a subjugated, African ‘them’. In Oates’ case, his liminary engagement with Africa and Africans was heavily shaped by intermediaries who acted as principal sources of information for much of Oates’ time in Africa. The informality of Oates’ relationship with them, their shared cultural cues, and crucially their status as individuals embedded in African society, rather than being derived from it, meant the information they provided was readily and eagerly processed by Oates. Their key influence lay in presenting a macro picture of the region that would go on to frame Oates’ ability to understand the Ndebele polity and society, whilst also helping demarcate other sources of information—principally his African guides and Africans he encountered—into sources that provided Oates with micro information necessary to facilitate his journey across the region.

This is not to say that this highly channelled processing of information was an inevitable outcome of the white British traveller’s encounter with unfamiliar, unknowable peoples. As we have seen, there were moments where Oates was able to adapt, or at least partially modify, his understanding of and engagement with Africans. Spending time away from

other Europeans whilst hunting with his African guides created opportunities for Oates to be able to debate with them about the ecology of the region, to gain a glimpse of their belief systems, and to form a relationship in which they challenged the colonial leadership mentality Oates had imagined himself taking. Yet there were also limits to his ability to do this. Where he did find out about Ndebele and San peoples through direct engagement with some of those he encountered (albeit, in the case of the latter, only after having spent nearly a year in Africa), he shows no evidence of doing the same with African women he encountered—especially with prominent and significant women such as Mncengence. That Oates came to accept certain ways of viewing Matabeleland and its surroundings through his serendipitous encounters with intermediaries in whom he placed trust—when other views were available from those of the Ndebele nation—highlights just how contingent his accumulation of understanding was, rather than being solely filtered through a preconfigured gendered, racial, or colonial lens.

Such contingencies also had a considerable influence in shaping Oates' understanding of his encounters with King Lobengula of the Ndebele. Oates did share in the European perception of African kings such as Lobengula as powerful figures of martial authority. It was a perception that he brought to Africa, introduced to him by the accounts of European explorer-hunter-missionaries who encountered Lobengula's predecessor, Mzilikazi. Lobengula's authority was perceived, as reinforced by the testimonies of Europeans Oates encountered in southern Africa, as ultimately geared towards friendly accommodation with whites who entered Ndebele territory. Oates also believed in the notion of Ndebele hegemony over Matabeleland, with Lobengula occupying a position of absolute authority over it and the peoples living there. At the same time, however, this belief was encouraged by the ways Lobengula managed his interactions with the outside world on the edges of Ndebele territory. The need for Europeans to seek royal permission to enter was particularly notable. Once at Bulawayo, the form of Lobengula's royal enclosure and the king's welcoming reception fed into Oates' preconceptions, with Lobengula seemingly living up to Western standards or expectations of African kingly authority. As a consequence of this initial encounter, Oates took their relationship to be of an entirely transactional nature. In exchange for firearms and ivory, Oates would be provided with guides, carriers, and, seemingly, be granted an unhindered traversal of Ndebele territory. Even when Oates encountered evidence to the contrary—and Oates received

plenty of this in the repeated challenges he faced in reaching the Falls—this belief in Lobengula’s absolute authority remained a consistent feature of Oates’ understanding of the encounter.

Yet Lobengula was actively complicit in maintaining the deception to outsiders that his authority was total. Lobengula’s evocations of kingly authority fell on Oates’ willing ears, helping create an enduring myth of the monarch in the mould of earlier figures such as King Shaka. But there are good grounds for why the king might have done so beyond a predictable and general desire to project one’s authority as a leader. Lobengula, coming off the back of a long reign by his antecedent father, took power through a messy accession. At a time of rapid transformations in Ndebele society and its relationship with an ever-encroaching colonialism, Lobengula was right to be wary of the increasing numbers of white travellers entering Matabeleland during the 1870s.

As conscious as Lobengula was of these risks, he was also conscious of the opportunities presented by people such as Oates—though not to the extent of merely providing a service to them, as Oates believed. The apparent informality of Lobengula’s initial meeting with Oates enabled the king to easily extract information about neighbouring territories, the spread of disease, and the wider politics of the region. Lobengula was therefore entrepreneurial in how he interacted with someone whose presence in his territory he had not instigated. Furthermore, Oates was used, without realising, as an informant for Lobengula as he traversed Ndebele territory to extract information about the actions of the king’s deputies outside of Bulawayo, and we see evidence of Lobengula becoming increasingly assertive in this regard through 1874, all whilst Oates remained largely oblivious to his own instigating and facilitating role.

Like many at the time, Oates suggested his capacity to navigate African terrain both mentally and physically and thereby attain his goals was dependent on the ‘caprice of the natives’.² This suggests a static ‘us’ in a straightforward relationship with a slippery and unfixed ‘them’. But Oates’ emotional and personal state was central to the contingencies that explain the understandings he developed from his engagements with Africa. The key influence here came at the intersection of an anticipated, imagined landscape evoked by the accounts of earlier white travellers,

² Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 125.

Oates' fluctuating aesthetical judgement on the topography, and the idea that the traversed landscape would crescendo in anticipation of the journey's goal, the Victoria Falls. Though Oates had enough self-awareness to realise that his emotional state influenced his responses to the people and places he encountered, this was not sufficient to challenge the romanticised, colonial ideals of Africa that had brought him to the continent. That his search for exciting adventure was central to his being there meant that, when this desire came up against the mundanity and boredom of travel, the disconnect fed a volatility towards his relationship with the Africans he encountered.

Yet we can go further in examining the contingencies that influenced his emotional state, and that subsequently impacted the processing of information on the colonial frontier. Two of these might only seem minor, but in their seemingly 'slight' nature, further compound the argument as to the power of contingencies in the development of Oates' attitudes. These were (1) a dispute over a saddle and bridle, and (2) an offhand but cutting comment Lobengula made whilst Oates was in Bulawayo which, without Oates immediately realising, sparked reflection on the fundamentals of why Oates was in Africa. The reimagining of Oates' initial encounter with Lobengula and the reasons for Oates' first failed attempt to reach the Falls had a significant impact on Oates' perception of Lobengula and the Ndebele polity. In this reimagining, Oates believed that Lobengula's authority over Ndebele territory was such that Lobengula had in fact orchestrated the initial failed attempt to reach the Falls. Rather than accept that there were limits to the king's power over his people and thus reevaluate his understanding of the Ndebele polity, Oates took to relying on and reinforcing a limited, self-validating understanding of his relationship with Africa and his reasons for being there. Rather than seeing himself as being confronted by an equal or better, which would have complicated his understanding of his relationship with Lobengula, Oates instead regarded the king's sole purpose to be to a service-provider to him and believed that the king's primary concern, borne out of fear, was to protect the interests of white travellers.

Furthermore, Oates' fleeting emotional state left him highly susceptible to the overbearing power of telos. His goal of reaching the Victoria Falls was, as we have discussed, the one that he brought to Africa, inspired by the accounts of figures such as Livingstone and Baines. This goal lingered in his mind but was not a constant. Instead, it grew in urgency and intensity the longer he remained in southern Africa. In doing so, his ability

to comprehend the risk of disease around the Zambesi became increasingly degraded. Oates had been justifiably risk-averse for much of his time in Africa on account of his poor health, and he had had several encounters that highlighted the extent of the risks he faced. Pushing against this, however, Oates felt emotionally exposed to the question of what constituted a successful trip to Africa. At a more personal level, Oates faced the question of what a Victorian man had to do to be considered the embodiment of a specific type of masculinity—the famous and successful explorer-naturalist. After months of uncertainty, a chance encounter with a somewhat notable personality in the form of Frederick Selous pushed Oates towards making the exceptionally late departure to reach the Victoria Falls. The forces that pushed Oates to make the ‘dash’ to the Falls exerted themselves both from the metropole and on the colonial frontier were powerful enough for Oates to judge it worth taking the risk, leading ultimately to his early death. What we have demonstrated here, in sum, is that the way figures such as Oates were able, or not able, to process information about Africa into knowledge was highly contingent on quite specific circumstances, which shaped their emotional and interpretative capacity to undertake such processing.

OATES’ AFTERLIFE AND THE RISE OF EMPIRE

The incomplete record of Oates’ time in Africa perhaps goes some way in explaining why it would take Charles Oates some time to compile, edit, and publish what would become the first edition of *Matabele Land and the Victoria Falls* in 1881, a full six years after Oates’ death. Even with such a partial record, there was nevertheless sufficient appetite for such works that would, as Charles put it, aid ‘the [increasing] number of our countrymen... who look to South Africa with a growing interest—whether as a land for colonization, exploration, or scientific research’.³ The ready reception *Matabele Land* received in the British press gives an insight into some of the ways Charles’ edits and omissions flattened the contingencies of Oates’ encounters and (mis)understandings of Africa and Africans that were then diffused into the broader currents of British interest in Africa.

³ Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. xii.

In particular, the explicitly masculine nature of exploration, hunting, and scientific endeavour was emphasised across several reviews to highlight Oates as an archetype for the idealised Englishman in Africa. According to *Field*, Oates had done ‘much more for the real upholding of the reputation of Englishmen in savage countries than professional civilisers and philanthropists’, whilst *British Quarterly Review* noted Oates as a ‘a typical example of the buoyant, enterprising English gentleman, whose pluck and high spirits carry him very far’, and *Nature* similarly regarded him as ‘a fine specimen of the English traveller, devoted to the pursuit of natural history, and gifted with indomitable perseverance and pluck’. Charles’ efforts to transform his brother from someone who could be a somewhat grumpy, tired, and frustrated traveller into the flawless personification of the opposite was evidently a success.

By holding up Oates as an exemplar of these traits, reviewers could thus push down Africans as objects of interest for, and potential nuisance to, the journey of an Englishman in Africa. Oates’ account, according to *Saturday Review*, took Victorian readers ‘far from the beaten track’ with a companion who could provide ‘intelligent observations of new scenes’ and treated the ‘natives’ mercifully, but was also ‘too sensible to credit’ those Africans he encountered with ‘unlikely and imaginary virtues’. *Modern Review*, giving a glimmer of recognition to the necessity of African knowledge and guidance that facilitated Oates’ time in Africa, noted the value of the account in providing ‘a good deal of insight into the manners and customs and general character of the people, both natives and settlers, on whose good will and service the traveller has to rely’.⁴ Within a format familiar to late Victorian audiences, *Matabele Land* fed into a metropolitan understanding of southern Africa as a region in which the most desirable qualities of white Europeans could be exercised and contrasted to the apparently less than favourable qualities of Africans.

Contemporary reviewers expressed admiration for Oates’ contribution to British scientific knowledge of Africa. The blending of the explicitly masculine, imperial, and scientific endeavour of Oates’ exploration of southern Africa particularly struck the *Illustrated London News*, which cast Oates as ‘almost a martyr to the cause of science in the flower of his manhood’. But it would be the appendices of *Matabele Land* that were emphasised as the work’s principal and unique importance, each based on

⁴ C. G. Oates (ed), *A selection from the notices*, pp. 1–8.

the human remains stolen and the bird, reptile, insect, and plant specimens collected over the nearly two years Oates spent in Africa. For the human remains, the appendix on ethnology written by George Rolleston, who lectured Oates at Oxford, detailed the measurements of six crania of those San peoples Oates had taken that fed into the development of phrenology. Apparent discrepancies between the measurements and features of the skulls compared to other human remains of San peoples held by the Oxford University Museum, however, could be explained away, Rolleston believed, by the possibility that ‘a runaway Caffre, or even outcast white man, may have betaken himself to some horde of Bushman’ to engage in what he called a ‘voluntary degradation’ of becoming ‘a savage and a half’. Such an explanation was, in many ways, emblematic of the desire to reinforce a circular, homogenised, hierarchical, and self-serving understanding of race that, as Rolleston put it, restored ‘the perfect circumscription which is implied in our speaking of the race as possessing well-defined limits’, limits which invariably placed white Europeans at the top of the racial hierarchy.⁵ Of the other appendices on ornithology, herpetology, entomology, and botany, the importance of the collection of specimens in the vicinity of the Zambesi River was especially noted given it was a region of Africa that, during the 1870s, was ‘*terra fere incognita*’ to British scientists.⁶

As interconnected as science was with empire in the nineteenth century, it was inevitable that in death, Oates could be called into the service of a more formal imperialism. In its presentation of Oates’ qualities and contributions, *Matabele Land* emphasised to British readers how there was still more for Englishmen to do in Africa. Oates’ life and death were readily slotted into a narrative establishing a trajectory of European interest bending towards an intensification of exploration as a precursor to colonisation. *The Times* lamented the loss of the ‘promise’ of what might have been in store for him had he not been ‘prematurely cut down before the real work of their lives is well begun’ and that his death was a ‘real loss’ to both science and exploration. This sentiment was shared by *Athenaeum* which believed that, had it not been for his premature death, Oates ‘might have taken a place amongst the leading African explorers’. It would thus be left to others, the *Manchester Guardian* noted, to read

⁵ George Rolleston, ‘Appendix: Ethnology’ in Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 287.

⁶ R. Bowdler Sharpe, ‘Appendix: Ornithology’ in Oates, *Matabele Land*, p. 298.

and act on Oates' account of a region which was in the process of being 'thrown more definitely open to English industry and enterprise'.⁷

But it was not only in Britain that *Matabele Land* found a receptive audience amongst those interested in exploration and colonisation. The *Cape Times*' review of the second edition of *Matabele Land* published in 1889, the same year that the British South Africa Company was chartered, noted its 'chief value as a description of the prehistoric condition of a settled land and the ways of a vanished barbarism', further flattening Oates' encounter with the Ndebele to deny the existence of an African history on the continent, whilst also proffering his book as a source of information about the Ndebele polity on the eve of the 1893 Matabele War.⁸

But Oates was not simply seen as the provider of knowledge. Oates' character was also considered a source of instruction as to how to live as a European on the colonial frontier, as well as a justification for so doing. Julie Bonello notes that, facing the shared threats of isolation, disease, and hardship, white settlers in Rhodesia sought instruction. Early white travellers served as useful exemplars of what a 1907 Rhodesian columnist called the 'sons of the nation who have weathered the stress of the pioneer enterprise', thus enabling the assertion of 'a more fervent desire to uphold those ennobling traditions of race'.⁹ And, in the wake of the conquest of Matabeleland in the 1890s, white settlers sought out figures such as Oates who, despite having no intention of settlement, legitimised white colonisation.¹⁰ In response to enquiries from the Oates family as to the location of Oates' grave, the Rhodesian Pioneers and Early Settlers Society were able to locate the site in 1934. The original gravestone, inscribed 'Frank Oates, FRGS, of Meanwoodside, Leeds, England; died 5th February 1875, aged 34 years', had been lost, but the Society installed a new iron cross and inscription which omitted Oates' original residence but included an addendum 'Pioneer & E.S. Society'. In doing so, Oates was claimed by the Society as their own, the Society adding him to those

⁷ Oates (ed), *A selection from the notices of Matabele Land*, pp. 3–8.

⁸ Oates (ed), *A selection from the notices of Matabele Land*, pp. 3–8.

⁹ Julie Bonello, 'The Development of Early Settler Identity in Southern Rhodesia: 1890–1914', *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 43:2 (2010), pp. 354–355.

¹⁰ J. L. Fisher, *Pioneers, Settlers, Aliens, Exiles: The Decolonisation of White Identity in Zimbabwe* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2010), pp. 1–2.

who, as its constitution states, ‘enabled Rhodesia to become a valuable addition to the British Empire’.¹¹

The conquest of Matabeleland and the establishment of Rhodesia in the 1890s would see the violent destruction of the Ndebele state that Oates had encountered in the 1870s. As we have seen, Lobengula had to delicately manage the balance between the opportunities and risks posed by the increasing white interest and presence in Ndebele territory, which in turn created tensions within the Ndebele polity, from the moment he became king. By the 1880s, Lobengula was in the ‘invidious position’ of seeking to maintain this balance as expansionist interest in the region, spearheaded by Cecil Rhodes, intensified.¹² The Moffat Treaty and Rudd Concession of 1888, which duped Lobengula into ‘signing away his territory and sovereignty and placed his territory and its people, as well as the people of Mashonaland over whom he had no jurisdiction, under British rule’, paved the way for a violent confrontation that Lobengula had persistently sought to avoid.¹³ Having been granted a Royal Charter to establish the British South Africa Company in 1889, the Pioneer Column sent by Rhodes to occupy Mashonaland, enforce the Concession, and establish white settlements was under the apparent approval and authority of the British state. Seeking to provoke Lobengula, Shona communities were discouraged from paying tribute and, under the pretext of an ‘incident’ near Fort Victoria (Masvingo, Zimbabwe), a column of settler forces launched a reprisal attack into Ndebele territory in October 1893. With superior firepower from the newly developed Maxim gun utilised to brutal effect at the battles of Mbembesi and Shangani, the capture of Bulawayo was swift. Company occupation followed, but the violent suppression of

¹¹ GWHM, OA 112, 2007.2458–2462, Correspondence relating to Frank Oates’ grave site. For a photograph of Oates’ grave, see ‘The naturalist Frank Oates who visited the Victoria Falls on 31 December 1874 and died only 36 days later of fever’, *ZimField-Guide*, URL: <https://zimfieldguide.com/matabeleland-north/naturalist-frank-oates-who-visited-victoria-falls-31-december-1874-and-died-only> [accessed 12 May 2024]; ‘Constitution of the Rhodesia Pioneer’s and Early Settlers Society’, *Our Rhodesian Heritage*, 31 January 2010, URL: <https://rhodesianheritage.blogspot.com/2010/01/constitution-of-rhodesia-pioneers-and.html> [accessed 12 May 2024].

¹² Ndlovu-Gatsheni, ‘Mapping Cultural and Colonial Encounters’, pp. 45–46.

¹³ Mlambo, *A History of Zimbabwe*, pp. 39–40.

the Ndebele and Shona during the First Chimurenga/Umvukela demonstrated that the destruction of the Ndebele polity and colonisation of the region was contingent on maintaining overwhelming force.¹⁴

Force of a different kind was required to construct a narrative of the encounter that occurred some two decades prior between Frank Oates and the Ndebele. *Matabele Land and the Victoria Falls* welded together a narrative that flattened and flattered the encounter to serve as a fitting tribute to Charles' late brother, as the stalwart and devoted student of natural history and exploration who succumbed to the dangers of Africa and the hostility of Africans. It was a telling, however, that skirted around and papered over the exact nature of the encounter. In our telling, we note and highlight the ruptures and pitfalls that shaped Oates', and therefore *Matabele Land's* readers', understanding of Africa and Africans on the eve of colonisation. We can see how tangential his initial framing of southern Africa was, and how reliant he became on singular intermediaries whose own frameworks of understanding were only ever partial. We can identify how Africans were not just fleeting set pieces of a single white man's narrative, but actively engaged in the process of influencing that encounter for their own ends and in ways that were missed or misunderstood by Oates. We can further see how the limitations of a singular observer of time, place, and people were extenuated by the very human nature of that observer as they attempted to comprehend what they encountered. This telling of the eventual turn towards colonisation shows how contingent those initial encounters were, highlighting the level of imperfection in the foundations upon which the late nineteenth-century colonial project in Africa was built.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 30–51; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 'Mapping Cultural and Colonial Encounters', pp. 39–50; Julian Cobbing, 'The Ndebele under the Khumalos, 1820–1896', Ph.D. thesis, University of Lancaster, (1976), pp. 347–445, 457–459.

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