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PORT ÉTIENNE: A MAURITANIAN PIONEER TOWN

R. J. HARRISON CHURCH

THE COASTAL WATERS of northern Mauritania and southern Spanish Sahara are rich in fish, although this fact is not generally known to most European fishermen, or appreciated by authors—geographical or otherwise—of texts on fisheries. Furthermore, there is little literature upon either the fisheries or upon the strange town of Port Étienne, the principal mainland port for these fishing grounds.

The rich and varied resources of the Saharan coastal fisheries result from the nearly 40 miles-wide continental shelf at Port Étienne, the cold Canary Current which brings great quantities of fish food to the coast, as well as a low salinity (34 per 1000, the same as United Kingdom waters), cool water for such a latitude (63° F. at 21° N.), cool air temperatures (75° F. yearly mean), and regular north-easterly winds which increase the oxygen content of the water. Of 255 species of fish known on this coast, 173 are identical with those found in the Atlantic north of the Canary Islands or in the Mediterranean (Postel, 1959). For centuries these varied fish have been caught by boats from the Canary Islands, or by two small tribes of Mauritians who catch fish by wading on certain beaches (Robin, 1955).

In 1905 a Fish Investigation Mission under the direction of Professor A. Gruvel made a detailed study of the fish resources and fishing on this coast. Gruvel (1906) urged that the grounds should be visited regularly from France and that to do this a fort, lighthouse, wireless and weather station, pier, coal and water stores should be set up in Cansado Bay, on the eastern or French side of the narrow and utterly desert Cape Blanc peninsula. Cansado Bay is an embayment of the vast Baie du Lévrier at the northern end of the Mauritanian coast, and on the south-western or peninsula side of the bay are deep and calm waters (Figs. 1 and 2).

These propositions were accepted by the French Government with remarkable alacrity in 1906, and on 9 August 1907 the town was formally named Port Étienne after a French Minister of the Colonies.¹ Since then it has been the headquarters of a District or *Cercle*, as well as a fish processing and supply centre mainly for fishermen but also for nomads, and a leave centre for French service personnel in Mauritania and for their families. The new function of iron ore terminal will be discussed later.

There is abundant evidence of earlier occupation of the peninsula by man, animal and vegetable life even up to some sixty years ago, but these are now virtually absent except at Port Étienne. The town has developed without roads or plan, in the accepted sense, some 3½ miles from north-east to south-west and a mile from west to east, immediately east of the border with Spanish Sahara. The buildings are widely scattered and whilst public, military and European private houses are in stone, the many Canary Islanders have houses of stone or of imported wood, and the Mauritians have wooden houses or their traditional skin tents.

The present town.—The original fort is on a slight bluff of Pliocene or Pleistocene soft sandstone, and since the late twenties has been known as Fort Lerumeur (Figs. 1 and 2) after a French officer who served at Port Étienne. Nearby are the wireless and meteorological stations, and the 2600-yard runway of the aerodrome served direct from Europe once a week and from Dakar six times a week. A little farther south are several pleasant European houses, and then the post office, doctor's house and dispensary, public works offices and yards, primary school, cultural centre, a shop or two, the fish

¹ The orthography of Port Étienne is in a confused state, an unusual occurrence for a French name. It was written with a hyphen by the early writers; this is the rule given in A. Dauzat (1948, p. 43) and the town is so spelt on the 1:100,000 map of *Cap Blanc*, 1954, Institut Géographique National, Paris. However, the 1:20,000 sheet of Port Étienne, 1957, Service Géographique, Dakar, a later and a local map, omits the hyphen, and this is English usage.

laboratory and the impressive district headquarters. After a further gap of loose sandy and sandstone waste come the Services leave centre, a naval air station, and the power station and fresh water distillery. From 1907 until 1923, and again for a few months in 1926, there was an earlier distillery of fresh water from sea water upon which the

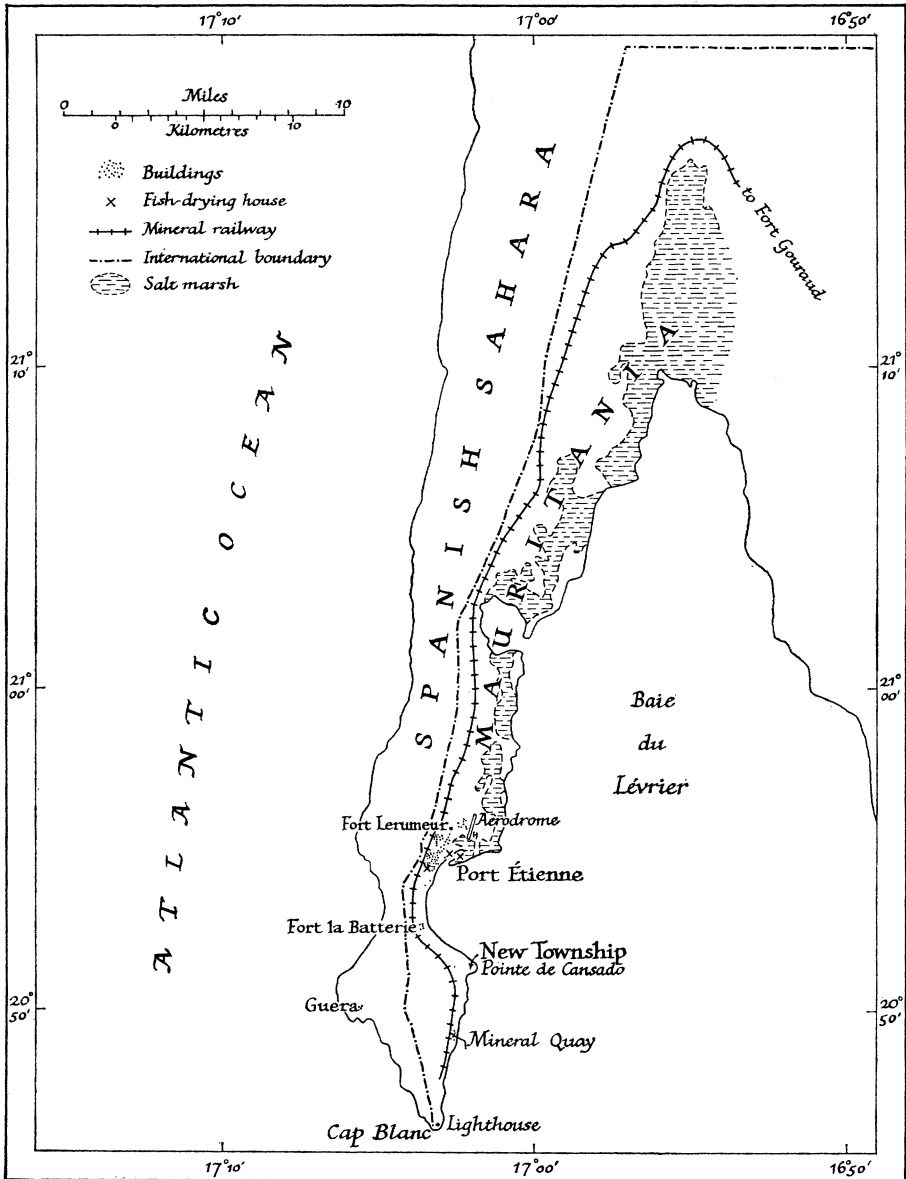


Fig. 1. The Cap Blanc peninsula with iron-ore railroad due for completion in 1963. Source: 1:100,000 Cap Blanc in 2 sheets, Institut Géographique National, Paris, 1954

town depended, but from 1923 to 1955 fresh water for town needs was imported by tanker from France (as it had always been by the main fish-drying house), and stored, first in a disused French battleship and later in small tankers. From 1955 until 1961 all fresh water was again distilled from sea-water and delivered in the town by lorries at

the price of about 2d. a gallon. Now it is brought 56 miles from near Boulanouar (Fig. 3).

South again is the largest and once fortified fish-drying factory which also has a good shop, garage, petrol and transport agency. Around the bay are two other much smaller and scarcely viable fish-drying establishments. Finally, nearly four miles from the most northerly building is the second and younger Fort la Batterie (Fig. 2). This great dispersion results from the fact that the original plan envisaged a large town, but only a few essential buildings were constructed between 1906 and 1960.

The fish-drying industry.—Although Port Étienne was founded in 1907 as a fish processing port, it has never been able to do much more than produce salted and dried

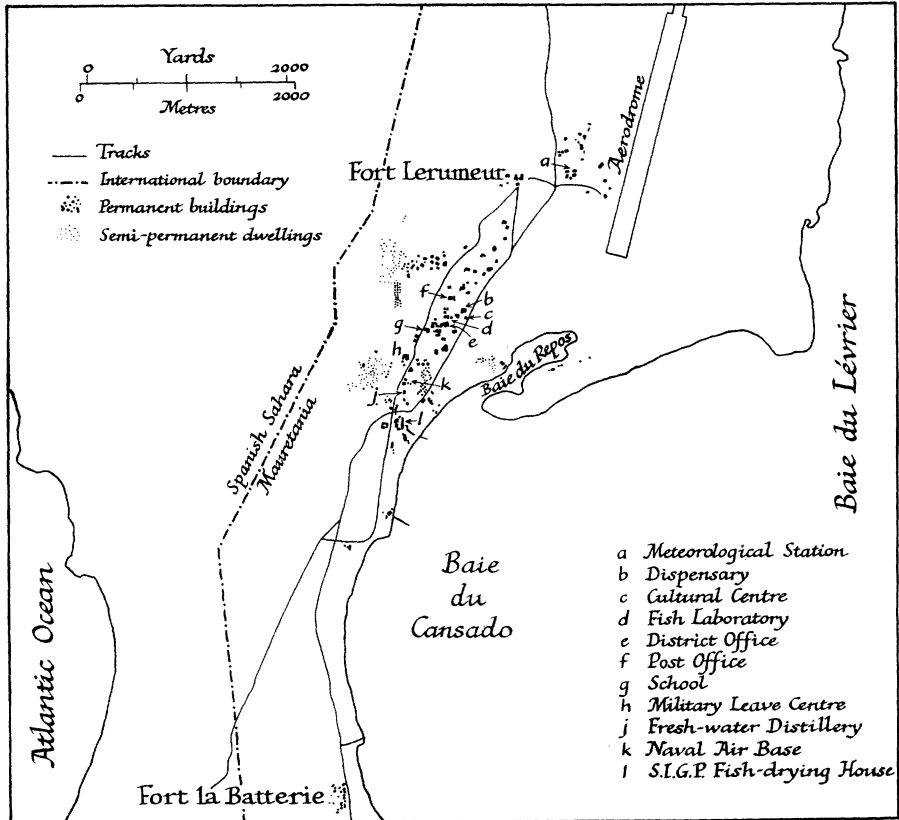


Fig. 2. Port Étienne before the railroad. Source: 1:20,000 Port Étienne, Service Géographique de l'Armée, Dakar, 1957

fish. This is because in the original town plan the main fish-drying establishment was sited one kilometre from the fish pier in the Baie du Repos. Deterioration of fish was so rapid and sea water so costly to carry that distance, that only the larger fish could be used. The more valuable small fish (such as soles), which need freezing, are wasted.

The first fish company, founded 1908, soon failed, as did a cooperative enterprise. The present largest company, la Société Industrielle de la Grande Pêche (S.I.G.P.) was founded in 1919. By this time, the government pier in the Baie du Repos was silted up (and has since disappeared), so an old French cruiser served as a pier, for stores—including water, and for partial fish processing. A tiny private pier was also built in front of the S.I.G.P. fish-drying house (Fig. 2). Despite the vigorous policy

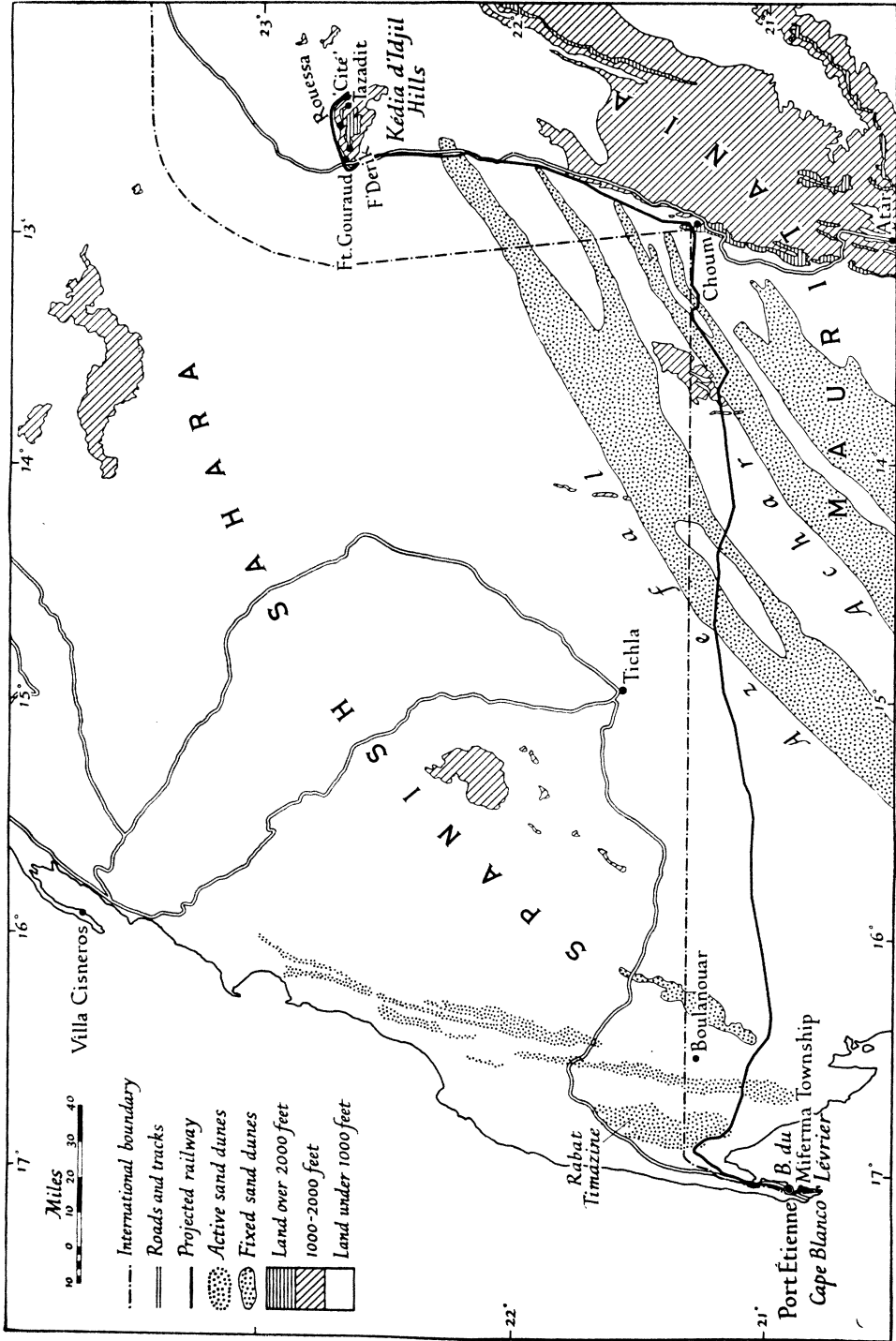


Fig. 3. The iron-ore railroad (reprinted from Church, 1961)

of this company it was faced with governmental indifference after 1925, and in 1926 the ex-cruiser was accidentally rammed and sunk. By 1931 Port Étienne was no better off than in 1908 (S.I.G.P., 1931).

Nevertheless, for nearly twenty years this private company owned its own fishing fleet and trained most of its crews. Fish is stored in brine pits, rewashed when wanted, and then sun-dried for fifteen days. Five Europeans and 125 Canary Island and Mauritanian labourers are employed. Some 3300 tons of dried fish are sold along the West African coast in losing competition with Angolan dried fish. About 4 tons of mullet roe are sold as 'poutargue', a substitute for caviar. A little fish is sold tinned and some spiny lobsters (crawfish) are sent by air to France.

Apart from fish landed at Port Étienne, most are caught by 30 boats which come from and return with their catch to the Canary Islands or Spain, 40 from Portugal, 30 from France, 3 from Italy and 6 from Greece. French boats usually confine their catches to tunny and crawfish, Greeks to octopus and crawfish. It is remarkable that, with the complaints by British fishermen of increasingly restricted fishing grounds and by the British public of the lack of varied fish, British boats do not visit these grounds. The fishing grounds are especially attractive to French and Spanish nationals, since a Franco-Spanish Convention of 1900 allows them to fish in the territorial waters of both Spanish Sahara and Mauritania. Now that Mauritania is independent, it could denounce the Convention and exclude at least the Spanish ships. Meanwhile, however, the grounds are much fished by Canary Islanders, especially from the nearest islands of Lanzarote and Fuerteventura, where the people are very poor and protein foods, other than fish, few and expensive. Aguera, near the south-western end of the peninsula, is a very minor Spanish counterpart to Port Étienne.

Port Étienne has long attracted labourers from the Canary Islands, for they have found work reasonably easily in the three fish-drying works and as building operatives. They come over on a small monthly steamer carrying water from Las Palmas (Grand Canary) to Villa Cisneros and Aguera in Spanish Sahara. In 1958 the population of Port Étienne was some 230 Europeans (about 180 being service personnel), 315 Canary Islanders and other Spanish, 250 Negro Africans and 1200 Mauritians. Thus some 2000 people were then living scattered over four miles from north to south and one mile from west to east, all dependent upon fresh water distilled from sea-water. Now that a mineral wharf, terminal townships and railroad are being built, the town has nearly 10,000 inhabitants.

The future mineral port.—The town and its economy are being transformed. The three existing fish-drying houses—one large and two small—may find their continued existence impossible for a variety of reasons. A former fourth fish-drying establishment has already closed because of Angolan competition helped by its compulsory contract labour. The Mauritanian and French governments also propose to build a large cold store for storing fresh fish and meat for export, and all fish landed at Port Étienne may be diverted to it. More immediately serious is the competition for labour and consequential rising wage rates as a result of the choice of a point south of the town for the export of rich haematite iron ore from the Kédia d'Idjil range east of Fort Gouraud (Church, 1961). A 400-mile-long mineral line (Fig. 3) is being built from there to a new quay some 8 miles south of the town, where there are natural depths of 44 feet. Between the two a well-planned mineral terminal township for 4500 people is being built on Cansado Point, previously an utterly desolate site but which, because it projects into the bay, is free from blowing sand, unlike Port Étienne.

The plan for this new township has encouraged another for the future development of Port Étienne itself, with the object of giving some cohesion to the town. This is highly desirable if Port Étienne is not to become a shanty town north of the new model township. The present shanty areas are on the west side of Port Étienne near the boundary, across which many Canary Islanders and nomadic Moors come and go according to labour needs of the fish factories. In view of this, it is not surprising that the shacks and tents are, and must be, somewhat temporary and sometimes, though not always, drab. Planning supervision of these nomads and seasonal immigrants

might appropriately be like that exercised over camping sites in Europe or America. One may wonder, however, whether it might not be better to abandon most of the present Port Étienne, and to concentrate people and functions in the Miferma model township. This would diversify the functions and character of the latter, and make of it a more varied community. The forts and services centres might remain, certainly the recently enlarged runway, its associated wireless and meteorological stations, as well as the fish-drying houses. Port Étienne may also become Mauritania's sole general port (Fig. 4), if, in addition to at least being given a hinterland in the form of

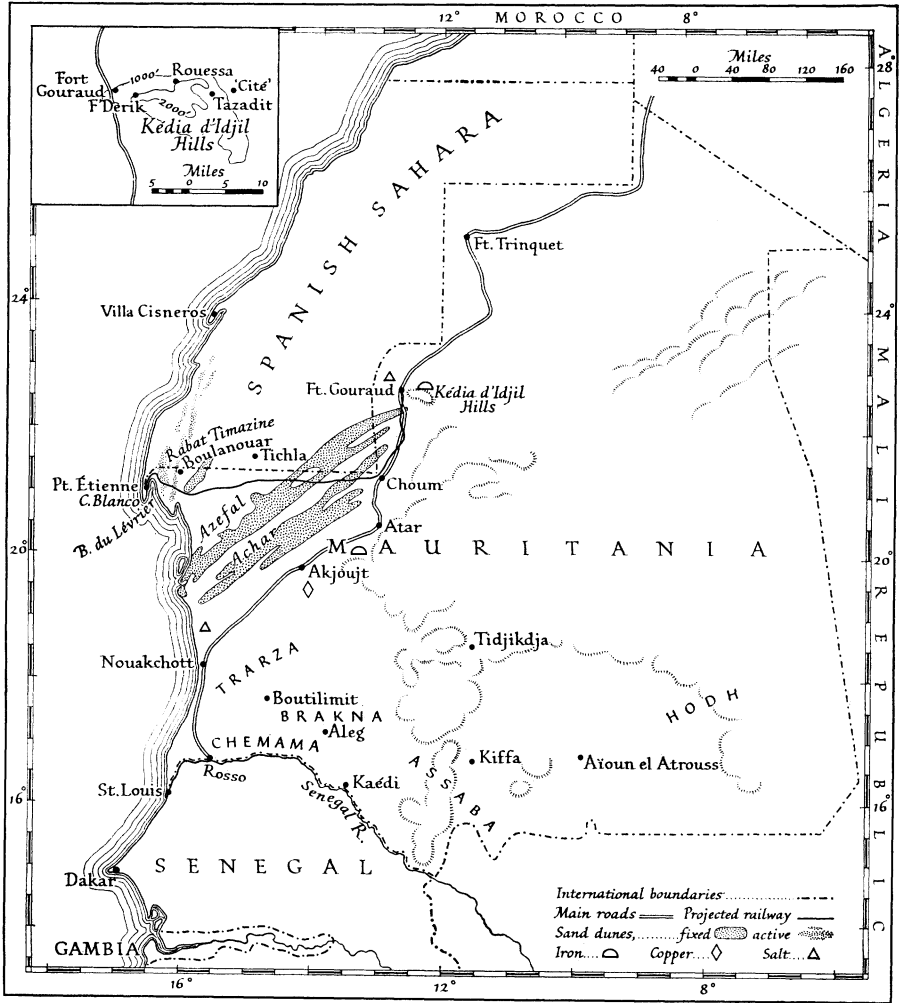


Fig. 4. Mauritania (reprinted from Church, 1961)

the iron-ore deposit near Fort Gouraud, the mineral line conveys general traffic as well. This would save long and expensive hauls via Dakar, Senegal. Furthermore, the aerodrome now takes inter-continental planes, so that passengers save much time in cutting out a detour via Dakar.

Morocco claims both Spanish Sahara and Mauritania. The former is the scene of oil prospecting and oil might equally well occur in western Mauritania. The latter's iron ore is also attractive to Morocco. Port Étienne's strategic significance lies in the

fact that it is a military and naval air base, with deep and always calm water, which alone could accommodate ships should Mauritania be attacked.

Port Étienne is fifty-five years old. From being a fish processing town, as well as the administrative headquarters of a large, entirely desert and almost uninhabited district, it is soon to be a major shipper of haematite ore and may become Mauritania's own general port and vital link overseas.

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ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO

THE FOLLOWING EXTRACT is taken from Lord Ashburton's Presidential address of 26 May 1862, printed in the *Journal of the R.G.S.* 32 (1862) clix–clx.

OUR OWN LABOURS.

'The relation of the Society to the wide range of science which it cultivates may be referred to with satisfaction. Through its influence, or by its Associates, it may be identified with most of the enterprises which enlarge the knowledge of the more remote regions or add to the details of those more intimately known. Although the progress of geography—a science which has been the growth of so many ages—can be but imperfectly estimated by the brief retrospect of the limited period to which this notice must be confined, still the past *two* years have been marked by some very important accessions to our knowledge.

It might perhaps be inferred that the industry of modern travellers, so well and so persistently carried on, would have left to these later times but few regions unexplored, or features to be noticed in primary discovery; but the late Transactions of our Society will lead to the inference that there lies hidden much more than has been revealed, and that our motto "Ob terras reclusas," will still apply almost as justly to the countries close around us as to the still unknown mysteries of Africa or Australia. The last volumes of our Transactions publish the details of primary discovery and exploration more extensive and important, of countries absolutely unknown before, than those contained in the first, when the true course of the then mysterious Niger, or the earliest journeys into the interior of Australia, were described.

There is one evidence of the appreciation of the Society and its usefulness in the unbroken chain of travellers and labourers which are and have been connected with it; those of later times being often the friends, pupils, or associates of those who first enriched its volumes with the results of their enterprise, and whose works may be traced continuously from its origin to those which I shall briefly allude to presently. The Annual Address of former Presidents will show how large a share has been taken in the progress of Geography by the Royal Geographical Society since its foundation.'