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THE OCCUPATION OF MASHONALAND

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In the year 1890 a British chartered company took possession of Mashonaland. As an almost inevitable consequence it went on in 1893 to break the power of Mashonaland's western neighbours, the Matabele, and to unite under one administration the territory that would soon be called Southern Rhodesia. These moves in the scramble for Africa had wide repercussions and helped to secure for Britain her subsequently dominant position on the continent. They had also lasting effects on the fortunes of the people of Central Africa. Thus the occupation of Mashonaland in 1890, from which these consequences followed, is important, and the reasons for it deserve examination.

The series of events which led to the occupation is well known in outline. The Matabele, originally a division of Zulu soldiers who followed their commander Moselekatse¹ into rebellion against their King, Shaka, settled on the Transvaal highveld, laid waste all the country within reach of their spears, and incorporated the young men, women and boys of defeated tribes into their own community. Moselekatse however met his match in the Voortrekker leader Potgieter, who defeated him twice in 1837 and a third time in 1842. The Matabele then trekked northwards into and beyond the Matopo Hills to put a safe distance between themselves and the Boers.

In the new Matabeleland, as in the old, the national economy was based on war and spoliation. Northward across the Zambesi, and eastward into the land of the indigenous — or at least long-established — Mashona, the Matabele regiments marched year after year to "wash their spears" and seek plunder, captives and excitement. One by one the Mashona chiefs gave up the struggle — the last of them in 1865 — and became the vassals, tributaries, or, as the Matabele put it, the "dogs" of Moselekatse. In 1868 the old King died, and was succeeded after an interregnum of two years by his son Lobengula.

While the Portuguese had penetrated Mashonaland in the sixteenth century and still laid a rather shadowy claim to it, the penetration of Matabeleland from the south by white hunters and traders began about the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1859 the London Missionary Society began its frustrating work in the

Note: Sources marked (N.A.) are papers in the National Archives of Rhodesia and Nyasaland.

¹ The names Matabele and Moselekatse, as generally used, come from the Sotho language of their enemies; the correct Zulu forms are amaNdebele and uMsilikazi.

country. In 1867 gold was discovered, and Lobengula, from the beginning of his reign, was importuned by concession-hunters.

The partition of Africa began in earnest in 1884. In the following year Great Britain declared a protectorate over Bechuanaland up to the twenty-second parallel of south latitude. Several of the men who had urged this step, including Cecil Rhodes (then a very new member of the Cape Parliament), were interested in Bechuanaland not for its own sake but as a step to the farther interior, which they saw as a field for British colonisation.

But if the British by 1885 were within easy reach of Matabeleland, so equally was the South African Republic. In July 1887 that republic sent an emissary, P. J. Grobler, who negotiated a treaty with Lobengula. The treaty gave substantial privileges in the country not only to Transvaal citizens, but to their government, and provided for the appointment of a Transvaal consul in Bulawayo, Lobengula's capital. There is convincing evidence that the text of this document had not been properly explained to the Matabele King. When Grobler returned as consul a year later Lobengula refused to receive him in that capacity, and he regretted having put his mark and his Elephant Seal to one of those white men's papers that were liable to have hidden and dangerous implications.

In the meantime the news of the treaty had reached the ears of Rhodes, who was already dreaming of British expansion to the north. Though he held no office in the Cape Colony he was able to cajole the High Commissioner, Sir Hercules Robinson, into taking immediate action. Instructions were sent through Sir Sidney Shippard, Administrator of Bechuanaland, to his Assistant Commissioner, John Smith Moffat, to conclude a British treaty with the Matabele King. The omens were bad. Lobengula wanted no more treaties. Moffat appears to have taken this attitude as his cue, and to have persuaded the King to commit his refusal to writing. The result was the Moffat treaty of February 11, 1888, by which Lobengula undertook not to enter into any correspondence or treaty with any foreign state, on any subject whatever, without the knowledge and sanction of Her Majesty's High Commissioner for South Africa. Thenceforward the British government could, if it wished, keep foreign competitors out of the area. But it had as yet itself no direct interest in Matabeleland.

The white men's camp outside Lobengula's town was filled with the representatives not of governments but of private interests, seeking gold-mining concessions. Rhodes himself was as much a private adventurer as the rest of them, though vastly more powerful than most. It was in this year that he at last succeeded in amalgamating the diamond-mining interests of Kimberley into the great monopoly of De Beers Consolidated Mines. Among the many concession-hunters

who went to Bulawayo in 1888 were Rhodes' agents Rudd, Maguire and Thompson. On October 30, after nearly six weeks of negotiations, they got Lobengula's mark and Elephant Seal on the Rudd Concession, which gave the concessionnaires the sole mining rights throughout his dominions and the power to exclude from them all other persons seeking concessions either of minerals or of land. The price paid for this monopoly was one thousand Martini-Henry breech-loading rifles, 100,000 rounds of ball cartridge, a steamboat on the Zambesi (or in lieu of this, if the King so decided, £500), and the sum of £100 to be paid on the first day of each lunar month.

When some of the implications of this concession became clear, Lobengula formally repudiated it, not once but twice. The rifles and ammunition were brought to Bulawayo and stored there, but Lobengula steadily refused to receive them, though he accepted the monthly payment of £100. And the position of the Rudd concessionnaires was weak in another respect. There were various people who claimed concessions prior to Rudd's, and there were others who combined shadowy claims or lively expectations with influence, or at least power for mischief, either in Bulawayo or in the City of London. During 1889 Rhodes succeeded in amalgamating the most important of these interests with his own. The rest were either bought out or crushed. Lord Salisbury's government was persuaded to grant a royal charter to the amalgamated interests, which took the name of the British South Africa Company and received its charter on October 29, 1889.

The Company acquired from the Crown the right to exercise the powers of government, including the granting of land and the promotion of immigration. But it could do these things only insofar as the native chief of any territory concerned had conceded the appropriate powers to the Company, and only when the relevant concession or treaty had been submitted to the Secretary of State for the Colonies and approved by him.

At the end of 1889 the only concession on which the Company could base any operations in Lobengula's dominions was the Rudd concession, which gave nothing but mining rights and which had been twice repudiated. Nevertheless it proceeded at once with a plan to occupy and open up, not the country inhabited by the Matabele, but their tributary province of Mashonaland. This could not be invaded by the usual route, which ran through Bulawayo, without fighting the Matabele. The suggestion that a new road should be cut through the bush, skirting the Matabele country on the south and east, was made independently by John Mackenzie (a former L.M.S. missionary) and by the hunter and explorer F. C. Selous. Rhodes accepted this suggestion. The plan, then, was to recruit a small party of Pioneers (there were eventually 186 of them) and a force of Com-

pany's Police, and to send these into Mashonaland by the proposed new route. This was accordingly done. The Pioneer Column marched out of its base camp in Bechuanaland on June 27, 1890, and on September 12 reached its destination at the point where Fort Salisbury was built. Lobengula held his warriors in check, and the operation was completed without a casualty.

On all these events the contemporary records throw an interesting light, though they raise more questions than they can answer. Two men — Rhodes and Lobengula — played the decisive rôles in the drama. There are therefore two general questions which impose themselves on the historian, and to which most of the specific questions are related. First, how did Rhodes manage to build a mining monopoly, a chartered company and a colonial empire on the apparently useless foundation of the Rudd concession and in spite of the most formidable opposition? Second, why did Lobengula grant a concession, then repudiate it, and then by restraint and prevarication ensure the safety of the Pioneer Column and the success of the Company's bold venture?

One factor in Rhodes' success was of course his enormous financial resources. Most of his small rivals in the Matabeleland concession business were bought out for cash. He could hire men for as long as he required them to scour Central Africa for treaties or to sit in the Bulawayo sun for months watching every move of Lobengula's. He had more persistence than his strongest competitors, because they were interested merely in gold-mining, while he wanted to build an empire. No less important was his experience of, and genius for, big business operations. The amalgamation of rival interests which resulted in the British South Africa Company looks simple in retrospect, but could be successfully carried out only by a man with a flair for this kind of negotiation.

Equally significant was the more elusive factor of Rhodes' strange ascendancy over men, or at least over many men. At this time he held no public office, though he was to become Prime Minister of the Cape soon after his Pioneers had begun their march to Salisbury. He procured the concession and the charter, and organized the Pioneer Column, as a private business man. Yet none of these things could have been achieved without official support. Among those who came under his spell and in most things did his bidding were Sir Hercules Robinson, Sir Sidney Shippard, and the latter's Assistant Commissioners J. S. Moffat and (Sir) Francis Newton. And most of them, in abetting Rhodes' schemes, were conscious of some inconsistency between this conduct and their duty to their employers in London.

When Rudd and his companions left for the north on what inquisitive onlookers were told was a hunting trip, they were provided by the High Commissioner with a letter of recommendation to Loben-

gula. At Vryburg they had a talk with Newton, who then wrote a letter to Moffat, arguing in favour of Rhodes' getting a footing in Matabeleland. No sooner had they arrived in Bulawayo than they "had a long talk" with Moffat, who in his turn wrote to Shippard that "it would be infinitely better if gold matters could be in the hands of one great corporation and so get rid of a swarm of mischievous meddlers who may, or may not, be amenable to Government authority". Moffat was an ex-missionary of the L.M.S.; his support would carry weight with the chief missionary in the country, C. D. Helm. It was Helm who first broached to the King the nature of Rudd's business, who acted as interpreter in the negotiations, and who endorsed the concession with a statement that the contents had been properly interpreted and explained.² This endorsement over Helm's signature helped, later, to win support for the charter in England.

While the Rudd negotiations were going on, Sir Sidney Shippard paid a ceremonial visit to Lobengula. Though he did not officially support the negotiators, he informed the King of the financial strength and responsibility of Rhodes and Rudd. He and Moffat left for the south, respectively a week and three days before the concession was signed. But Rudd overtook the Administrator on the road, brought him the good news, and was treated by the official party to a champagne lunch in the bush. When Rudd reached Kimberley, and Rhodes, the two of them boarded the first train for Cape Town, there to receive the hearty congratulations of the High Commissioner.

The enthusiasm of the officials would have been less embarrassing to themselves if it had not been for one awkward fact: the 1,000 rifles and 100,000 rounds of ammunition. Britain had signed treaties with the republics prohibiting the sale of arms to natives, and one of these was still in force. The Cape Colony had fought a disastrous war for the disarming of the Basuto, and Natal had suppressed a rebellion, perverted her judicial system and finally been subjected to Crown Colony government, in an attempt to disarm another tribe. Everywhere in South Africa the denial of firearms to natives was an almost unquestioned axiom of policy. Everyone who knew the terms of the Rudd concession, with the possible exception of Robinson at first, knew that this item would raise a storm when it became public.

The concessionnaires had foreseen this and had thought of the curious argument that the Matabele were less dangerous with rifles than with assegais. While this argument in itself is not worth discussing, it happens to throw important light on Shippard's visit to Lobengula. On the very day he arrived in Bulawayo he was visited by two white concession-hunters unconnected with Rhodes. "Amongst

² Rudd's account of his journey is published in *Gold and the Gospel* (Oppenheimer Series).

the things he asked us", one of them wrote, "was 'Was the native most dangerous with the assegai or the gun'".³ He got the reply he wanted. This and other pieces of evidence make it clear that Shippard was working with and for Rhodes from the beginning of the negotiations.

By the middle of December news of the concession, and of its terms, reached the Colonial Secretary, though not through official channels. Lord Knutsford at once cabled to Robinson for further information. The reply included a minute written by Shippard, who laboured the point that no Government officer had had anything to do with the concession; the dates of his (Shippard's) and Moffat's departure from Bulawayo were given with some precision.⁴ As Knutsford had not raised the question of their participation in the business, the anxious disclaimer is significant.

The terms of the concession could no longer be concealed, but the rifles had yet to be brought from England, through the Cape Colony, to their destination. Early in 1889 Rhodes was under some pressure to visit Bulawayo himself. As he afterwards wrote to Thompson, "I saw clearly that if I left the guns would never have got through so with great difficulty I have managed to get them through the Colony and Bechuanaland... If I had left when desired not a single gun would have ever got through".⁵ The rifles were landed in Cape Town and conveyed by the Cape Government Railways to the premises of De Beers in Kimberley. Rhodes appears to have left no document in the Archives explaining the nature of his operations in the Cape Town docks, Customs House and railway yards. But it must be emphasized again that he held no office at that time. How this was done is a mystery that may never be unravelled.

Within a few days of the signing of the Rudd Concession the numerous rival concession-hunters in Bulawayo got wind of it. They began at once a propaganda campaign to induce second thoughts in Lobengula's mind and to persuade him, if possible, to cancel the grant. The diaries and letters of the time tell a long and complicated story of intrigue, cross-examination, bribery and judicial murder. In the course of this, on April 26, 1889, Lobengula despatched a letter to the Queen. It informed her that he had discussed the Concession with his councillors, and that "they will not recognize the paper, as it contains neither my words nor the words of those who got it". The letter was written and witnessed by local white men who were interested parties; the missionaries, who were suspected of complicity with Rhodes, were not informed; the letter was sent off hastily during the absence

³ (N.A.) Wilson Diary, under date October 15, 1888.

⁴ Quoted in S. P. Hyatt, *The Northward Trek*, pp. 133-8.

⁵ N. Rouillard (ed.), *Matabele Thompson, an Autobiography*, pp. 153-4, 217.

of Moffat, the British government's local representative, who could hardly have been by-passed if he had been present; and it was sent to the Queen direct, not through Rhodes' friend the High Commissioner in Cape Town.⁶ It reached London when the negotiations for a royal charter were well advanced. One of Rudd's partners, Thompson, was in Bulawayo at the time, got news of the letter, and according to his own account "induced two of the white conspirators to sign a statement to the effect that the letter had been faked, and was not authorized by Lobengula".⁷ He claims that this statement reached London just in time to prevent the breakdown of the charter negotiations, but I have found no other evidence to confirm this. But the other member of the trio, Maguire, was himself in London, and at once stated, with such authority as his brief visit to Matabeleland conferred, that letters from Lobengula could not be regarded as trustworthy unless they were witnessed by a missionary. So this letter misfired.

On August 10, Lobengula wrote to the Queen again, repudiating the concession, and this time took care to have Moffat sign as a witness.⁸ If the Post Office had functioned at its usual speed, this letter would have been delivered in London about September 26. But it did not in fact reach its destination until November 18, three weeks after the Great Seal had been affixed to the charter. The only reasonable inference is that Rhodes had friends in the Post Office, as well as in the customs, railways and harbours.

His influence over the authorities in the Cape Colony explains much. But he had, at first, very little influence with governing circles in England, where he was regarded as a not quite reputable colonial adventurer. As late as March, 1889, Knutsford wrote to Lobengula virtually inviting him to cancel the Rudd Concession. But Rhodes was by then casting his spell over the right people in England, from the Queen and the Prince of Wales to Mr. Parnell, from Albert (the future Earl) Grey to the Baroness Burdett-Coutts and W. T. Stead of the *Pall Mall Gazette*. He secured the Dukes of Abercorn and Fife as directors of his company. These were the weights that tipped the scale in favour of the charter. The legal difficulty that the Company did not hold adequate powers from Lobengula was met by treating the mining concession as valid, while grants of land to settlers were provisional only, pending the Company's acquisition of a land concession. This was subsequently acquired by a tortuous manoeuvre. A rival adventurer, Eduard Lippert, got the land concession from Lobengula when the latter was under the impression that he was thwarting Rhodes by strengthening his opponent. But Rhodes and

⁶ C. 5918, p. 201 (where the date is wrongly given as April 23); (N.A.) Dawson papers, in Marshall Hole collection, original draft of letter.

⁷ Rouillard, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

⁸ S. P. Hyatt, *op. cit.*, pp. 154-5.

Lippert had previously come to an agreement profitable to both, and as soon as the land concession was obtained the Lippert interests were absorbed by the chartered company.

But for Rhodes, it is virtually certain that Southern Rhodesia would have fallen to the South African Republic. Rhodes was the real originator not only of the Moffat treaty, but of the diplomatic negotiations between the High Commissioner and President Kruger from 1890 to 1895, when Rhodes was Premier of the Cape. These negotiations completed the defences of the Company's territory against interference by the Transvaal or its citizens.

Even with the Transvaal excluded, however, Rhodes would have had a much more difficult task if Lobengula had firmly opposed him. The illiterate monarch and his illiterate councillors had innumerable discussions in which the white invasion must have been debated. Not only is there no record of these debates, but Africans have an almost insuperable reluctance to communicate their real thoughts to Europeans. The missionaries knew no more of Lobengula's mind than the most disreputable trader. But after looking at all the evidence together it is possible to hazard a guess at his reasoning, his motives and his intentions.

The Rudd concession was couched (by Maguire, a barrister and Fellow of All Souls') in the turgid language of the Inns of Court. During the preceding negotiations Rudd and Thompson, in reply to questions, gave their own rather disingenuous versions of what the concession involved. They promised, for instance, not to bring more than ten white men to work in the country.⁹ The verbal undertakings would have seemed to Lobengula no less significant or binding, and certainly more intelligible, than the written jargon in which he granted and assigned "unto the said grantees their heirs representatives and assigns jointly and severally the complete and exclusive charge over all metals and minerals situated and contained in my Kingdoms Principalities and dominions". It was only during the subsequent heated debates that he fully understood the difference in effect between the written and the spoken words.

While there was no room for doubt about the exclusive character of the grant, Lobengula in the first instance probably misunderstood the character of the grantees. He had given mining concessions before, but as the recipients were men of small resources, little or nothing had been done to exploit them. Three months before the Rudd concession he had given the very same exclusive mining right to a group of local traders,¹⁰ who were afterwards satisfied with £2,000 each to extinguish

⁹ (N.A.) L.M.S. Papers, Vol. V, Helm to L.M.S., March 29, 1889.

¹⁰ (N.A.) Papers of Thomas Leask, 11, 16 and 17. Political Papers of John Smith Moffat, letter of August 1, 1888. L.M.S. Papers, Vol. V, Helm's letter of September 15, 1888.

their claim.¹¹ Part of the shock which followed was Lobengula's discovery that Rhodes was able and determined to exploit his grant.

There is no uncertainty about the King's motive for making the concession in the first instance: he wanted the rifles. When for these reasons he changed his mind, he refused to accept the rifles. But he still had some freedom of choice. The Pioneer Column could not march peacefully through his country without his permission. There were negotiations about this; Lobengula raised objections, made accusations and complaints, but would not absolutely "refuse the road". This was treated as permission. When the Column assembled, and while it was on the march, the King rattled the sabre and sent warnings and equivocal commands, but arranged that they should take as long as possible in the delivery. And all the while his impatient warriors were begging permission to "make a breakfast" of the invaders.

The evidence suggests that Lobengula knew, as most of his subjects did not, what power the apparently feeble bands of white men could summon to their aid if they were attacked. He had watched the irresistible march of European conquest and was certain that it would reach his country in due course. When it did, his plan was to take his people on another trek, across the Zambesi to the healthy Batoka plateau. His father before him had foreseen the danger and the way of escape, and both had sent regular expeditions to keep the plateau depopulated and available. This was a fact which deflected the course of Livingstone's career and changed history in several ways. Lobengula was therefore essentially playing for time and fighting a delaying action by diplomacy. War with the English would end in disaster. A migration, properly timed, could give the Matabele a new lease of life. But Lobengula's difficulty was that his subjects could not understand the facts of the political and military situation. After satisfying the white men with a concession he had to quieten his own people by a show of anger, repudiation or bellicosity. He played this game with admirable skill till the end.

But the war with the English came, after all, in 1893. The thousand rifles, now taken out of store and made more deadly by raising their sights to the maximum range, were no match for Maxim machine-guns. The fighting was over too quickly for a mass migration to be possible. But when the torch had been set to the huts of Bulawayo the King and his entourage moved away towards the Zambesi. Before he reached it he was struck down by an enemy, small-pox, against which he had made no provision.

¹¹ The chief member of this syndicate (Thomas Leask) was however brought into the later amalgamation as a shareholder.