

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BSQ-20

City Hotel
Box 24
Freetown, Sierra Leone
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Two Trips Upcountry

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Dear Peter,

The bus for Bo was supposed to leave at 9:30 a.m. For once I was glad that in Africa schedules are mostly approximations, if not wishful thinking. My traveling companion, a Canadian named Tom, overslept and arrived at the bus station fifteen minutes late, or roughly five minutes before the bus departed.

We meant only to spend the weekend in Bo, Sierra Leone's third largest city, or town for it has a population of about 30,000. In the event, we extended our traveling time and distance to visit Pendembu in the far eastern section of the country, 300 miles from Freetown and only sixteen miles from the Liberian border.

I had known there used to be a train to Bo, but only upon arrival in Pendembu did I learn that our journey followed the full extent of the main rail line. Upon my return to Freetown, I obtained a copy of a 1910 depiction of Sierra Leone by T.J. Alldridge, a former British colonial administrator, entitled A Transformed Colony. In it the author recounts a trip like mine to Bo and Pendembu, except his was mostly by train. The differences and the similarities that exist over this span of seventy years are instructive.

From the start the railroad was regarded as a concession to business. Built and run at government expense, it was always a money-loser. The first part of the line was opened in 1899, traffic to Pendembu began nine years later. The rails never reached the proposed terminus of Kanrelahun, a few miles farther away.

Alldridge was much impressed by the efficiency and the comfort of the rail service. It should be noted that he was keen on seeing the colony developed and so probably inclined to present it in as good a light as possible. Here is his description of the Freetown train station just before departure:

"The platform is crowded with the gaily coloured native costumes peculiar to the different tribes. Here are tall, slim Mandingoes with sandalled feet and flowing white robes, and their distinctive little skull-caps with their beautiful native embroidery. Here a group of Susus in long, close-fitting sleeveless gowns of a good claret-colour over white. Sierra Leone gentle-folks in elaborate European costumes, native trading

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women in their stiffly starched prints and their smart wrappers carelessly thrown round one shoulder, and their shining patent-leather shoes, are everywhere in evidence, with the friends who have come to see them off."

The bus depot, almost in the same spot as the old train station, cannot be described so picturesquely, though few transportation centers that are old and obsolescent could compete with those that are new and novel. The bus is loaded long ahead of time, passengers chatting through the windows with friends and family. The scene lacks the sense of excitement one feels in Alldridge's account. The trip upcountry has become routine. Passengers, well-wishers and vendors all look unremarkable to me. Most wear Western clothes, though the women's dresses are made from colorful tie-dyed or printed cloth. Rather than the costumes, I notice the fat woman asleep on a bench, and wonder what she could have done the night before to make her so tired at this hour of the morning. Next to her, a young mother watches as her child relieves herself on the cement floor, then wipes the toddler clean with a cloth that she sticks back in her bag.

Alldridge makes much of the punctuality of the train's departures. As I said, I was thankful the bus driver was less precise. The trip takes only four hours by bus, whereas the train used a day to reach Bo. The ride on the paved road was among the most comfortable 140 miles I've traveled in Africa. The bus was as full as could be, with fold-down seats in the aisles for extra passengers, but we were not crowded. The coach was not too warm, no chickens or goats were aboard, nor was anyone bringing a pungent load of fish home to the family. Those who wished could treat themselves to a late breakfast of fried or smoked fish at a quick rest stop twenty miles outside the city. No need to get out, the saleswomen surround the bus, their wares on their heads, ignoring a sign that forbids them from coming out into the road. Oranges, bananas and soft drinks are also available.

One of the things that have not changed since Alldridge's journey is the beauty of the landscape. To the south are the Sierra Leone mountains, dark green rolls of land that remind me of the Berkshires. To the north a more African panorama of wooded plain, mangrove swamp and winding river stretches out as far as the eye can see. Once past the mountains, the land is mostly flat, but with occasional eruptions to keep the view from becoming monotonous. I was surprised by how little of the land is cultivated, a marked difference from Senegal and The Gambia where seemingly every arable inch of soil is put to use. Here, fields of corn, of cassava and of rice intervene with large areas of elephant grass or thick woods. The forests bear several valuable crops, but I saw only two places where the trees were obviously planted and harvested, an oil palm plantation and an orange grove.

The villages consist of square, brown mud-brick houses, with zinc or tin roofs ranging in color from dazzling silver to rusty red, depending on their age. Here where it rains so much and so hard, few people want to bother with rethatching their roofs with palm fronds every year or two, though that's probably cooler.

Despite the apparent lack of cultivation, there seems to be

no shortage of food. At our next stop we descend from the bus to buy roasted ears of corn for ten cents, oranges four to the dime and bunches of five or six bananas at the same price. A bamboo skewer of barbecued beef, four or five mouthfuls, with slices of onion and hot pepper, is also ten cents. In real terms the prices are probably about the same as those Alldridge raved about—four mangoes or sixteen bananas for a penny. Yet despite these low prices and the lack of extensive cultivation, people upcountry often get only one meal a day, and there is still a hungry season, the last three months of the rains. It seems to me something is very wrong with a country that has such an apparent paradox.

Bo reminded me of a Klondike town, full of people stocking up on provisions for life in the bush. Many, though, have come not to buy but to sell their produce in the market. The streets are lined with two-story buildings of pastel-colored stucco. On the ground level are the shops, mostly hardware and appliance stores, although there is a surprising number of record and book shops. Above are the homes of their Lebanese owners, whose wives and children lean over the edge of the balustraded balcony to gaze on the bustle in the street.

On the weekend the town also fills with young white volunteers—Peace Corps, CUSO (Canada), VSO (United Kingdom)—looking for a little relief from the tedium of their villages. On Friday afternoon they gather in Coker's Bar, almost to the exclusion of Africans. Star Beer is sixty cents here, a good price as a shortage, described by some as contrived, has raised the price to double that in some places. Coker's also plays good music on a good sound system. By good, I mean American—Linda Ronstadt, the Eagles. African music and even black American music are not popular with the volunteers. One told me with some satisfaction that there was more American music played in Bo than in Freetown.

There are several other bars and nightclubs in town. One pumps out African rock and funky patter from a deejay all day, the others are subdued until evening. That night the volunteers gathered on the verandah of the Dembey Hotel. Downstairs is the bar and dance floor, sparkling with colored lights. Tom said it reminded him of a bar he went to once in Niagara Falls.

For all its gaiety, Bo has fallen on hard times. Power comes on for only a few hours at night. Public water has been cut off. Rising fuel costs are blamed.

Alldridge would hardly recognize the place. He was struck by the rapidity of the change that had come over the town in a decade: "Can it really be possible that two trains full of peaceable travellers should actually be starting from this remote place so near to scenes that only ten years ago had been the centres of the native rising, and of some of the most terrible massacres which then took place?" Proudly, he notes that the town had become safe enough for an English lady to reside in it alone while her husband the judge was on circuit and the roads safe enough for her to venture out in her mule cart. He might be somewhat shocked to find there are now English ladies, as well as Canadian and American, living alone in the villages and coming into Bo for the weekend on their motorcycles.

Yet once he had made allowances for the changes in the

times, Alldridge might be disappointed at the lack of progress Bo has made in seventy years. As the main upcountry town on the railroad line, run by British administrators and British businessmen, Bo was a promising commercial center. Today, the railway gone, Bo and the surrounding area are dependent upon foreign volunteers to teach in the schools, set up businesses, develop agriculture. Few, if any, volunteers come away with much confidence in the Sierra Leoneans' ability, or even willingness, to take over these operations. For all their democratic ideals and spartan living conditions among the people they are trying to help, most volunteers seek comfort and reassurance in each other's company. When they do, their criticisms of their jobs, their co-workers, their students, their surroundings, can be harsh. Comparisons with colonial days are hard to avoid. Alldridge found a tennis court in the government compound at Bo, a requisite for British expatriates, he said; the volunteers played basketball at the Bo secondary school.

The Bo school is another source of disappointment. Alldridge devoted a chapter to it, encouraged by the concept of a school that not only stressed practical education—"farming, carpentry, bridge-building, road-making, land-surveying"—but sought to retain the pupils' links with their villages by requiring native dress and serving native food that had to be eaten with the hands. Those days are gone. The school grounds are lovely, with manicured lawns and landscaped trees and shrubs, but everything else is a shambles. Bo school students wear uniforms—white shirts and colored shorts—just like the students at every other school in the country. They study the same subjects from the same kind of teachers, discontented Sierra Leoneans threatening to strike and disillusioned volunteers usually eager to go home. They do just as poorly on the GCEs, their final exams. And they are as undisciplined as most other students in Africa. While we were playing basketball, the school's soccer team played a match against another school. Annoyed at a referee's call, the players walked off the field, ending the game with the approval of their coach and teachers. Such incidents are common at every level of the game in Sierra Leone.

On Sunday we left Bo about noon for Pendembu. The trip is not as easy as the one to Bo, for half of it is on rain-gutted dirt roads. The public buses only make the run in the dry season. Private transport is available in three forms: taxis, poda-podas (vans) and lorries (small pick-ups and minibuses). Competition for passengers is stiff. The traveler is besieged by drivers and apprentices as soon as he nears the lorry-park, an open space clogged with vehicles, luggage and people. The area is enclosed by stalls displaying tee-shirts and colored underwear and by chop shops selling rice and sauce or stewed meat and bread for about a dollar. The traveler works the best deal he can, trying not only to lower the fare but to choose the vehicle that will be next to leave and to get a reasonably comfortable seat on it. The last objective is futile unless one sacrifices a prompt departure to obtain a front seat. The number of people crammed into the back seat of these vehicles

defies common sense. There is always room for one more. Twenty people in the back of a small Japanese pick-up is not unusual.

Once inside, the passenger receives a constant stream of vendors selling the most incongruous collection of dime-store junk imaginable. Combs, mirrors, keychains, jewelry, toys, cosmetics, sunglasses, pocket knives, lighters, pens, tools, more tee-shirts and underwear—hardly anyone buys any of it, but every taxi park I've visited in Africa has the same swarm of tireless salesmen. The only ones who do much business are those selling fruit or pastry, for passengers often get hungry waiting for the trip to start.

We were lucky and only waited about half an hour for our poda-poda to fill up. (I have asked Sierra Leoneans what poda-poda means and they know it only as the name of the transport, but I have a feeling its derivation is that "slowly, slowly" proverb I mentioned a while back.) It took only an hour to reach the end of the paved highway at Kenema.

Kenema looks dull and depressingly familiar to an American visitor, the kind of town back home that one quickly forgets the name of but remembers something unpleasant that happened there. I half expected to come upon a Zayres or some other cheap department store basking in the harsh light of a parking lot. Instead there were nondescript buildings with big signs but no business, rows of the two-story Lebanese shops, marketplaces filled with flimsy wood platforms and gas stations crowded with more lorries. The town is at the center of the timber and diamond region, but both industries are depressed. The diamonds are running out, and the offices of the diamond dealers look less than prosperous. The Forestry Industries company, which made furniture, has just shut down, putting hundreds of people out of work. The official reason is a shortage of electricity due to a lack of fuel oil at the power station, but people on the street say this is a cover for mismanagement.

From Kenema we endured the roughest part of our journey, three hours bouncing on wooden benches, packed in the back of a bus. Feet and arms go numb after a while, as does the brain since one cannot see out and has only the vacant faces of fellow travelers to look at. It is surprising under what conditions a person can sleep when all else is deprived him, resting the head on a raised arm holding a bar to keep from tipping over into the lap of the person he faces, knee to knee. African rock screaming out of two speakers over our heads gave pleasure to some; I found it annoying.

I was grateful the day was not too hot. The sky was cloudy, the road shaded by forest, and we were headed into the high country. The blast-furnace temperatures of The Gambia and Senegal can make less arduous trips more punishing. All in all, it was not the worst traveling I've done in Africa and Pendembu was worth the effort.

Tom's friend, Dinah, another CUSO volunteer, lived on the grounds of the secondary vocational school where she taught commerce. It was on a hill about two miles from the village, overlooking grassy fields, woods and to the north a long, low mountain. A few hundred yards from her house, a small field of

sugar cane sparkled in the sun, the wispy silver crests of the plants looking like spun sugar. It was an experimental plot, and the experiment had proved a success. Dinah was unsure what had become of the follow-up plans for a large-scale sugar cane plantation. The soil around Pendembu is wonderfully fertile. Coffee and cocoa, oil palms and pineapples grow abundantly.

To me, Pendembu was like a piece of heaven. I marveled at the cool freshness and the quiet of the mornings. Mosquitoes and flies were scarce, but one had to be wary of snakes. The days were sunny but not too hot. At sunset we watched as low black clouds came flying out of the east followed by a gray curtain of rain, putting on a show like a Disney nature film. In the village the children waved and shouted pumwe (white man). When we waved back they jumped with excitement and ran to get their friends. Little girls came up smiling, but only giggled when we tried to talk to them. The village has no electricity and the water is turned on only a couple hours a day, but it was no harder living there than in Bo. The market had plenty of fish and rice and vegetables. Tom and I made dinner on Dinah's gas stove—peanut soup, excellent on rice, and fried fish.

I asked Dinah what her students at the vocational school wanted to become. "Doctors and lawyers," she said.

There was a dance in the village our first night. A band from Freetown thumped out rock music until two. I wondered if they danced to drums and native instruments any more. Village girls wear dresses and skirts in the latest fashions from Freetown when they attend a dance. A teacher told me they wouldn't be caught dead in the traditional wrap-around lappas of colored cloth.

A nightclub is supposed to open in December. At the moment the place to gather is Nadim's Supermarket. It is the size of a normal grocery store but has only about a score of different kinds of canned and bottled goods, about a caseload of each, on its shelves. A deep refrigerated chest provides cold beer. Nadim caters to Western tastes. Though the market women sell a fine peanut paste, he stocks Skippy peanut butter.

The Lebanese dominate trade from Freetown to the smallest village. Known as Syrians at first, they began to arrive in Sierra Leone about 1890, selling the same kind of cheap goods the Africans sell in the lorry parks today. Alldridge explains the secret to their success.

"The Syrian saves where the Sierra Leonean squanders. He professes nothing; he makes no show; he attends strictly to business. He does not use the parcel post for getting himself an up-to-date costume quite unsuitable to the climate, the height of his Sierra Leone neighbour's ambition....No one, except a rival, who observes their quiet plodding industry and their uncomplaining self-denial, can grudge them what they make."

I don't know if the Lebanese still stick to this regimen of diligence and discipline. The young Lebanese men in Freetown drive flashy cars and wear expensive clothes and jewelry. Most Africans still haven't learned the value of investing in the future. What they get, they spend.

The railroad was built to help the British bring the produce of the Protectorate, chiefly palm oil for soap, lubricants, margarine and explosives, out of the country, and to send their manufactured goods, especially Manchester cloth, back up. All-

dridge recognized the unfair advantage the railroad gave to the Europeans in competition with Creole and Syrian traders, which helped to enrich Britain while impoverishing Sierra Leone. He also saw the baleful influence of European imports on native industry.

"With the march of so-called civilization the paradox is presented of asking the natives on the one hand to grow cotton for the English markets, while on the other hand the English manufacturers are sending out, as an article of trade, manufactured yarns in all colours for the people to use in place of their own country-grown cotton, which they have cultivated and spun as far back as we can get at their history."

Still, he was convinced the railroad promised much for the development of the country: "...as I travelled in these higher districts now under the influence of the 'steam horse', it was impossible not to be aware of the wonderful change that has passed over them. It is difficult to describe how it has been effected, but there is an ever-recurring evidence that a powerful current of civilising influence is continually passing up from Freetown along the railway; influences that are already bearing excellent results, and which as time goes on will lead to subtle but far-reaching developments that will ultimately produce changes in the right direction provided the Hinterland is not flooded by trade liquor."

The civilizing influence of the railroad ended in 1971 when the Sierra Leone government stopped the service, unable to afford its two million dollar annual deficit. The developments the railroad set in motion continue. The railway buildings at the end of the line in Pendembu house volunteers. Some teach at the secondary school, another is supervising the construction of a simple building for a community center. When I told one of them what I was doing, she was faintly critical of my long residence in the capital.

"You have to get out of Freetown to see the real Sierra Leone," she told me.

That is the romantic Western view. Sierra Leoneans tend to have a different opinion. There is a young woman working in the library where I wrote this letter who comes from Bo. She was pleased when I told her I enjoyed my stay in her hometown; when I said I liked Pendembu even more, she thought I was crazy.

Alldrige was right. The railroad did bring a powerful current up from Freetown, but it was a current that dragged men and women out of the country and left them to sink or swim in the city. Though it is a sad commentary on modern man's inability to amuse himself without his electric toys, it is not shameful that Sierra Leoneans should prefer the filth and noise of Bo to Pendembu and of Freetown to Bo. Like the foreign volunteers, Africans find village life boring. What is shameful, and more injurious than all the trade liquor that ever flooded the country markets, is the belief that the attractions of Freetown are worth the degradation of poverty and unemployment.

Outside the window of my hotel room is the Ministry of Health. Scores of able-bodied men collect on the sidewalk around it and pass the day in a loud babble of chatter. Why

they gather there, what benefit if any they get from it, I don't know, but it doesn't look like work to me. Yet this country cannot feed itself, and there is a lot of idle land in it. I sympathize with the Gambian or the Senegalese who leaves his parched farm and ovenlike hut for Dakar or Banjul. In Sierra Leone, water is abundant, the soil is rich, the climate is mild. To shun the land for the sterile charms of Freetown looks like laziness.

That Sierra Leone suffers from a lack of industriousness among its people is evident. Tom, who is trying to help set up an oyster-farming project, complains that the Department of Fisheries workers under him go to sleep on the job.

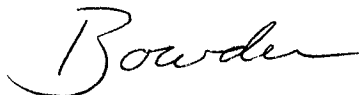
"They say they are paid to go there," he explains. "To get them to work, you have to pay them extra."

A Peace Corps volunteer working with primary school teachers finds her work frustrating because they will not do any preparation for their classes.

"Their work day goes from eight o'clock in the morning to two o'clock in the afternoon. The rest of the time they won't even think about teaching," she said.

It is not enough to say that colonialism has destroyed the Sierra Leoneans' will to work, though it may be true. The question is whether foreign aid, which some call a form of neo-colonialism, is nurturing parasitism here.

Regards,



Bowden Quinn

Received in Hanover 11/12/80