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**J. B. King**

M.D., F.R.C.P. Ed. Department of Anatomy, Edinburgh University

### Abstract

Dr. James Balfour Baikie died, aged thirty nine, on the West Coast of Africa one hundred years ago. His name appears in the History of the Royal Medical Society as having been its President in 1847-48: that and nothing, absolutely nothing, more. Yet this man was one of the most remarkable of the many great medical graduates of Edinburgh in the nineteenth century and his name is revered by all scholars of West African history.

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# J. B. BAIKIE — DOCTOR AND EXPLORER

J. B. KING, M.D., F.R.C.P.Ed.

Department of Anatomy, Edinburgh University

Dr. James Balfour Baikie died, aged thirty-nine, on the West Coast of Africa one hundred years ago. His name appears in the History of the Royal Medical Society as having been its President in 1847-48; that and nothing, absolutely nothing, more. Yet this man was one of the most remarkable of the many great medical graduates of Edinburgh in the nineteenth century and his name is revered by all scholars of West African history.

Nearly a hundred years after Baikie's death, Professor Perham writes: "He was a man of rather different type from the other great African travellers. His tastes were extremely cultivated (the catalogue of his large library, which was sold after his death, shows this very clearly): by temperament he was a calm and dispassionate scientist—an intellectual rather than a moral or spiritual crusader; cool, humane, above all intelligent." It was his use of quinine prophylactically, and subsequent successful establishment of an interior trading post on the Niger that altered the entire course of British foreign policy in West Africa. There is surely enough here to justify a biographical note in "Res Medica".

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, towards the end of the slave trade, the European powers became interested in West Africa for more legitimate activities which might still prove profitable. There was confusion in the underlying motives of the expeditions which were sent out. Sometimes their primary object was to be the suppression of the slave trade, sometimes the spread of Christianity, and sometimes the pushing of the sales of Manchester goods. A philanthropic society even sent sixty London prostitutes to Sierra Leone to make them honest women by marriage with the natives. The interior of the country was virtually unknown although there had been trading stations along the coast for several centuries. Wild tales were told of the potential wealth of the inland territories because of the ivory and gold which were brought down

the rivers. Sometimes openly, but more often surreptitiously, the great European powers financed exploration parties which drew up strange informal treaties with the local tribal chiefs. The result was a confusion of conflicting territorial claims which were reconciled in 1885 at Berlin in a manner which was a credit to no one. Among other territories the vast stretch of country which is now Nigeria fell to the British. A sequence of heroic explorers had proved that a great river flowed from about Timbuktu on the southern edge of the Sahara into the Atlantic but all efforts to find its mouth failed until Richard Lander, having been taken prisoner well inland, was brought down for barter on the coast. Thus was the delta of the Niger discovered. Between 1795 and 1855, thirteen expeditions had ascended the Niger and gradually charted its course finding that it divided about two hundred and fifty miles inland where the Benue turns South towards the Cameroon mountains. The fate of these expeditions was almost uniformly disastrous. The very first British expedition in 1553 had had a crew of 140 Europeans of whom only 40 returned alive. In 1832, of an expedition of 48 men with Laird and Lauder, 9 survived. In 1841, the Powell Buxton expedition lost more than a third of its white crew. Not only had the mortality been appalling, but the expected wealth had not materialised, and by 1850 British foreign policy was set against any further attempts to develop the interior, it being considered that the climate was such that no European could survive for any useful period. Moreover the riverine tribes were far from complacent and those towards the delta took strenuous action against vessels attempting to move inland and undermine their monopoly of the river borne trade. It was against this background that MacGregor Laird organised and financed with Government support yet one more expedition. MacGregor Laird was a man of the greatest perseverance and but for his vision the development of Nigeria would

have been long postponed. The expedition sailed in 1854 with Baikie as ship surgeon. It was to have been led up the Niger by Consul Beccroft of Fernando Po, but he had died there before it arrived and Baikie took charge. His account of the expedition was published in 1856. The quality of the man is probably better shown by extracts than in any other way, but let it be remembered that at the time of writing Baikie was only 29 years old. Moreover, no one who has not actually experienced the humid heat and insect life of tropical rain forests can have any idea of the stoicism quietly inferred in these pages. Baikie's routine was a fourteen hour day and: "I, in addition, always slept on deck and was roused regularly at twelve o'clock, and at three in the morning for the purpose of recording meteorological observations, but while in the river, I had constant health. I mention these circumstances to show that, under proper precautions, Europeans may not only live quietly, but even commit with impunity what, some years ago, would have been considered as terrible indiscretions."

Baikie was a passionately accurate observer of all that went on around him.

"The average price of a stout male slave is from ten to twelve bags of salt, or from 60,000 to 70,000 cowries, and for a good-looking young female, eight to ten bags of salt, or from 45,000 to "50,000 cowries."

"In New Kalabár circumcision is universal, in Bonny it is only practised on slaves. In Bonny the breasts of the women very soon become loose, flaccid, and pendulous, while in New Kalabár they keep plump and firm; the men too, of New Kalabár are more determined and warlike."

"The principal marks are three perpendicular ones along the breast and belly, the centre one being straight, and side ones being curved; another behind, following the curve of the armpit, and going downwards; seven short, perpendicular incisions on the forehead, and a curved row of small lines under each eye."

Baikie was an able geographer and linguist, being able to record comprehensibly the innumerable tribal place names and dialects which he met:

"Adamáwa is not synonymous with the name Fumbina, but merely, I apprehend, applies to that portion of it which has been conquered by the Púlbe (i.e. Fulátas). I am inclined to think that formerly along the south side of the Binue, from the confluence of the Kwóra to

the Fáro, there were three extensive territories, namely A'kpoto, Korórofa, and Fumbina, and that all the other tribes are of more recent origin. Thus the Mitsi tribe has encroached partly on A'kpoto, and partly on Korórofa . . ."

Baikie had that imperturbability which alone enabled the great explorers of Africa to survive:

" . . . I had walked alone for from seven to eight miles, when I lost almost all trace of the path. Having ascertained by my compass the position of the river, I endeavoured to work my way in that direction, but soon got more entangled than ever. I climbed up several trees to look around, but could not discover a single guiding mark. I was completely in the bush, the grass and brushwood being so long, thick and close, that every step I took was a severe exertion. It was now past sunset, and getting rapidly dark, and as it was only too evident that I had lost my way without any chance of bettering myself, the next question came to be how I should pass the night. The most comfortable and safest spot seemed to be up a tree, so I tried one, and got as high as I could, but did not much relish my quarters. All the others near me were too small, but I recollected having observed some time before a tall Baobab, which I determined again to search after. I took a good mark, so that, if unsuccessful in my cruise, I still might have something to fall back upon, and starting with a good run to clear the grass, was fortunate enough in a few minutes to get a glimpse of the wished-for harbour of refuge. Luckily for me it had a double trunk, with a distance between of about two feet; so tying my shoes together, and casting them over my shoulder, I placed my back against the one trunk, and my feet against the other, and so managed to climb until I got hold of a branch by which I swung myself further up, and finally got into a spot about twelve or fifteen feet from the ground. Here I placed myself on a branch, about a foot in diameter, projecting at nearly right angles, and by leaning against the main trunk and stretching out my legs before me, I found I had a tolerably comfortable seat, when I might peer into surrounding obscurity."

When the "Pleiad" could proceed no further Baikie continued for two days by pinnace, but ran into hostile natives at Dulti on the Benue and could get no further. But the main objects of the expedition had been fulfilled, there had been no casualties and a return was made after sixteen weeks in the river.

Baikie's success with the expedition of 1854 made him the obvious choice as a leader of a

further expedition which set out in 1857 in the "Dayspring". His achievement this time, though less spectacular, was no less remarkable and ultimately important. All went well until the vessel was completely wrecked at Jebba three hundred and fifty miles up the Niger. There was no loss of life and all returned home except Baikie who stayed on and maintained virtually single-handed for five years the first inland trading centre in Nigeria. This was at the confluence of the Niger and Benue, where there is now the large and quite important trading town of Lokoja. But at that time there was no settlement and it was here that Baikie lived and established for himself and for the British an extraordinary prestige, entirely without force of arms. Not only did he become recognised as a safe rallying point for those fleeing from the slave raiding peoples of the North but without violence maintained peace among the tribes over a vast area where peace had never been known.

Baikie received permission to return home in 1864, but died on the way in the house of a fellow Orcadian at Sierra Leone. He was only thirty-nine years of age.

Hundreds of brave and devoted men have died unrecorded in the development of the vast continent of Africa. Baikie's name deserves to be remembered firstly because of his achievement in taking an expedition into the interior and maintaining it without a casualty by the use of quinine prophylactically and secondly by establishing, developing and holding the town that is now Lokoja.

The Romans had protected themselves from malaria empirically by the use of nets. Quinine in the form of cinchona bark had been used for centuries as a treatment for "ague" and "fever". Laveran did not discover the malaria parasite until 1880, and in 1883 King showed Anopheles to be the vector by biting. Baikie's prophylactic use of quinine was therefore empirical, but this in no way detracts from his feat in enforcing a routine which maintained health by the taking of five grains night and morning.

There is no means of knowing from what Baikie died, a diagnosis of "fever" being then acceptable on the West Coast. But it is more than probable that he died from malaria by discontinuing his quinine a few days too early. It was only later that the necessity of continuing treatment throughout the potential incubation period of the parasite was realised.

There was a saying that outside Sierra Leone the bones of those dying at sea were so numerous as to impede the boat.

The question of descendants from Baikie is one of the greatest difficulty because in his time escaped slaves frequently took the name of their white protector and with recent political developments it is common for those to have been given up in favour of African names.

James Balfour Baikie was born at Kirkwall on August 27th, 1825, came to Edinburgh University from Orkney, and lodged at 14 Pitt Street. It was a great period in the history of the medical school. The Chair of Anatomy was held by Alexander Monro, tertius, that of Materia Medica by Christison, of Surgery by Syme and Midwifery by Simpson. Baikie took his M.D. in 1847 with a Thesis on the "Mode of treating persons who have been cut down when suspended by the neck". In March 1848, he entered the Royal Navy serving successively in the "Volage", "Vanguard", "Ceylon" and "Medusa". Following a cruise on the "Hibernia" in the Mediterranean he became assistant surgeon at Haslar in 1851 and remained there until his appointment to the "Pleid" which had been built by MacGregor Laird specifically for the Third Niger Expedition of 1854. During his life Baikie received only the scantiest official recognition but after death was not without honour in his own country. There is a large freestone monument to him in St. Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall. On it is the epitaph written by his friend Colonel Balfour of Balfour and Tunabie: "William Balfour Baikie, R.N., F.R.S.Scot. Born at Kirkwall 27th August 1825. The Explorer of the Niger and Tchadda, the Translator of the Bible into the languages of Central Africa, and the Pioneer of Education, Commerce and Progress among its many nations. He devoted his life, means and talents to make the heathen savage and slave a free and Christian man. For Africa he opened up new paths to light, wealth and liberty; for Europe new fields of science, enterprise and beneficence; he won for Britain new honour and influence and for himself the respect, affections and confidences of the chiefs and people. He earned the love of those whom he commanded and the thanks of those whom he served, and left to all a brave example of humanity, perseverance and self sacrifice to duty. But the climate from which his skill and kindness shielded so many, was fatal to himself and when relieved at last, though too late, he died at Sierra Leone 12th December, 1864."