**Casement to Claude MacDonald**

**TNA FO 2.64**

**microfilm/19-29**

Old Calabar,

July 4th, 1894.

Sir,

In accordance with your instructions to endeavour to find the best line of country for making a road between the lower course of the cross River and the Kwo Ibo river, I proceeded in the "Evangeline" on 18th June to James Town, accompanied by Captain Lalor to assist me in compiling a traverse of the route.

Believing that Oron would be the most suitable point of departure for a road to Eket, we left our porters and loads there in passing, hoping to return the next day from James Town with guides and information gathered from J.E. Sassy, the Chief of that district.

Unfortunately, we found him absent from his town, and on the following day we determined to return to Oron, and make a start inland, trusting to find guides, either sent across country from Eket by Mr. Whitehouse who had been informed of our intentions, or among the Oron people themselves.

We travelled for three hours by canoe in a northwesterly direction from James Town up the Ibo or Obokpo river passing several tributaries or tidal mangrove creeks opening into the west bank, and at length reached the landing place of a village called Oraiya, situated at the head waters of an easterly feeder beyond the mangrove limit of this waterway.

The next day we set out on foot guided by one of the James Town canoe boys to walk back to the point on the Cross River where we had left our men and loads.

We marched for three hours and a half in an easterly direction, passing through several large villages of the Oron tribe, whose inhabitants turned out in crowds to greet us as we proceeded rapidly on our way. Not knowing how far we might be from our men's camp on the banks of the Cross River which we were anxious to reach before night, we were unwilling to delay our journey to talk to these people, in spite of their evident desire to be friendly.

At noon we gained the bank of the Cross River, a couple of miles below where our men had landed, having come about fifteen miles N.E. from Oraniye, and getting a trade canoe, we came up to their camp at James Henshaw's house in the afternoon.

Here we could learn nothing of the guides from Eket we had hoped to find waiting for us, nor could any of the Calabar traders help us with their own people, or in overcoming the repugnance of the natives to accept the responsibility for introducing whitemen into the country, attaching in their eyes, to the village or people who gave guides.

Despite the absence of guides we started inland on the following day, the 21st June, but had not gone more than a mile and a half, to the town of Eye Absi, when we found the natives unwilling to help us to go beyond that point.

After explaining to the headmen of this town the object of our coming, and the full intention of the Government to make a road from Oron to Eket, utilising the villages along the line for its construction and maintenance, I determined in the face of heavy rain and the evident delay attendant upon a journey without guides through a more or less unwilling population to abandon the attempt to get through to Eket from Oron, and to make a start instead from James Town, where, I had been led to believe, James E. Bassy had already done much to prepare the people for our visit, and to secure guides.

Accordingly we returned to Oron beach and came down to James Town in the surf boat.

Here we were delayed two days waiting for the chief's return to give us boys.

On Saturday the 22nd, we set out in an easterly direction through the cultivated fields surrounding the houses of the different Ibaka villages which extend inland nearly a mile from the banks of the Opokpo River to the commencement of the swampy forest, which, beginning here, runs south to the shore of the sea, and west to the Ibeno country along the lower Kwo Ibo river,, affording shelter and food to numbers of elephants, antelope, monkeys, and, I believe, a species of "bush" cow or buffalo.

This swampy forest contains no villages, and it is only traversed - and I might add, is only then traversable - during the dry season by stray Eket hunters, whose villages run along its northern boundaries, where the land sloping upwards, at first in hillocks only, quickly attains at a distance of from 10 to 12 miles from the sea the open cultivated plateau level of 10 to 150 feet extending between the Lower Cross and Kwo Ibo rivers.

The general altitude of this depressed tract of forest whose extreme length might be 2 miles from East to West by 6 or 8 miles from North to South, cannot be more than from ten to fifteen feet above the sea, and on the east and west it is invaded by long tidal inlet, from Efiat on one side and the Kwo Ibo river at Ibeno on the other, into whose upper reaches at all seasons of the year its overflowing waters escape.

The exact line of parting between the streams bearing this surplus water east and west, is at the best, almost impossible of definition, for the sources of the Efait and Kwo Ibo creeks lie in the still, matted weed grown expanses of water or deep silent forest pools of the very heart of this region eight or nine miles inland from the seashore. In very heavy rains, there must exist in this neighbourhood an accumulations of waters seeking an outlet in all directions, by the creeks or overflowing the sands along the seashore, that were it an open body of water might be called a lake - but being entirely shadowed by the thick shade of the trees whose trunks bear annual record of its rise and fall, it is hard to say which of the divisions of water known to Geography it belongs.

Our path carried us along the northeastern limits of this forest, at times entering its shadow, or traversing its deep channels of rainwater overflowing into the Uda creek to the north - at others, rising 40 and 50 feet on knolls and slopes where trees ended and cultivation and villages took their place.

After passing through the villages of Abason, Oiritu and the deserted clearing of a town once called Odinga, all situated on palm covered, well cultivated slopes, we reached the village of Nkontiga at 1.30., having travelled about 7 to 8 miles in a East North Easterly direction.

Nkontiga we found situated near the head of the tidal Uda creek which, draining the forest from the South, flows north and east into the Obolpo river. The bed of this creek was from 300 to 400 yards broad and the rise and fall of tide from 5 to 6 feet. At low tide it cannot be more than 2 feet deep, for soon after low water our carriers waded across to the far shore less than waist deep.

A steam launch might at high tide proceed from James Town to Nkontiga by this creek, but she would probably be stranded during low water.

The Nkontiga people were very friendly - as were those of Ofiuda, less than a mile on across the Creek, where we halted for the night.

The people of Nkontiga and Ofiuda struck us as being very poor, although their farms are fertile and palm trees numerous, while their towns, situated on good land fully 50 or 60 feet above the forest and creeks, are clean and well built. The reasons for this must be sought in the probably necessity they are under to trade with Calabar men on the terms imposed by the latter.

Indeed, that this is more than a supposition may be judged from the fact that at these, as at all the villages we halted at in this district, the Chiefs begged for a whiteman to come and trade with them, or at any rate, to establish more intimate trade relations between themselves and us.

Leaving Ofiuda next day (Sunday 23) after a heavy night's rain and entering a forest strip, we quickly found ourselves stopped by a flooded stream called the Urimeku, which flows into the Uda creek north of where we crossed it at Ntontiga. A native bridge lay under water, but we found footing on one timber that still stretched across, and by this means we were all able to pass over one by one.

/soon after this, we again crossed the Urimeku, more than 5 feet deep, by wading it, and entered Arukum, the first Eket town, where we made a midday halt. The people crowded round in a very friendly manner and gave us two guides on to Itebbi, which lay well N.W. [can’t read]. From Arkum to Itebbi we traversed a broad, open plain with low scrub bush, the growth of one or two seasons, on land that had been allowed to fall out of cultivation, mingled with numerous oil palms. After about four miles march, we entered Itebbi, a village enclosed in a network of palisades and stout wooden fences, some of which were seven or eight feet high. The people here greeted us very timidly at first and some even got ready to fight, but after several hours of enforced halt and talking, the Chiefs agreed to give us people to take us on to Ntaenyan where J.E. Bassy had told us we might get some men from the Chief Ekoninyan to go on to Eket.

A crowd of the Itebbi people came part of the way on to Ntaenyan with us, and after going S.W. for about 2½ miles and wading fully half a mile nearly neck deep in water flowing w through the forest, we arrived at Ntaenyan at 7 o'clock in rain and darkness. The few people about ran away from us, but we found shelter for the night in the house of Ekoninyan.

Next day in continuous rain, we held a meeting of the headmen, who begged us to abandon the attempt to go on to Eket at once, on the double ground of the flooded state of the country and the hostile reception we were certain to meet with at the hands of the villages beyond them if we entered that country unannounced. There were eighteen villages between themselves and Eket, they said, and if we would wait until the dry season when people could travel in safety, they would do their best to open the road for us by sending messengers and going themselves to talk to the unruly villages who, if we attempted to go on today, would most surely attack us.

Failing to get any other response to my repeated assurances that if they would give us guides, we were willing to accept the risk of being attacked, and the rain continuing to fall with unprecedented violence throughout the day and night, we determined the following morning to return by canoe (Tuesday 26th) from the trading beach on the upper waters of the Efiat creek at which J.E. Bassy had a house and men, and which the natives told us lay about two miles to the south of their town.

Accordingly we set out at 10.30 after a slight break in the rain, and quickly descending the cultivated southern slopes entered the forest, only to find the path entirely under water.

Wading for half a mile in water up to the shoulders and waist, we found it rapidly deepening, until it rose over our heads.

Those of the men who could swim pushed on, floating their loads in front of them and resting by climbing into branches of the trees that stretched all round, or, wherever at intervals they could touch the bottom and wade; but the non swimmers had to be floated along on rafts of some old fishing stakes we fortunately found and lashed together. We did not get down to the beach until 5 p.m. although the distance could not have been more than a mile and a half from the beginning of the water, and even then several of our men were left behind and had to climb into trees (tying their loads to the branches) where we were forced to leave them all night. We swam back several times, and tried up to 8 o'clock to get them off, but in the darkness could not find them and they were not reached by a relief party until 8 o'clock next morning when they had been nearly twenty hours clinging to the trees, exposed to pitiless rain and without food.

As all our stores, clothing, books &c had been more or less under water, we determined on hastening back to Jamestown in a canoe of J.E. Bassy's we found at his trading beach, and at 10 o'clock we left Ntaenyan Beach and reached the mouth of the Efiat Creek at 2 p.m. - a distance, I judged, of some 16 miles in a S.E. direction, and thence proceeded up the creek opening into the Cross River just below James Town, whence we returned next day to Calabar.

The glimpse of the country obtained on our short march from Oraiye to James Henshaw's house, confirmed the impression already derived from the appearance of the land at this latter spot as seen from the Cross River, that Oron is the best point of departure for a road to Eket. Not only does Oron beach rise at once from 40 to 50 feet above the river, thus contrasting strongly with the intangible bank of mangrove trees and mud, elsewhere offered by this portion of its course, but the country immediately inland maintains and increases this altitude until a height of fully 100 feet above the river is attained in the extensive levels we traversed from Oraiye. These were well inhabited and apparently well under cultivation, and in our 14 or 15 miles march, we crossed only one stream of any size, and this, although swollen by rain to a breadth of 20 or 25 yards, offered no obstacles to easy bridging.

Oron lies in about 4 degrees 49' North latitude, and probably 8 degrees 16' East Longitude, while I made Eket to be in 4.37.30 N and longitude 7 degrees 54' E.

Eket is placed several miles north of this on the Admiralty Chart, I believe, and the distance between the two points by that chart is about 25 miles, which may be assumed to be not far from the truth. The native paths at present no doubt make considerable detours - but there is no reason why a road from Oron to Eket should measure more than 33 or 34 miles, which allows one third of the distance as the crow flies, for windings to avoid obstacles or obtain better levels, in rounding hollows or heads of streams.

I believe from my present knowledge that no considerable cutting of forest would be necessary, but that it would be found more or less a work of clearing grass and shrubs all the way.

That plenty of native labour could be obtained from the villages en route I am convinced; but it will require some time and considerable patience to arrive at an understanding with the people as to their duties in this respect.

Up to the present, no whiteman has ever penetrated a mile from Oron or from Eket one might say. The people of the latter district fear our coming and dislike it even more than they fear it, and to overcome this distrust and suspicion of us, and disinclination to admit the whiteman - and particularly the “Consul” - to their country, will be the work of time, and will require persistent effort.

My view of these people may be a wrong one, but I believe their dislike to the whiteman getting into their country is founded far less on their fears of the harm we may do them, than on their dread of the good we may do them.

Our ways are not their ways - They have made evil their good; they cling to their cruelties and superstitions, their idion crowns, and symbols of fetish power, their right to buy and sell man - to the simple emblems as well as the substantial advantages of savage life - and claim to practice upon one another's bodies the cruel punishments which, as they themselves say, from the beginning of the world existed despite the whiteman or his laws.

To all such, the coming of “the Consul” means 'red ruin and the breaking up of laws' and our roads into their midst, and the good we seek to do them are equally hateful, for both foreshadow the end of their own power to do after the fashion of their fathers.

The method I would suggest to pave the way for a journey next dry season to Eket would be to employ James Henshaw, or any other Calabar man having influence in Oron, in sending messengers and removing from the minds of the people the belief that we intend to "make war" upon them, or that we have any object against their liberty in seeking to enter their country - while at the same time impressing on them that, whether they like it or not, we intend making the road, and that they will benefit far more by helping than by trying to oppose, or by standing sullenly aside.

It will require more than one journey of whitemen - after this preliminary work of the Calabar men has achieved the desired result, before the best tracing for a road can be finally decided on; since the first journey will of necessity be undertaken entirely in the footsteps of native guides who will conduct whoever is going across by the paths their own interests or fears dictate, and the route so traversed may not be the best one along which to construct a good road. Subsequent observation can only determine this.

While keenly regretting our noon-success from both Oron and James Town, our journey has not been altogether barren of result. We have laid, at the first place the first stone in the path that I trust will ere long unite the Kwo Ibo river to Calabar, while negatively we have proved the necessity of Oron being chosen as the starting point from the proven impossibility of the low lying district behind James Town offering the physical features necessary to the construction of a roadway required to be kept permanently open and free from stoppage.

We have further proved that, to be of political value, such as we desire our public routes to be, no road should be laid nearer the sea than a line from Oron to Eket could give us.

The further inland we make our roads, the larger the districts we cut in two, and the greater the influence they will exercise on the bordering country - while if we seek for a route down near the sea,, we shall only have human beings on one side of us - and the inland people, whose present boast is that we dare not come near their country, will only see, in our clinging to the neighbourhood of the seashore, a fresh proof of their view that the whiteman has no power or wish to go beyond the guns of a man-of-war.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your obedient Servant,

[signed] Roger Casement

H.B.M's Acting Consul General,

Old Calabar.