



African Exploits: The Diaries of William Stairs, 1887-1892

Roy D. MacLaren

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Born and raised in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Stairs (1863-1892) attended the Royal Military College in Kingston before being commissioned in the British army. Wearied of peacetime soldiering, he volunteered in 1887 to participate in Sir Henry M. Stanley's final trans-African expedition to rescue Emin Pasha, the last of "Chinese" Gordon's lieutenants in the Sudan. The expedition emerged almost three years later in Zanzibar, a reluctant Pasha in tow, having left a trail of havoc and suffering behind it. Stairs promptly volunteered for a second expedition in Africa to secure Katanga for King Leopold II of the Belgians as part of the controversial Congo Free State. Stairs was a cruel leader, condoning decapitation and mutilation to attain colonial ends. The expedition succeeded, but at the price of suffering, destruction, and his own life: Stairs died of malaria at the end of the expedition at the age of twenty-eight. Few diaries of the period convey better than Stairs's the nature and course of imperialist expeditions in Africa in the nineteenth century and the psychological and moral corruption caused by absolute power. Stairs's diaries of the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition present a candid, personal account of the long and arduous venture, including a very unflattering assessment of Stanley, whom Stairs described as cruel, secretive, and selfish. The Katanga diaries, written as an official company account of the expedition, were intended partly to provide information useful to those intent upon exploiting the African hinterland. African Exploits is the most complete published collection of Stairs's diaries, with a new translation of the Katanga diaries, which no longer exist in the original English. Roy MacLaren's introduction and conclusion set Stairs's adventures in the colonial context of the era and analyse the psychological effects of his experiences.

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