Kilimanjaro and its First Ascent – 6 October 1889

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It is a huge mountain. The volume of lava erupted over its million years of activity exceeds 4000 cubic kilometres. Dumped on the Home Counties (the southern bias of the AC would necessitate this), it would spread from Reading to Rochester. The summit crater alone would have its eastern rim 5800m above Tower Bridge and the western rim somewhere above South Audley Street, appropriately a few metres higher. It would seem to be the biggest land-based volcanic cone and, until the top 600m or so collapsed forming the summit crater (strictly: caldera), it may well have been the highest.

With side slopes averaging seven degrees, classic Gothic mountain scenery is limited to the Western Breach of Kibo and to the older, more deeply eroded eastern peak Mawenzi, especially its E face. Both have been termed 'The Eiger of Africa'. The summit crater, however, is like nowhere else on earth. A formal pattern of concentric cone/crater structures in sombre blacks and ochres is decorated by the terraced remnants of the ice-fields. Fretted and fluted, glittering silver in the sun or smouldering blue in the shadows, it looks like a moonscape. The sweeping dome of the sky and the absence of any distraction from rival peaks reinforce the sense that you are indeed standing on the edge of space. On a moonless night illusion and reality meld and you can reach out, over the edge, to the stars.

Kilimanjaro is best seen from some distance to the north or south. The graceful sweep of the forested slopes provides a majestic pedestal for the three summit areas. The oldest, imploded Shira to the west is now a plateau rather than a peak. Rugged Mawenzi, to the east, is a shipwreck of a mountain. Between and above them stands the symmetrical cone of Kibo. The whole massif is a balance of contrasting shapes, a scenic unity from the spreading thorn trees on the steppe in the foreground to the ethereal and seemingly inaccessible ice-capped summit.

The shape of the hill and its equatorial position give it a benign character, considering its Himalayan scale. In contrast to neighbouring Mount Kenya, it is a democratic mountain, its summit accessible to all. If you can get to the bottom and pay fees rather steeper than the mountain itself, and can walk uphill for four or five days, you can get to the top. The crowded huts, the sparse oxygen and the execrable scree may make it less than totally enjoyable. The summit – tatty unless the rubbish is hidden by fresh snow – is likely to be reached with relief rather than euphoria. But the mountain will not have tried to kill you.

Wilful negligence on a suicidal scale is needed to make Kilimanjaro even averagely dangerous. The greatest hazard Meyer faced once he was climbing was that of falling into a well-concealed eight-metre-deep elephant trap.

Homicidal leopards have been reported in the forest (as well as the freeze-dried specimen found on the crater rim). A lone hippy did die of exposure in the Western Breach but he had set out alone, ignorant of the route and apparently with only a few oranges as supplies. Serious climbing is available – Messner is reported as saying that his ascent of the Breach Wall Icicle was the most dangerous thing he had done. And Barber and Taylor had an epic accident on that route, but their trip could be re-run as a soap opera – a kind of 'Dallas on Ice'.

Kilimanjaro lacks the vindictive bad weather of serious mountains. Go up in March or in one of the other rainy-season months if you must have your mountains wet, but even then you could be disappointed; the upper slopes get less precipitation in a year than some parts of the Sahara.

The lower slopes get a couple of metres of rain a year. For the people of the area, Chagga on the southern side and Masai to the drier north, Kilimanjaro acts like a great water tower, storing and supplying a huge oasis as fertile as the surrounding steppes are barren. The Masai in their prime – before they were wasted by disease and expropriation, shackled by Pax Britannica and, ultimate indignity, subjected to the 'democratic' control of the more numerous tribes – had an uncompromising way with visitors. Convinced that their way of life was the best of all possible ways, they were not to be seduced from prehistory to the 19th century. They neither feared nor coveted its gadgets. Happy to steal from caravans, they had little interest in trade, valuing their cattle more highly than trinkets. Well-armed caravans kept clear of their side of the mountain. The Chagga, in contrast, were deeply involved in trade – the East Coast slave trade. With their numbers and mountain stronghold they should have been safe; but the rivers which cut deep dividing valleys helped to produce a political geography of 20 or so clans, each in a state of hostility towards its neighbours. Travellers could be a source of weapons and might even be recruited as allies. Meanwhile, if they could be detained, they could be milked.

In 1848 Johannes Rebmann was the first European to report the snow-capped mountain, 3°S. The Chagga he questioned revealed that attempts to collect the 'silver' from the mountain failed because it turned to water when it was carried down in a container. Considerable scepticism was expressed, especially by an Irish 'armchair' geographer, Cooley. He had made a reputation refuting other travellers' tales and, provoked perhaps by the gross under-estimate of Kibo's height (3800m), he was positively abrasive in his disbelief of the missionary. Indeed, it seems that he had a 'passage at arms' with the next European visitor, Baron von der Decken, over the latter's report of an overnight snowstorm at 4300m in 1862.

The next would-be conqueror of Kibo was the English missionary New, in 1871. His problems were with the wily one-eyed Chagga chief, Mandara. It is fitting that Mandara's name was given to the former Bismarck hut when it was expropriated by the Tanzanian Government and the fees for its use vastly inflated. Mandara was delighted to have visitors. He would provide a camp-site near his village. Gifts would be exchanged and Mandara would affect dissatisfaction in sulk or rage. More gifts would appease him. Trade in fresh food would resume. Mandara would pay his visitor a call and inspect or rather

mentally catalogue property not well hidden and ask for anything that took his fancy. Refusal produced rage and a crisis. Food trade ceased. Arrogant spearmen would jostle and intimidate the porters. The water supply, an irrigation leat sourced in a distant deep ravine, would be diverted. The traveller could trim or cut and run. If he looked serious about leaving, Mandara compromised.

New eventually got Mandara's permission to start up the mountain, but found that his own men were largely psyched out by Chagga horror stories and few would go with him. The Chagga guides regarded the journey as a chance to do some private-enterprise slaving and it must surely be a unique record for a missionary's mountaineering expedition that a woman was enslaved, though but briefly. New did reach the snow-line, but his second expedition in 1873 was a total disaster. Mandara, bolder, robbed him of everything but his life, and that he lost on the way back to the coast.

Johnston, in 1884, spent six months in the area on a mainly scientific expedition sponsored by the British Association and the Royal Geographical Society. Mandara effectively obstructed his efforts to get up the mountain and Meyer is distinctly sceptical of his claim to have reached over 4900m. Johnston's expedition does mark the intrusion of imperialism as the Scramble for Africa speeded up. Kilimanjaro was briefly involved, as it was located in the disputed zone where the German and British spheres of influence overlapped, like badly fitted carpet.

Mandara distinguished himself by concluding treaties recognizing the suzerainty, first of the British-backed Sultan of Zanzibar and then, a few weeks later, that of the Germans who promised greater rewards. The eventual acceptance of this by the British reflected perceived gains elsewhere in the wider diplomatic game. That the mountain was not a gift from Queen Victoria to Kaiser Wilhelm seems to be an established fact. The job of journalists then and since has been to process the news and the myth persists. I quote an example from *East Africa* by Read: 'The division of British from German East Africa was, with one exception, drawn along a ruler edge . . . That exception was Kilimanjaro . . . It may or may not be true but it is at least *ben trovato* that the youthful Kaiser Wilhelm, when staying at Osborne, took the map of East Africa and tearfully entreated Queen Victoria thus: "Oh please, Grandma, do let me keep that big mountain."'

Sportsmen explorers such as the Hungarian Count Teleki visited the area; he reached 5300m. When he met the inbound Meyer in 1887, he was able to give him up-to-date advice. Meyer was already well prepared; he had climbed in the Alps and the Himalaya and had travelled extensively in tropical Asia and Central America. Also he was powerfully motivated. As a geoscientist he had an academic interest; his patriotism urged him to promote German imperial interests which the authorities seemed to be neglecting; the publicity that a successful ascent would bring would be gratifying; but, above all, he was going for the adventure. His addiction to safari life shows through, and he certainly gives the impression of being more at home travelling than on what was surely very straightforward ice-climbing. Without any obvious technical problems Kibo must have seemed like a ripe plum, a happy combination of duty and

pleasure. 'Kilimanjaro,' he wrote, 'was discovered by a German . . . , it was first explored by a German . . . , it seemed to me to be almost a national duty that a German should be the first to tread the summit . . . certainly the highest in the German Empire.'

Meyer did, however, have to take three bites, and he admits to an obsessive hunger as his appetite was sharpened by failure. His first expedition of 1887 went very well up to 4300m, where his companion gave up with mountain sickness. Meyer went on, reaching the edge of the ice-cap at 5400m. An ice wall, typical of the mountain, barred his way. Alone and without ice gear he retreated, confident that he had found the solution to the problems of getting to and getting up Kilimanjaro.

He immediately organized a second expedition. As the conquest seemed rather a formality other objectives were included, involving the exploration of mountain areas as far inland as the Ruwenzori. A commercial caravan was engaged to place a depot of supplies near Lake Victoria. An army of 230 porters left Tanga and, while most of them slowly followed the caravan route, Meyer went to explore the delightful Usambara range.

His caravan was not at the rendezvous. Without proper leadership, it had been sent back and disbanded as the coastal people rose in armed revolt against the Germans. Meyer went in pursuit to try to salvage his expedition but was 'overpowered, maltreated and loaded with chains until eventually I was able to purchase our freedom by the payment of a heavy ransom'.

Relieved to escape with his life, he immediately started to organize the third expedition. He recruited the outstanding Austrian amateur mountaineer Ludwig Purtscheller as companion, generously but justly giving him credit for his major contribution to their success. When some of their baggage went on to India in error, depriving them of their tents and some climbing equipment, he was able to have replacements made in Zanzibar, except for his crampons. Through the good offices of the British commander in Zanzibar, he was able to circumvent the ban on gun imports and get a lift on a gunboat to Mombasa.

Meyer craftily nursed his caravan for the first few stages, until it was far enough into the wilderness to discourage desertion; then he drove it forward quickly. He based himself briefly at Mandara's court where his gifts bought a few days' goodwill, but he soon relocated his party further east with an old friend, Chief Mareale, at Marangu.

He adopted the classic siege tactics of Base Camp, Advanced Base, Camp 1, etc, to ensure the regular supply of food to the Saddle between Kibo and Mawenzi. The first assault, on 3 October 1889, had probably not allowed enough time for acclimatization. Despite a 2.30am start, it was 10am before they got on to the ice. Some of their impetus had been lost in a route error. There are hints of disagreements as to the best line. Meyer favoured a direct line towards the summit, but the more experienced Purtscheller appears to have preferred a route which avoided height loss by keeping to a curving ridge on the NW side of the SE valley. In the event, at least an hour was lost descending into and across the SE valley. The only technical problem was a steep bulge of ice up which Purtscheller, happily in possession of crampons, cut steps to reach the fissured surface of the Ratzel glacier. The crater rim, at 5870m (Meyer's

estimates are understandably inflated by about 120m), was reached at 1.30pm. The summit was 150m higher and 1500m away. Their hunger for success was blunted by altitude sickness and the prospect of a bivouac, so they retreated, consoled to be the first to see the summit crater, and they got back to camp after dark, very weary with headaches, slight snow-blindness and considerable sunburn. Their experiences have been unwittingly re-enacted by thousands since who reach the crater rim and give up.

Recuperating next day, they set out at noon on 5 October, making for a bivouac in the SE valley at about 4600m. After a 3am start on the 6th, in welcome moonlight, dawn found them shivering with cold at the edge of the ice. When the sun rose behind Mawenzi they resumed, relieved to find their steps still serviceable. By 9am they were at their previous high point and at half-past ten, 'I was the first to set foot on the culminating peak . . . Taking out a small German flag . . . I planted it on the weather-beaten lava summit . . . and in virtue of my right as its first discoverer christened this hitherto unknown and unnamed mountain peak – the loftiest spot in Africa and in the German Empire – *Kaiser Wilhelm's Peak*.'