

# WILLIAM COTTON OSWELL

**Hunter and Explorer**

*THE STORY OF HIS LIFE*

WITH CERTAIN CORRESPONDENCE AND EXTRACTS FROM THE PRIVATE  
JOURNAL OF DAVID LIVINGSTONE, HITHERTO UNPUBLISHED

BY HIS ELDEST SON

W. EDWARD OSWELL

OF THE MIDDLE TEMPLE, BARRISTER-AT-LAW

**With an Introduction**

BY

FRANCIS GALTON

D.C.L., F.R.S., F.R.G.S., ETC.

PORTRAITS, MAPS, AND ILLUSTRATIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

BY FRANCIS GALTON, D.C.L., F.R.S.

SIXTY years ago the interior of South Africa was a blank on our maps, the modern knowledge of its geography being based for the most part on numerous explorations made since that date. One of the most epoch-making of them was that which, by traversing wastes previously impassable to Europeans, succeeded in connecting the pastoral uplands over which great game had been hunted by many travellers, with the lakes and rivers of the equatorial part of the continent.

This notable Expedition was made by a party of three—Oswell, Murray, and Livingstone. Its furtherance required wagons, oxen, stores, and a capable leader, and these desiderata were mainly supplied by Oswell. Livingstone was at that time comparatively inexperienced, while Oswell had spent years in persistent travel, and had become the most dashing hunter and successful explorer of his time in South Africa. Murray was also a hunter, but by no means of equal experience. The idea of the desirability of such an Expedition was not due to any one of the three alone: it was in the air, and shared by many others, but its achievement was due, first and foremost, to

Oswell. Murray joined Oswell with his wagon. Livingstone accompanied them as a guest, most welcome on many accounts, and not least for his familiar knowledge of the language of the native races, and for the personal love and respect with which he was regarded by many of them. Still, the Expedition would have gone all the same without Livingstone, while Livingstone could not have moved without the assistance of Oswell and Murray, especially of the former. Yet, notwithstanding Oswell's eminent services to geography, notwithstanding the loyal attitude of Livingstone towards him, and, again, notwithstanding the attempts of many of his friends in England to induce the public to appreciate him as he deserved, his work soon began to pass into oblivion. The chief cause of this lay in his invincible laziness as a writer, which rendered him a deplorably bad correspondent, even to his nearest relations, who craved for tidings, and whom he dearly loved. His dilatoriness in these respects was enforced by a strange shrinking from publicity, and from even the most legitimate forms of self-assertion; and, again, he honestly took greater pleasure in ministering to the reputation of Livingstone than to his own. It followed that the story of the Expedition was first learnt through the letters of Livingstone, which were published and widely discussed weeks before a scrap of information reached England from Oswell's own pen. He was the despair of the Geographical Society, whose authorities, as I well know, did what they could to induce him to communicate a substantial memoir worthy of himself, but in vain. He was then placed on their Council, but he did not seem to appreciate the honour, and rarely cared to attend it. So, owing to his persistent abnegation, it

naturally followed that his achievements should gradually pass out of mind, but I think it not unlikely that in later years he may have felt some regret at his neglected opportunities. Murray, the third member of the travelling party, of whom little is known except his love of hunting, was also a man who never cared to write; he was hardly seen by geographers, and fell quite out of touch with them. I never to my knowledge had the pleasure of meeting him. Now the usual desire of a hero-worshipper is to worship a single hero at a time, and not to divide his homage in perplexing proportions among those who shared in the same great action. Consequently, as the years went by, when the frequent and elaborate descriptions written by Livingstone of what he saw from time to time, together with the grave missionary purpose of the man, and his unrelenting progress, monopolized public attention, a retrospective credit became popularly given to him (which he himself never claimed) for the paramount conduct of the first great journey across the sandy wastes to Lake Ngami, which was the beginning of his heroic career.

It is gratifying to read the few letters and memoranda of Oswell, and the other contents of this book. They confirm what many as well as myself well knew at the time, and they extend that knowledge. Let it not be supposed for a moment that the slightest rivalry existed between Livingstone and Oswell; on the contrary, they were the warmest friends, though, the one being a missionary with a keenly observant eye and a strong scientific bent, and the other a roving hunter, their ideals of life must have differed in many ways. Touching evidences of their mutual esteem are to be found in many pages of these volumes.

It was my good fortune to gain the friendship of Oswell after his final return from Africa, when I quickly appreciated the remarkable nobleness of his character. I was at that time closely and eagerly connected with the Geographical Society, so that I was brought into frequent contact with every contemporary traveller of note. Among these Oswell, with his clear-cut, aquiline features, keen glance, and lithe frame, suggested perhaps the most typical specimen of a man born to adventure. His striking physical gifts, combined with his aristocratic bearing and winning but modest address, seemed a living realization of the perfect and gentle knight of whom we read in old romances.

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As my name occurs two or three times in the letters in connection with Lake Ngami, I may mention that I never went there, because on arrival at the Cape I was assured by the Governor, Sir Harry Smith, that the Boers had barred the passage to travellers. I therefore changed my destination and went to Damara Land instead.