

Lake Rudolf as an Iconic Geographic Space in East Africa

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Abstract. Iconic geographic spaces come into being because they are unique and offer opportunities for self-challenge and accomplishment. Lake Rudolf (Lake Turkana) in East Africa has been such an iconic space during the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras. While a number of early travelers to the lake pursued objectives such as hunting, scientific inquiry, and furthering the aims of colonial powers, they also frequently derived self-satisfaction from having “reached” this iconic geographic space. An examination of some of these travelers’ experiences reveals the centrality of the lake’s iconic space attraction for them and how it met individual needs for self-fulfillment and accomplishment.

Lake Rudolf, now known as Lake Turkana, lies in the eastern arm of the Rift Valley in East Africa. Fed by the Omo River, which flows south from the Ethiopian highlands, it lies mostly within independent Kenya (Butzer 1971: 136). However, in previous decades, when the lake’s level was considerably higher, much of the northern end lay in Ethiopia. Situated in an inhospitable landscape of dormant volcanoes, windswept desert, and old lava flows, the lake’s waters are brackish because they have no outlet. The lake is about 155 miles long and from 10 to 15 miles wide.

Of little value in terms of commerce, industry, or transportation, Lake Rudolf rapidly became an iconic geographic space in East Africa at the end of the nineteenth century. Early interest in it by Europeans was driven by a variety of motivations, including exploration, hunting, ivory trading, and, most important, colonial expansion. For at the time Lake Rudolf was believed to be a possible source of the Nile, and thus crucial to European colonial ambitions to control the river. Although Great Britain eventually

became the dominant colonial power in this part of Africa, the French, Italians, Russians, and Ethiopians were not insignificant imperial players in this region. The lake was a geographic benchmark in a vast and otherwise desolate wilderness, and this too drew people to it.

Iconic geographic spaces often attract people primarily because they are just there. They enable individuals to challenge and define themselves, to test their stamina and skills and to earn distinction. It is as much the getting there that matters as the being there. Thus, like most iconic geographic spaces, Lake Rudolf has been approached from various directions, by differing modes of travel, during difficult seasons, and in different time frames. This was done, as is often the case with subsequent travelers to iconic geographic spaces, to make the exploit unique, since the claim of being there first was already someone else's prize.

One frequently sees this dynamic of personal physical challenge and uniqueness of exploit attached to iconic geographic spaces. For example, adventurers regularly attempt to set records, if not of first presence in a region, then of distinction in how or how fast they arrived there. Thus it is that people attempt to cross the polar regions by different means and routes, and at speeds that they hope will outdo those of their predecessors. Even geographic borders and global surface lines such as the Arctic Circle have been elevated to iconic geographic spaces. Those who cross the Arctic Circle are currently referred to as "bluenoses" (Wilson 2003: B1–B4), a moniker not in use when I did so in 1987, while asleep on a ship. Some youthful and even older adventurers seek distinction and satisfaction by accumulating a number of such feats, since the achievement of any given one has become less remarkable. In so doing, they often take unnecessary risks and not infrequently must be rescued at public expense. The increasing numbers of Americans using iconic geographic spaces as opportunities to challenge themselves and to enhance self-worth has given rise to the medical specialty of wilderness medicine. These frontline practitioners are trained to treat a range of physical problems and injuries ranging from blunt trauma to snakebites.

While Lake Rudolf attracted a good share of adventurers set on ivory hunting or scientific exploration, some, unlike their equivalents today, were in the service of European colonial powers. In certain instances, a hunting trip was merely a convenient cover, and in others it was subsequently used to press a colonial power's claim of first presence. For in the final analysis, the role of Lake Rudolf in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as an iconic geographic space was primarily linked to colonial expansion and the political designs of competing imperial powers. Yet this colonial competition for Lake Rudolf should not obscure the allure of the remote

iconic space that was operative as well, often enmeshed in the former, but not always so. This essay explores the role of Lake Rudolf as an iconic geographic space in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mindful that this occurred against a broad canvas of colonial competition between Great Britain and Ethiopia in this part of Africa (Imperato 1987; Mirzeler 2002).

Iconic geographic spaces in Africa came into being in the minds of nineteenth-century Europeans in a variety of ways. Some, such as the source of the Nile, were surmised, and the quest was to find them. Others, such as Maasai Land in East Africa, were known to exist, but reputed to be impenetrable because of the fierceness of the people who lived there. Yet others, including Lake Rudolf, had been vaguely described by African traders, and often placed on European maps, however inaccurately. In all instances, the challenge was to physically visit them, to measure and define them, to prove the skeptics wrong or debunk myths, and to systematize them according to European standards of taxonomy. Quest and conquest, science and sport, proving one's mettle and furthering one's own aims or those of others, including those of colonial metropoles, all merged in the expeditions that visited Lake Rudolf in the two decades following its "discovery" in 1888.

Between 1888 and 1910, a score of expeditions arrived on the shores of Lake Rudolf, differentiated by purpose, direction of approach, and scope of geographic inquiry, but all sharing a romantic quest experience (Brantlinger 1988; Brown 1993; Imperato 1998). The accounts of most of these travelers were published in books and/or articles and rapidly became important components of Victorian and Edwardian adventure literature. The travelers themselves were viewed by many readers as incarnating the heroic virtues of H. Rider Haggard's famous fictional character, Allan Quartermain. Beginning in 1885, Haggard wrote a series of novels including *King Solomon's Mines*, in which Quartermain, a white hunter, is depicted as courageous, sportsmanlike, endowed with endurance and great physical strength, and capable of unusual resourcefulness in the bush. He is the ideal gentleman hunter who transports the ethics of the English hunt to the African bush. While Quartermain's conduct reinforced the standards of the hunt for Victorian and Edwardian boys, his exploits also mesmerized them, and later drew some of them to the great landscapes of Africa (Imperato and Imperato 1992: 95–96; Haggard 1926). Thus, travelers to Lake Rudolf wrote for an audience already well conditioned to tales of African adventure and structured their discourses so as to reaffirm national values and sometimes to justify Eurocolonialism. The realities presented by these travelers were often textured by race attitudes, religious beliefs,

social values, and economic and political self-interest (Youngs 1994: 39–50). Although these characteristics of travel writings about Lake Rudolf may have nuanced field observations to some degree, they also inform us about the cultural and social references of the authors themselves, as well as about the authors' motives.

Mary Louise Pratt (1992: 202) has characterized the geographic accomplishments of nineteenth-century travelers to Africa as a process of “converting local knowledges (discourses) into European national and continental knowledges associated with European forms and relations to power.” While there is some obvious merit to this perspective, one cannot overlook the fact that local knowledge bases were frequently fragmented and imprecise, and usually not set in larger geographic contexts. European travelers to iconic spaces such as Lake Rudolf did not simply translate local knowledge bases into their own. Rather, they used local knowledge bases as points of departure and greatly augmented them using scientific techniques to situate, quantify, and contextualize topographic features. In addition, European travelers communicated their knowledge to wide audiences of Europeans and Africans. The latter often used the received knowledge to open up new trade routes and markets that greatly benefited them and local populations (Imperato 1998: 5–6).

All of the travelers to Lake Rudolf were bold, resourceful, and unorthodox men well endowed with originality and eccentricity. They were adventurers and risk takers at heart, men whose courage, daring, and resources enabled them to overcome the enormous obstacles presented by climate, geography, and disease. Whether as willing agents of colonial designs, soldiers intent on advancing their military careers, hunters out for sport, or explorers devoted to advancing science, they all viewed Lake Rudolf as a remote iconic geographic space capable of fulfilling their desires and needs. That so remote a place, surrounded by vast inhospitable spaces, served as an iconic magnet speaks to the role of this lake as also enabling nineteenth-century travelers to define and confirm their idealized Victorian male identity.

Both Monty Brown (1993) and I (1987 and 1998) have detailed the travels of those who arrived at Lake Rudolf between 1888 and 1910. The purpose of this present communication is not to revisit this chronology in detail, but rather to selectively discuss some of the types of travelers and how Lake Rudolf represented for them an iconic geographic space. Explorers, men of science, hunters, freelancers, adventurers, surveyors, mapmakers, soldiers, and colonial agents each came with a different primary purpose. Yet for all of them, Lake Rudolf was a Holy Grail, and their travels a determined quest for both space and self.

As was the case with many geographic “discoveries” in Africa, Lake Rudolf’s probable existence was known for decades before the first Europeans ever laid eyes on it. This knowledge derived from the general accounts of African traders and caravan leaders, whose geographic imprecision was intended to protect rich sources of ivory. Assembled by missionaries such as Jacob J. Erhardt, Johann Ludwig Krapf, and Léon des Avanchers, this knowledge was communicated in the form of published narratives and maps, respectively published in 1855, 1858, and 1859 (Imperato 1998: 7–27). Referred to as Lake Zamburu by Erhardt and Krapf, and El Boo by des Avanchers, the lake was fairly accurately situated (*ibid.*).

European preoccupation with finding the source of the Nile during the 1860s and 1870s drew attention to the iconic spaces of Central Africa, with its intricate system of rivers and lakes and snowcapped mountains (Collins 1971: 4–5). Once these features had been documented, the slave trade suppressed, and missionary endeavors launched, support for exploration in East and Central Africa waned. However, in 1883, Joseph Thomson led an expedition into East Africa on behalf of the Royal Geographical Society and funded by the British Association for the Advancement of Science. His charge was to explore the snowy peaks of East Africa and the vast region between them and Lake Victoria. Many believed that this region had enormous commercial potential, as it represented the shortest route to the wealthy kingdoms around Lake Victoria and the Nile sources.

Thomson’s success in traversing Maasai Land, then believed to be impossible because of the presumed hostility of the warlike Maasai, caused a sensation. His book, *Through Masai Land: A Journey of Exploration among the Snowclad Volcanic Mountains and Strange Tribes of Eastern Equatorial Africa* (1885), quickly became a classic of nineteenth-century European travel writing on Africa. In it, he resuscitated the long dormant earlier reports about a great northern lake, which he called Samburu, and which no European had ever seen. He described it in significant detail, based on the accounts of Samburu or Maasai men who had seen it (*ibid.*: 314). In addition to this description, he accurately depicted it on the map accompanying his book. Given the popularity of his book, which was translated into French and German, Lake Samburu was bound to attract the attention of a newer generation of travelers in search of unexplored, iconic African spaces. One of those who read Thomson’s book was Crown Prince Rudolf of Austria-Hungary. He saw in this as yet unexplored lake an opportunity for Austria-Hungary to gain a place in African exploration (Imperato 1998: 47).

Crown Prince Rudolf convinced Count Samuel Teleki von Szek, an avid sportsman, to undertake a journey to “discover” the great northern



Figure 1. Count Samuel Teleki von Szek (from von Höhnel 1894)

lake described by Thomson (Erdélyi 1977: 12–13). Teleki's fortuitous choice of a companion for this journey was the naval officer Lieutenant Ludwig von Höhnel (2000: 49), who had always dreamed of traveling to Africa. It was von Höhnel (1894) who later wrote an account of the expedition, which soon became a classic of nineteenth-century Africa travel.¹

Teleki and von Höhnel set out from the East African coast on 18 January 1887, with close to four hundred men, including Jumbe Kimemeta, the ivory trader who had guided Thomson across Maasai Land. Slightly over a year later, on 5 March 1888, they finally came within sight of the southern end of the lake. For von Höhnel, seeing the lake for the first time from the heights of a dusty ridge was a romantic aesthetic experience, the culmination of a quest for an iconic geographic space (Mirzeler 2002: 324–25). The usually meticulous scientist and geographer put aside his sextant and compass and gave vent to his deep emotions (von Höhnel 1894: 92, 95).

An entirely new world was spread out before our astonished eyes. The void down in the depths became filled as if by magic with picturesque mountains and ragged slopes, with a medley of ravines and valleys, which appeared to be closing up from every side to form a fitting frame for the dark blue gleaming surface of the lake stretching beyond as far as the eye could reach. . . . We gazed in speechless delight, spell-bound by the beauty of the scene before us . . . full of enthusiasm and gratefully remembering the gracious interest taken in our plans from the first by His Royal and Imperial Highness, Prince Rudolf of Austria, Count Teleki named the sheet of water, set like a pearl of great price in the wonderful landscape beneath us, Lake Rudolf.

Teleki and von Höhnel made their way up the eastern shore of the lake and soon discovered a small lake to the northeast, which they named Lake Stefanie in honor of Rudolf's wife. Because the heavy rains had flooded the Omo River delta, they were unable to cross it and return along the lake's western shore. This left available to subsequent travelers the iconic geographic spaces surrounding the lower Omo River and the western shore of the lake. Teleki's enormous profits from the sale of ivory from the trip had the inevitable effect of drawing ivory hunters and sportsmen to the region.²

It was not long before von Höhnel was back in East Africa, this time accompanying William Astor Chanler, a wealthy American, who wished to travel to Lake Rudolf. On 18 September 1892, they set out from the coast along a slightly more northerly route than that previously taken by Teleki. The day after Christmas, they came upon a waterfall some sixty feet high on the Guaso Nyiro River, which they called Chanler Falls. Local people reported that the river emptied into Lake Lorian, and this rapidly

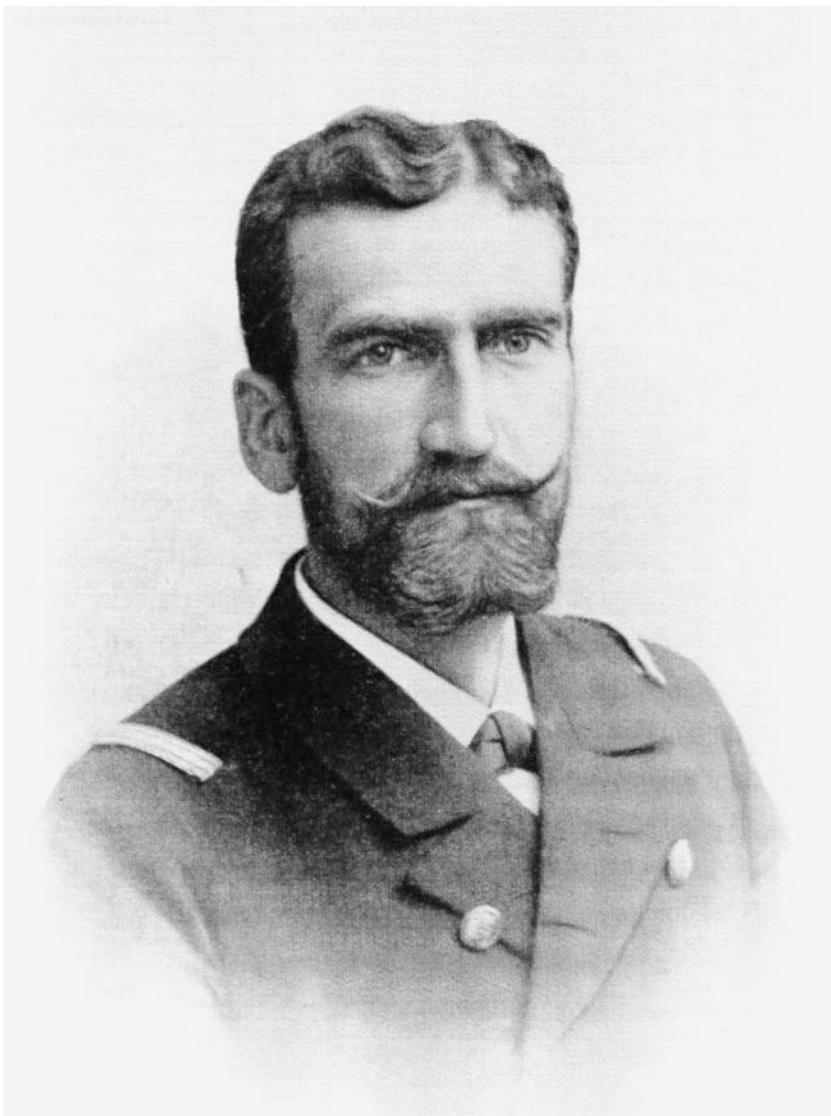


Figure 2. Lieutenant Ludwig von Höhnel (from von Höhnel 1894)

became Chanler's quest. He soon found, however, that the lake was actually a swamp, which has since been known as the Lorian Swamp (Chanler 1896: 139).

On 24 August 1893, the expedition's fortunes were dealt a serious blow when von Höhnel was gored by a rhinoceros in the groin and lower abdomen. Chanler sent him back to the coast in a hammock. After 54 days and 580 miles, he reached Kibwezi, where William Charters, a missionary doctor, debrided his wounds under general anesthesia (Imperato 1998: 87–88). While von Höhnel recovered at Kibwezi and eventually returned to Europe, Chanler set out for Lake Rudolf. However, a mutiny among some of his men soon ended his expedition.

Although Chanler never reached Lake Rudolf, he did identify other topographic features that later became iconic geographic spaces for other travelers. Among these were the Guaso Nyiro River, Chanler Falls, the Lorian Swamp, and the Nyambeni Mountains.³ He had attempted to reach Lake Rudolf from a route slightly different from that taken by Teleki and had planned to travel from there to the northeast via Ethiopia and Somaliland. This would have made his encounter with the lake somewhat distinctive from Teleki's, and many subsequent travelers shared this goal of difference and distinction. One of these was an American physician, Arthur Donaldson Smith of Philadelphia, who set out to reach Lake Rudolf from the north.

In July 1894, Smith set out from Berbera on the Somali coast at the head of an expedition financed by himself but under the patronage of the Royal Geographical Society. His purpose was to reach Lake Rudolf from a then unique direction, to resolve the issue of whether the lower Omo River flowed into the lake, and to collect a broad range of scientific specimens.

On 10 July 1895, Smith saw the blue-green waters of the lake in the distant haze. He later described this first encounter with his quest.

We saw a long white strip of water gleaming far off in the distance. This was a sight that appealed to the heart of every man in the caravan. It was Lake Rudolf. With one accord, the boys rushed up, and crowding around me, burst into a loud "hip-hip hurrah!" led by Dodson. As I looked upon the bright sheet of water . . . I felt that I had attained in a measure the greatest ambition of my life—that of being able to add a little drop to the sea of knowledge possessed by civilized mankind. (Smith 1897: 289)

Like von Höhnel before him, Smith saw Lake Rudolf romantically and considered it the iconic end point of his trip. Although he traveled up the lower Omo, he was unable to elucidate the still unresolved issue



Figure 3. William Astor Chanler (from Chanler 1896)



Figure 4. Arthur Donaldson Smith (from Smith 1897)

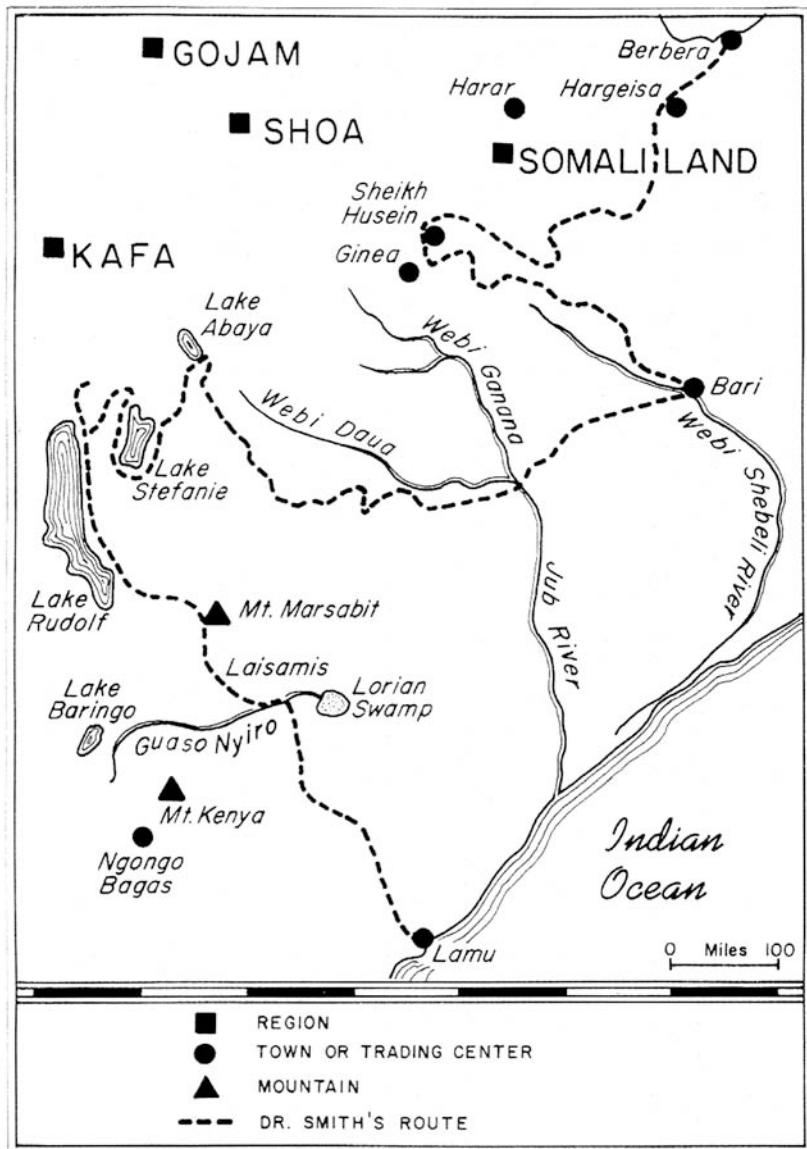


Figure 5. Arthur Donaldson Smith's route during his 1894-95 journey to Lake Rudolf (drawn by Saturino Villapez)

of the Omo River. Based on his travels, Smith (1897: 238–39) later incorrectly concluded that the river did not flow into Lake Rudolf.⁴ It was the Italian explorer Vittorio Bottego and his companions who soon thereafter proved that the Omo River did indeed flow into Lake Rudolf (Bonati 1997: 347–49).

The large herds of elephants along the eastern shore of Lake Rudolf drew ivory hunters. The first of these to arrive was Arthur Henry Neumann, who reached the southern end of the lake on 6 December 1895. Hardly an elephant along the lake's eastern shore escaped the sights of his rifles. He continued northward into the forest galleries of the Omo River, where he shot so many elephants that wounded animals were left to die (Neumann 1898: 327). Unlike von Höhnel and Smith, Neumann's quest for the lake as iconic geographic space was a reach for wealth. Yet his first recorded impressions of the lake reveal that its rugged beauty moved even him. "At last, early in the morning of 6th December, we came down the last step and reached the shore, and I had the satisfaction of drinking and bathing in the bitter water of Lake Rudolf. It is a desolate and forbidding land, but with a wild grandeur of its own which had a great charm for me" (259).

The next hunters to visit Lake Rudolf were Henry Sheppard Hart Cavendish and Lieutenant H. Andrew. Cavendish was also intent on exploring the western shore of the lake, only the lower portion of which had been visited by Teleki and von Höhnel. He was also interested in elephant hunting. Cavendish and Andrew left Berbera on 5 September 1896 and, following a route similar to Smith's, headed for the northern end of the lake. Amassing large quantities of ivory as they went, they arrived at the northern end of the lake on 12 March 1897. If Cavendish had been moved by his first sight of the lake, he hardly conveyed it in his subsequent article about his trip. "In our satisfaction at the sight of Lake Rudolf," he wrote, "we immediately determined to take a few days' rest" (Cavendish 1898: 382).

Cavendish's search for glory lay along the western shore of the lake, exemplifying the way original iconic spaces became subdivided and the smaller units became objectives of subsequent travelers. He therefore divided his expedition in half and sent Andrew and most of the men down the eastern shore while he and a smaller party crossed the Omo River and proceeded along the western shore. They eventually met at the southern end of the lake, after Andrew had killed large numbers of elephants on his way down the eastern shore.

A short time before Cavendish and Andrew visited Lake Rudolf, an Italian expedition under Captain Vittorio Bottego had come down the Omo River toward the northern end of Lake Rudolf, which it reached on 29 June 1896. Bottego's expedition had both scientific and political objectives. However, the route it took to reach the lake was then unique, dis-



Figure 6. Arthur Henry Neumann (from Neumann 1898)

tinguishing it from those of previous expeditions. Writing after Bottego's death, Lamberto Vannutelli and Carlo Citteri (1899: 331), also members of the expedition, described their feelings on seeing the lake: "After so much effort and suffering, we had finally achieved the principal objective of our journey." For them, Lake Rudolf was the iconic space that represented the high point of their travels.

It was almost inevitable that men would want to make their mark by being the first to travel from Lake Rudolf to the Nile. No white man had ever visited this 450-kilometer stretch of iconic space. One of those intent on visiting this region was a young British army officer, Captain Montagu Sinclair Wellby. Using great ingenuity, he was eventually able to obtain the support of the Ethiopian emperor, Menelik II, and an Ethiopian escort. This played into Menelik's hands since he subsequently tried to use the expedition to further his claims to the lake. Wellby (1901: 196) arrived at the northern end of the lake in March 1899, three months after leaving Addis Ababa.

Like others before him, Wellby luxuriated in his first contact with the lake. "There were a few shady trees," he wrote, "and the clean, short grass sloped down to a border of pure white sand, over which broke the blue waves of the fresh water lake" (*ibid.*).

His sentiments were not much different from those of the British army captain Herbert Henry Austin (1902: 184–85), who had reached the western shore of the lake a short time before, on 31 August 1898,⁵ by taking a route from the southwest that was distinct from those of his predecessors and that allowed him, like them, to claim a "first." His gaze on Lake Rudolf was similarly romantic.

At last their dream was to be realized, for early on August 31, through a gap in the hills, we saw the waters of the lake shimmering in the morning sunlight. The sight raised a lusty cheer of "Hip, hip, ray," from the exhausted men. . . . It was a full moon that night, and sitting outside our tents looking across the lake, one felt at peace with all mankind. . . . I had often longed to see Lake Rudolf, and my desire was now fulfilled.

There were a number of other visitors to Lake Rudolf, including those who eventually used the lake as a benchmark as they surveyed the frontier between Ethiopia and British East Africa. Throughout the twentieth century, the lake continued to be an iconic geographic space offering both challenges and opportunities to those who sought it. In 1934, Martin and Osa Johnson, famous American wildlife photographers and filmmakers, flew with their pilot, Vern Carstens, to Lake Rudolf. They were the first to fly over the lake and gain access to its islands by plane (Imperato and Imperato 1992: 174). In the case of the Johnsons, an aerial approach and an ability to visit the lake's islands gave their visit to this iconic space a significant uniqueness.

In the early 1970s, the late John Hillaby (1973), a naturalist and long-distance walker, trekked through the Northern Frontier District and two-



Figure 7. Captain Montagu Sinclair Wellby (from Wellby 1901)



Figure 8. Henry Herbert Austin (from Austin 1902b)

thirds of the way up the eastern shore of the lake. Later that decade, a young Englishman, Stephen Pern, walked around the lake, starting in the south-east as Teleki and Neumann had done. He then traveled down the western shore, retracing in part the routes taken earlier by Cavendish, Bottego, and Austin. He accomplished this remarkable trip in fifty days (Pern 1979). Shortly afterward, Mohamed Amin, a highly acclaimed Kenyan photographer, drove around the lake. His expedition carried 800 liters of gasoline, 20 spare tires, 275 liters of drinking water, a quarter ton of photographic equipment and film, and a radio-telephone with a range of 900 miles (Amin 1981). In respectively walking and driving around the lake, Pern and Amin tested both their stamina and skills in a challenging iconic space and achieved great distinction within its physical confines.

Between 17 February 1982 and 4 December 1983, Tom Heaton (1989), a broadcast journalist and former head of the British Broadcast Corporation Monitoring Service's East African Unit, retraced Teleki and von Höhnel's route on foot and bicycle. On the centenary of Teleki and von Höhnel's journey, the Hungarian Scientific Africa Expedition (1987–88) retraced their route over a period of six months, installing a memorial plaque in English and Hungarian at Loyangalani on the eastern shore of Lake Rudolf (Janos 1989: 52). While a major objective in the retracing of historic routes to iconic spaces is commemoration, especially during a centennial year, modern travelers also attain fulfillment through a vicarious association with historical figures and their unique accomplishments.

Roads, schools, clinics, and small towns now dot the countryside through which Count Samuel Teleki and Ludwig von Höhnel once passed. A paved road leads to the western shore of the lake, and modern explorers whitewater-raft down the Omo River. Although this corner of Africa has dramatically changed since Teleki's time, much remains the same. He would still find northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia familiar places, with their beautiful landscapes and splendid views. And the lake is still there, a shimmering jade sea, remote and lonely, set like a jewel in a vast expanse of thorn bush and desert, an iconic geographic space that continues to challenge and inspire and to draw visitors in search of personal fulfillment.

Notes

¹ Von Höhnel went on to have a distinguished naval career, rising to the rank of rear admiral prior to his retirement in 1909. From 1899 to 1903, he served as aide-de-camp to Emperor Franz Josef, and in 1905 he led a special Austro-Hungarian diplomatic delegation to the court of Emperor Menelik of Abyssinia. For details of von Höhnel's life and career, see von Höhnel 2000.

- 2 When Teleki and von Höhnel returned to Vienna in 1889, they did not receive a hero's welcome, even though they had given Austria-Hungary an honored place in the annals of African exploration. According to von Höhnel, there were several reasons for this, including indifference by the public, jealousy among Vienna's small world of geographers, and Crown Prince Rudolf's suicide on 30 January 1889. Rudolf's closest friends were then being scapegoated as responsible for his death. Teleki was among them and therefore was ignored by Emperor Franz Josef and his government. For further details on this, see von Höhnel 2000: 78. Teleki returned to East Africa in March 1895 in order to hunt and to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. Gout and generally deteriorating health precluded the latter. For an account of this trip based on Teleki's diary, see Imperato and Teleki 1992.
- 3 Chanler and von Höhnel remained lifelong friends. After World War I, von Höhnel found himself in penury, living on a naval pension in a country without a navy. Chanler provided him with a monthly remittance until von Höhnel's death in 1942 (Imperato 1998: 101–2).
- 4 Smith returned to Lake Rudolf in 1899, setting out from Berbera in Somaliland. He then marched west from the lake to the Nile River. In so doing, he traversed much territory never before seen by a European. For a detailed account of this trip, see Smith 1900.
- 5 Austin made a second trip to Lake Rudolf, traveling down from the north at Omdurman in Sudan. Because a supply caravan failed to meet him at the lake, he lost 73 percent of his men on his march down the western shore. For the details of this trip, see Austin 1902a.

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