

The Mysterious Land of Mist and Bog – Rwenzori

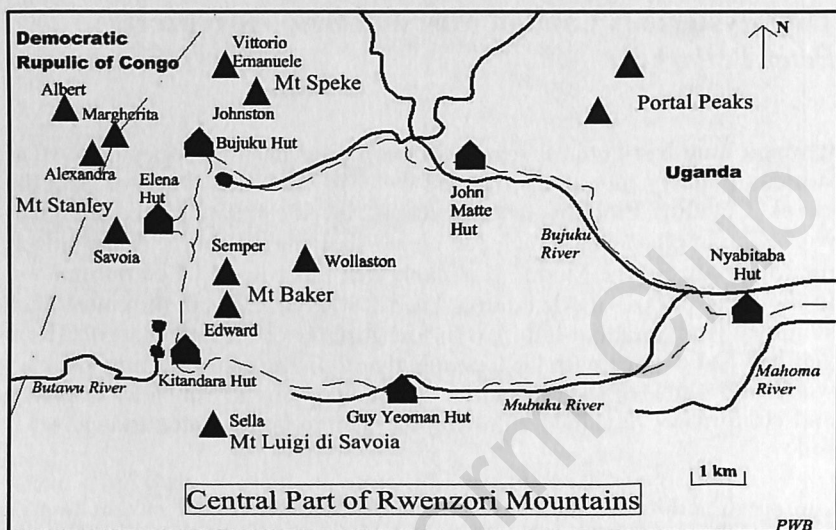
Peter Bellarby

It was a long-lost land, or was it a fable? For many centuries there were stories of snowy mountains that fed water to the Nile. It started with the Greek Claudius Ptolemy who, it seems, in AD 150 produced his great work *Geographia*¹ which included a map showing the source of the Nile at the Mountains of the Moon. It is likely that this was based on information in the great library of Alexandria, later destroyed. This in turn must have stemmed from Arabian sailors who had gone down the east coast of Africa and had had contact with local people there. In the course of time the map was lost because of the difficulties of hand-copying it, but tables of places and coordinates remained, allowing the map to be recreated in mediaeval times.

Cartographers used information from Ptolemy in their own maps, adding something of their own – was it based on factual information or just imagination? Thus Gerald Mercator Junior, basing his work on the map of 1569 made by his grandfather also Gerald Mercator, published a map² which showed three large lakes and several smaller ones. Another map is that produced by Willen Blaeu³ and published in 1643-50. This shows two lakes just below *Lunae Montes*, Latin for Mountains of the Moon. Could these be Lake Victoria and Lake Albert? Both feed into the Nile, Victoria being some way east of Rwenzori, the other being to the NE of Rwenzori. So are the Rwenzori Mountains the same as the Mountains of the Moon of Ptolemy? Not necessarily, since both Mount Kenya and Kilimanjaro have snowy tops and are much nearer to the east coast of Africa, from which it is assumed knowledge of the Mountains of the Moon reached Alexandria. We shall probably never know with certainty.

Be that as it may, the term 'Mountains of the Moon' conjures up images of remoteness, barrenness and loneliness. Enough to stir the soul and hurry the heartbeat with the thought of experiencing a little of this oneself. I had already climbed Mount Kenya and, with four other members of the Cairngorm Club, had stood on the summit of Uhuru, the highest point of Kilimanjaro⁴. Rwenzori was a dream that seemed unlikely to be fulfilled, since for many years political turmoil had prevented access. But in 2005 the opportunity arose to join an expedition there, organised by Jagged Globe. The opportunity was grasped!

We met up at the check-in at Heathrow for the flight to Entebbe in Uganda. Alun, the leader, arrived with the news that a visa had been omitted from his passport so we would have to leave without him. He promised to get it sorted and catch us up later – somewhere in the land of



mist and bog. Well, Stanley managed to meet Livingstone without modern communications, so we should be alright.

We stumbled out of the plane at Entebbe after the long but uneventful overnight flight. We were met by an agent who would ensure that we got to the foot of the mountains. There was a day to look round Kampala, with its teeming masses of people, before the 435km road journey to Kasese. This took all day as the road is rather rough, although work was in progress to improve it. To get round one stretch of road works we were instructed to drive into the bush. Two lorries going in opposite directions did this and collided. We managed to scrape by, bending a tree in the process. Fortunately the tree was pliable.

The Rwenzori straddle the border of Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. We were to approach from the eastern, Ugandan side. From our hotel near Kasese we could see through the mist the foothills of Rwenzori, or so we supposed. Land of mist and bog – there is precipitation 360 days of the year – so early European explorers in the 1870s and 1880s such as Baker, Emin and Gessi passed close by the mountains but could not see them, or had only tantalising glimpses that might be hallucinations or might be real. Henry Stanley⁵ is credited with the first definite sighting in 1888. He returned in 1889 and spent more than three months in the foothills. Exhaustion and sickness took their toll of his expedition so that only one man, Lieutenant W. G. Stairs, was fit enough to climb high. He reached 3,000m but was not equipped to go further. It was Stanley who cobbled together the name Rwenzori from

several local words. It translates as 'rain maker' or, as somebody told me, 'the great leaf in which the clouds are boiled'.

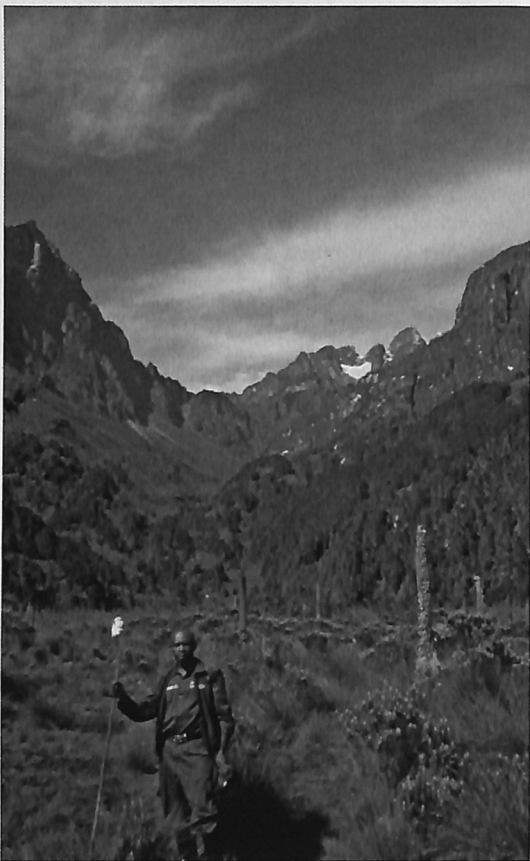
So what else does so much rain imply? It implies bogs, and the bogs of Rwenzori are notorious – deep, squelchy, extensive and impossible to avoid. It implies vegetation – and there are huge amounts, closely packed. There are heathers twenty feet high, giant lobelia and giant groundsel.

Next day we experienced the vegetation for ourselves. We reached the Rwenzori Mountains National Park offices at Nyakalengija after a bumpy ride along a dirt road. Many of the local Bakonzo men were lined up hoping to be engaged as porters. There followed much argument with the weighing scales about loads and whether they were too heavy for one man. We had two cooks, some local guides and a man with a gun. This was not really to shoot anything but rather to frighten away any animals such as leopards that we might encounter.

At last the expedition moved off. At first it was past mud and wattle Bakonzo houses and banana plantations, and we passed young girls carrying large loads of bananas. There were black and white colobus and blue monkeys. After about forty minutes we reached the National Park boundary and left the habitations behind. We followed a trail beside the Mubuku River with the first experience of clambering over tree roots and vegetation, not to mention rocks. We crossed the Mahoma River on a bridge, one of only two in the area. After a short rest and lunch, it was a change of gear as we climbed steeply up through bracken and podocarpus. Not doing too badly here, I thought, as I moved up from the back of the party to catch up those in front. We reached the Nyabitaba Hut in slight rain. Not bad at all – we expected heavy rain. Then we saw peaks – we hadn't expected to see any because of all these references to mist and cloud. Which were they? The compass came out and showed them to be Portal Peaks, not on our list of objectives, and in another direction Mount Baker, which was.

What was the plan? We were following the Central Circuit Trail. From Nyabitaba it forms a loop, which we followed anticlockwise, back to Nyabitaba. For many, this in itself is enough of a challenge, but we had ambitions to reach the summits of Mount Stanley, Mount Speke and Mount Baker, the highest mountains of the Rwenzori.

Next day I was rather disappointed after half a kilometre to find that we were going steeply downhill, realising that once we had crossed the Kurt Shaffer Bridge, which lies below the confluence of the Bujuku and Mubuku rivers, we would have to regain all the lost height. Once over the bridge we were climbing through bamboo forest with slippery mud, and then boulder-hopping. We followed the Bujuku River to reach the John Matte Hut at 3,380m, our resting place for the night. And we were able to take a photograph of Mount Stanley – a rather rare possibility according to one of our guides. Alun arrived later that afternoon, having double



Guide Justin and the Lower Bigo Bog

marched to come up from Nyakalengija in one day. Ironically he could have flown out with us, as we found that you could get a visa on arrival at Entebbe.

Day three meant crossing the two Bigo bogs. Jumping from tussock to tussock was hard at that altitude, and the penalty for missing was to get rather wet. On part of the Upper Bigo bog a boardwalk has been constructed. Rather intrusive you might think, but better than the destruction of the vegetation that would otherwise occur. We reached Lake Bujuku, an impressive place with high precipitous cliffs of Mount Baker to the south, Mount Speke to the north and the glaciers of Mount Stanley to the west. But my, was the mud deep

there. A little further on we arrived at the night's lodging place, the Bujuku Hut at 3,977m. I wasn't at the front, but secretly rather pleased to be an hour ahead of those at the back. I was feeling the altitude though, and lay down rather exhausted.

Mount Speke was the next day's objective. We left at 6.50 a.m., walking NW to the top of the Stuhlmann Pass. Then the climbing began, with a shallow gully with an awkward exit round a tree. A lot of scrambling on rocks followed, many of the rocks being moss-covered, and there was one quite hard section. We reached the glaciers and put on rope and crampons. Not too steep this part, so it wasn't long before we reached the top of Vittorio Emanuele at 11.45 a.m. At 4,890m this is the highest point of Mount Speke. On the descent the rope was used on the hard

section. I climbed down, but others abseiled. So far conditions had been good and the first objective achieved. Could this continue?

The following day was not too long, and the weather was really beautiful. We took a rising traverse above Lake Bujuku, which we could see far below us. There was one ladder and much boulder work before we reached the Elena Hut. From here next day we would attempt Mount Stanley. This had been climbed for the first time by the Duke of Abruzzi, Luigi di Savoia, in 1906⁶, so the centenary was last year. He was a navy man and organised his expeditions in military style, involving hundreds of men. This very successful expedition made the first ascents of all the major peaks. Accompanying it was the renowned alpinist and photographer Vittorio Sella, whose pictures are a joy to behold. Of particular interest is a panorama photograph taken from Edward, the highest point of Mount Baker. It is reproduced in David Pluth's book⁷ which, incidentally, includes a wealth of modern photographs. The panorama shows Mount Speke well covered with glaciers, with hardly a rock showing. Likewise for Mount Stanley, with Margherita, the highest point, showing only two very small rocky bits. Is it like that today? No! Sadly the glaciers have retreated and cover only about a fifth of the area they did in 1906.

We left the hut at 6.40 a.m. The route was up a scrambly path onto the Elena Glacier and then the East Stanley Glacier, which forms a high plateau. We then had to descend a little with some rocks to join the Margherita Glacier. This was followed steeply to the col between Margherita and Alexandra. These are the highest points of Mount Stanley, named by the Duke after the then queens of Italy and the United Kingdom. He gave the name Stanley to the mountain as a whole. From the col we traversed rightwards, still on the glacier until we came to a fixed rope leading upwards over steep rocky ground. One of the African guides suggested using a prussick loop, but that did not work as the rope was too slippery, as indeed were the rocks. Alun climbed up and belayed, and used his rope to enable the rest of us to follow. Above this the rocks were easier and we soon reached the summit of Margherita, at 5,109m the highest point of all the Rwenzori. It was 11.30 a.m. on 21 February. We were elated as all members of the expedition reached the top, not the case on Speke and Baker.

On the descent we abseiled down the slippery rocks. Then it was on with the crampons, and suitably roped we retraced our footsteps to reach the Elena Hut at 3.20 p.m. There is a problem with using this hut in that it is unsuitable for porters to remain there overnight, so the dilemma is when to ask them to return. After much discussion we had agreed they should come back on the day of the summit bid and do the carrying to the Kitanadara Hut. So at 4.40 p.m. we set off, minus two members who felt somewhat tired. The route descends to join the trail over the Scott Elliott

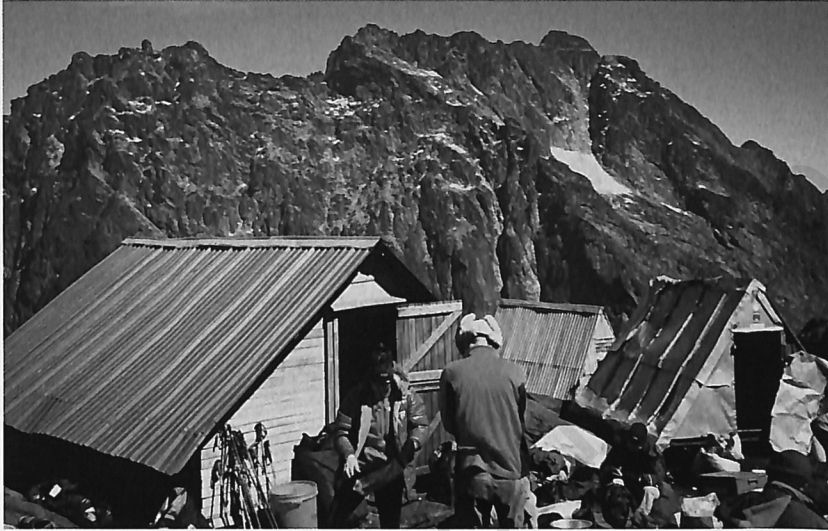


Margherita (right) and Alexandra (centre) taken on the ascent

Pass, which crosses from the valley of the Bujuku to that of Butawa. From the top of the pass the route goes under the huge cliffs plunging precipitously from the heights of Mount Baker. Water cascaded hundreds of feet down the cliffs in mighty waterfalls. The ascent to the top of the pass was not the end of uphill section, as there were still what would normally be considered very minor ascents. But, after a long hard day and still over 4,000m, it was a weary Peter that arrived at Kitandara Hut.

Next day was a rest day – a time to enjoy the tranquil settings. The hut lies beside the lower of the two Kitandara lakes. Two ducks swam contentedly on our lake. We had time to clean boots and inspect more closely the lush vegetation.

Mount Baker beckoned. The original plan was to climb it out and back to the Kitandara Hut in one day. But the Butawa flows west out of the Kitandara lakes and we had to go east at some point, to go over the Freshfield Pass to the valley of the Mubuku. Why not avoid the descent to the hut and the next day's re-ascent? We were in good form so the plan was changed: we would descend instead directly to the Guy Yeoman Hut in the valley of the Mubuku. Once high up on the slopes of Mount Baker, the route was marked by a confusing array of cairns which seemed to lead here, there and everywhere, with much very enjoyable rocky scrambling, until we came to an easy slope leading to the summit. There was some competition to see who would get there first, a sign that we were well-



Mount Baker from the Elena Hut, Edward the rightmost top

acclimatised and fit. So the top of Edward, 4,843m and the highest point of Mount Baker, was reached.

Edward was named by the Duke of Abruzzi after the then King of the United Kingdom. This matches Vittorio Emmanuele, the highest point of Mount Speke, named after the then King of Italy. The tradition of royal appellations continued when, to mark the coronation of our present queen, two hitherto unnamed tops on Mount Stanley became Elizabeth and Philip. The names of the main mountains come from the names of African explorers, again given by the Duke. Mount Luigi di Savoia was named after the Duke himself, but only at the insistence of the (British) Royal Geographical Society.

We had to descend, get over the top of the Freshfield Pass, and make the long descent to the Guy Yeoman Hut. I was tired and lagging behind. More bogs, vertical this time, more scrambling down rocks, much steeper this time, and more vegetation, more tangled and contorted this time, before I reached the hut, to the applause of the porters. These were a cheerful group, without whom we would not have had a successful expedition. Our cooks provided us with good food to sustain our exertions, no mean achievement in such a remote setting. Our guides had been very supportive, although we made recommendations about enhancing their skills with further training, since some of their practices were somewhat unsafe.

All that remained was to walk out past the cave with bat-eating cobras. We disdained an overnight stop at the Nyabitaba hut and ran in exhilaration down the steep slopes to the bridge over the Mahona, creating clouds of dust. Dust? Yes, it seemed we had experienced all the five days in a year when there is no precipitation. The mist had not enveloped us, and the bogs were not so deep as expected. The mysterious land was mysterious no more. This rather elderly gentleman had now climbed the five highest mountains in Africa according to some lists. But what about Mwenzi? This high mountain is a neighbour of Kilimanjaro, but the drop between them is very significant. Surely Mwenzi is more than just a top? Perhaps, just perhaps, I might get to its summit one day.

Expedition members: Alun Richardson (Wales, Leader), Peter Bellarby, Rhona Fraser (Cairngorm Club), Brad Neiman (USA), Hans Vaaben (Denmark), Pia Vaaben (Denmark), Innes Walker (Aberdeen), Leo.

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