Nyasaland ~ A Bit of Background History

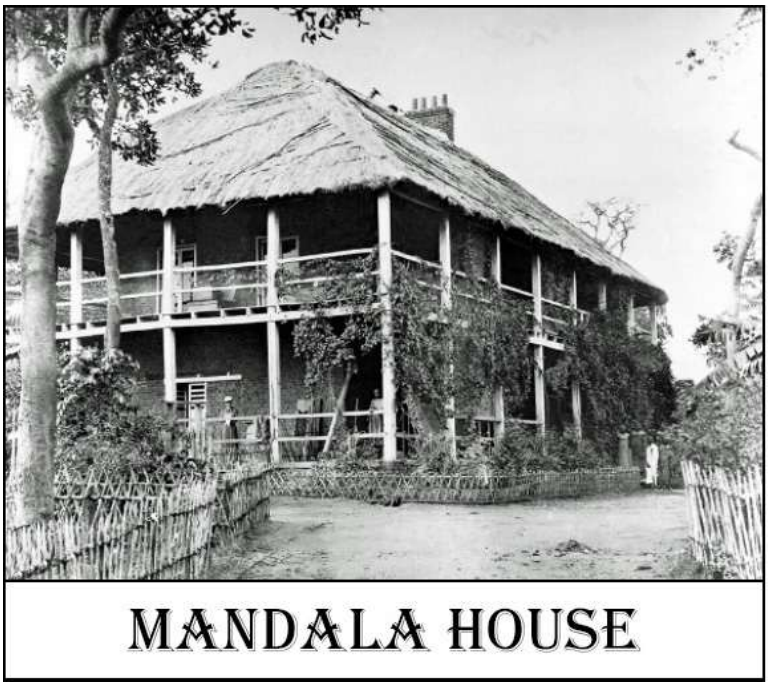
(Part 6)

Compiled by Vanessa Farmery

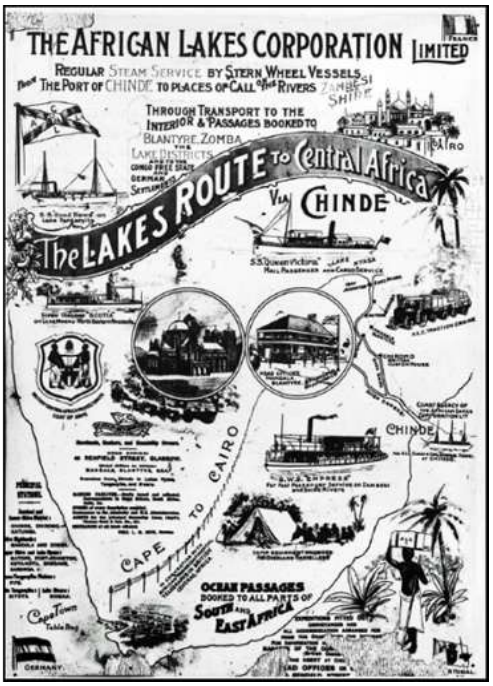
Commerce

British business interests were pioneered by a group of Glaswegian entrepreneurs who established the African Lakes Company Limited in 1878. Almost all the parties concerned were connected to the Free Church of Scotland, but that is not to say that this was a philanthropic venture. Their purpose was to take over trade and transportation in Nyasaland while squeezing out the interests of the Arabs and Portuguese and their agents, the Yao, who were still operating as slavers.

John and Frederick Moir, the sons of an Edinburgh doctor, were sent to Nyasaland to manage the enterprise. Small towns were beginning to be established across the country and wherever there was a European presence the brothers opened a chain of small shops and wholesale stores, each called 'Mandala'. The company headquarters, Mandala House, was set up in 1882, in Blantyre. This first 'European style' building to be erected in Nyasaland was made of local materials and boasted two storeys! Unthinkable! The Moirs lived upstairs and had their offices downstairs. In 1883 they leased space to the country's first proper fiscal body, the Standard Bank, thus endowing upon Blantyre the status of commercial capital of the country, which it still is.



MANDALA HOUSE



To take control of the waterways seemed obvious and the African Lakes Company Limited owned and operated a number of steamers on the Lake and along both the upper and lower Shire River. As well as transporting goods and passengers the steamers were used to carry labour (recruited from around Livingstonia) to the upper Shire Valley as, by 1884, the Company employed over five thousand migrant workers in those highland areas. The African Lakes Company Limited also purchased land in the north of the country, hoping to find mineral deposits worth exploiting, but this was never mined or developed into extensive agricultural concerns.

Ivory traders ~ Fort Johnston

During the early eighteen eighties several other prospectors began acquiring land. One of the first of these was John Buchanan who set himself up as a land agent and farmer. Others followed including Alexander Low Bruce who was the focus of an anti-European uprising during the First World War and Eugene Sharrer who became a vocal representative for the European land owners. Most early commercial interest was in the ivory trade - and the stupefying quantities of tusks being taken cannot be underestimated - but later these vast swathes of land would become plantations and estates. It must be pointed out that the contracts made with the African Chiefs were entirely exploitative; the purchasers applied English rules and concepts of land tenure without the vendors' real understanding of what they were agreeing to.

In most colonised African countries extensive farms were only owned and run by European settlers but in Nyasaland a few land leaseholders were African. Most of them had had a mission education and had earned some capital through jobs such as mining, teaching or working as foremen on the larger estates which they invested in land as soon as they could. Some of them later moved into retail and set up businesses in the larger commercial centres.

Despite all its diversification, business did not go well for the African Lakes Company and by the mid-eighteen eighties it was almost bankrupt. This was partly due to the usual problems of poor cash flow and insufficient capital but there were also practical problems associated with transportation and a regular supply of goods with which to trade. Another factor was that the ivory trade, although lucrative, was competitive and in some areas the Africans still dealt with the Arabs and Portuguese. This commercial conflict spilled over into several incidents of armed conflict between 1886 and 1889. The African Lakes Company proved itself unable to protect the people it had made promises to and was regarded as being too weak and disorganised to be effective by the missionary populations as well as the British Government in London who kept a weather eye on the situation.

Meanwhile, Nyasaland's neighbours on the west were also living through interesting times. The region had been more or less taken over by the son of a British vicar who had, astonishingly, become one of the most successful diamond merchants in history. His company, De Beers, remains synonymous with the trade today, although his own name is more likely to conjure up images associated with many negative aspects of colonialism for this was Cecil Rhodes. Rhodes, who always had a keen eye for the main chance, was the founder of the British South Africa Company, insatiable in its quest to dominate Africa from 'the Cape to Cairo'. This institution was like an octopus, its tentacles reaching out in many directions and grasping whatever it could, and had interests in mineral rights, agriculture, oil, railways and land generally. It had immense power thanks to a Royal Charter granted in 1889 and to support its actions it even had its own para-military police force.

When, in 1891, the floundering African Lakes Company finally had to give up its ambitions to control the area it suited Rhodes to step in under the auspices of his British South Africa Company, claiming rights over the whole of Nyasaland's Northern Province. (This was bitterly disputed by the locals and decades later the land rights were returned to the native

population by the British South Africa Company - but not without the caveat that the British South Africa Company itself would retain mineral rights in the region.) Rhodes now had control over the area west of the Lake although it turned out to be a poisoned chalice. It cost him dearly to completely vanquish the slave traders still at large in the area and rather than being venerated he was vilified by the native Nyasalanders, disliked by the British who lived there and had an uneasy relationship with the new man in charge, Harry Johnston, whom he had expected to be compliant but found to be antagonistic.

British Foreign Policy at that time was that any African dependencies should be self supporting, but Nyasaland had never been particularly productive as the land lacked those fertile qualities that made Rhodesia 'the bread basket of Africa'.'Most of the population lived from subsistence farming, growing staples such as cassava and sweet potato roots, legumes like beans and groundnuts and varieties of grains ranging from maize to millet. The colonial regime brought with it agricultural experts and officers and, although some emphasis was put on the production of food for domestic consumption, the development of cash crops such as tobacco, cotton and tea for export became more important. This meant that for several decades the interests of the European owned estates and plantations were strongly favoured over those of the locals.

After the First World War, Nyasaland was left with an extensive road system and motorised transport became the preferred method for moving goods around the country. The railway had also been expanded. With improved transportation, Fishing came into its own as an industry for the first time. Many people who had previously worked as head porters - literally carrying loads on their heads - were released into the labour market and these mostly went into agricultural enterprises. The Government sold or leased small plots of Crown land and 'peasant production' overtook the big plantations, the local people preferring to work for themselves. This was increased during the worldwide economic depression which affected several large estates to the extent that they ceased general production. In the absence of the owners and managers even more the Africans grew and sold their own crops of tobacco and cotton. (Tea was the only cash crop to remain solely in the hands of the large scale planters until Independence.) Unfortunately, although these crops were exported and their sale was of great importance to Nyasaland, the quality of the products was never high and they did not command the prices that others could. The Nyasaland commercial agricultural sector struggled to scratch a living out of the dry African dirt.