

## PROFILE OF A PRESIDENT— TUBMAN OF LIBERIA

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WHEN he was a young man—President Tubman told me during the celebrations of his last Inauguration in 1956—a military expedition went from Monrovia to Liberia's interior almost every year; and, as a militia officer 40 years ago, he had taken part in several. Now he was convinced that the enmity between "tribes" and "settlers" had ended, and he regarded his cordial relations with Paramount Chiefs and the hinterland people as the main achievement of his twelve years in office. He wanted the tribal people, the country's great majority, to feel that the Presidency itself was open to them, and he did not pretend that the reforms which had allowed them a greater say in the government (until 1945 they had no representation in the legislature, in the lower house of which they now have a third of the seats) were ahead of their aspirations. Political activity among the people of the interior—if there is really anything sustained—is still clandestine, and there does not seem any urgent demand for rapid political reform; but the demand will come, and the President wants to keep abreast of it.

The great meeting of Paramount Chiefs in the Centennial Pavilion on "Interior Day" during these inaugural celebrations produced some sincere tributes to the President's policy—"Now we are all guests at one table," said a venerable, bearded Grebo Chief—and the ceremonial presentation of white kola nuts and cloth to the President and Vice-President, both wearing tribal robes presented to them during up-country tours, was not just formal.

Some visitors from British West Africa, it is true, found it strange that such relations with the Interior should be new, and felt that Chiefs had far too little respect paid them in the capital. But there is no great Chief in Liberia, and the gathering in the Pavilion looked very much like a gathering of elders in Sierra Leone. It is certainly time that the division between "settlers"—descendants of the Negro Americans who settled along the coast to found the Republic of Liberia—and "tribes" should be forgotten, and that use of invidious words like "uncivilized" and "savage" should be dropped. Yet, to the settlers,

"Pioneers' Day" still celebrates the bravery of their forefathers, who had resisted attack after attack from the inland tribes ever since the first settlement was founded at Monrovia in 1822—one attack, the President reminded me, would have put an end to Monrovia for good if a British warship captain, hearing the sound of gunfire, had not brought his ship in to aid the settlers.

Since his last Inauguration, the President has taken a step which might seem long overdue, but which represents a minor social revolution in Liberia. Drily observing that the text of the diploma which is presented to recipients of the Humane Order of African Redemption seems not to reflect exactly the ideas of Liberian democracy, he has requested the legislature to delete from it the word "savage", and substitute "unfortunate". The order is given for work among peoples within Liberia and neighbouring territories, and when I attended a ceremony in Monrovia's Centennial Pavilion at which Mr. Tubman invested many foreigners as well as Liberians with the order, a number of Liberian ladies, dressed in Victorian costume, adorned the back of the platform, emphasizing the atmosphere in which an award of this kind could be instituted. Though the citation refers to "our brothers", it also uses that adjective which might have seemed inevitable in 1897 when the order was instituted, but sounds incongruous in the decade of Afro-Asian self-consciousness.

President Tubman is the first President to travel widely in the Interior, and his appeal to the Paramount Chiefs to "bury the hatchet" and end their warfare with the settlers has borne fruit. Some of the government's Afro-American officials stationed in the Interior, including even District Commissioners, have felt the weight of a President's wrath; and now, too, some senior officials in Monrovia, including the Director-General of the Health Services, Dr. Togba, are "tribal" people.

Nobody pretends that President Tubman has made Liberia a model democracy—it is one of the few aristocracies left—or that he has purged the government of inefficiency, nepotism and corruption. But since 1943, when he first became President, the country has been transformed as a result of the new relationship between the Interior and the government, and because of the impetus the President has given to economic development.

For 15 years the history of Liberia has been the history of William Vacanarat Shadrach Tubman, 18th President, who in this year stood election for a fourth term and won. Yet in 1943, when he was first elected, some thought that the out-

going President, Edwin J. Barclay, who had been in office for 14 years, intended to use the man he had made an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court six years before as a stooge, wielding the real power himself. The idea did not survive very long.

Supreme office has developed W. V. S. Tubman; it is extraordinary that in 1943 anybody could have expected him to be anything but a ruler. He is of medium height, but has dignity and obvious shrewdness: his face is that of a man who has his own way, even if it is easily broken by a smile, and his voice is level, strong and calm.

He was born in 1895 in Harper, Maryland County, in the east of Liberia. His father was Alexander Tubman, former Speaker of the Liberian House of Representatives and a Methodist minister, descended from U.S. Negro settlers who emigrated to the newly founded colony for ex-slaves in 1834, from Augusta, Georgia. (Alexander's wife Rebecca emigrated to Liberia from the same State in 1872.) William entered the Methodist Cape Palmas Seminary, which he left in 1913 to teach. But he came from the narrow circle which expects and is expected to hold high office in Liberia and, while teaching, read for the Bar, the politician's standby in most countries. Called to it in 1917, he soon had a flourishing practice.

Entering government service as a Recorder in the Monthly and Probate Court, the young Tubman soon became Collector of Internal Revenue and a Country Attorney. Under the Liberian system, civil service or judicial office does not close the door to politics, and in 1923, at the age of 28, he became the youngest Liberian ever to be elected to the country's 10-man Senate—a victory credited by some to his great popularity as a "poor man's lawyer". He remained a Senator until he became a judge, in 1937.

He first went abroad in 1928, to a Methodist Conference in Kansas City, whence he returned home via Europe. As President-Elect he visited President Roosevelt in 1943, and in 1952 made a state visit to Spain. In 1954, he went to the United States as President Eisenhower's guest, and returned via Haiti and Jamaica where he was Sir Hugh Foot's guest and where a British warship was put at his disposal. His famous yacht, which some critics have called extravagant, but which the Liberian Government claims to be essential for coastal communication, has been seen too in Freetown harbour, this year when the President

made his very popular state visit to Sierra Leone. In 1956, he paid a most successful state visit to five countries of Western Europe. This year, too, he has played host to the Governor-General of Nigeria and the Governor of Sierra Leone, while in December the Queen's one day visit to Monrovia will bring a host of journalists to Liberia.

Last year the President emerged as a figure in Pan-African politics when he led his country's delegation to the Conference of Independent States in Accra. This year he put forward his proposal for "Associated States of Africa", with the novel suggestion that the Association should be open not only to independent States but to those—and he has made it plain that he has in mind particularly Nigeria—who have fixed dates for their independence. He has declared his dislike of theoretical Pan-Africanism or utopian federations, and his Association would confine itself to strictly practical forms of co-operation such as removal of customs barriers. It might be thought that in some way Mr. Tubman's proposals mean rivalry with the Ghana-Guinea Union; but the Liberian visit of President Sekou Touré of Guinea and Dr. Nkrumah of Ghana in July to discuss African affairs with President Tubman showed that these two leaders respect his importance.

His achievements are remarkable, and personal. He is the government of Liberia, the country's most hard-working man, and perhaps its shrewdest. He has ensured economic development almost entirely by encouraging overseas capital, but he has diminished the consequent risk of economic domination by seeking it from countries other than the U.S.A. He has also stepped-up taxation on Firestone and the American Bomi Hills iron-ore enterprise, though recognizing that low taxation is one of Liberia's attractions. (For some Liberians, his regime may be remembered as the one which introduced income tax; while, for a great part of the world, Liberian taxation is so low that shipowners prefer to register in Monrovia rather than at home.)

The interest now shown in trade with and investment in Liberia by firms in Europe is, indeed, amazing. The Italian Medico Banca, a subsidiary of three big Italian banks, for example, is now established in Liberia and assists Italian traders there, while Italian contractors are building roads and public buildings. The Liberian Government is considering concessions to Italian groups for plantation rice growing, since the country urgently needs to increase its food supply if any of its present projects are

to be started. An Italian group is interested in an iron-ore concession—which makes Italy the sixth country to be interested in Liberia's vast iron-ore deposits. They are already being worked by American and Swedish interests, while German interests are developing a concession, and Dutch and French steel interests have examined the possibilities. Manganese is another mineral being developed, and a Swiss group holds a concession in which there is said to be manganese.

Diamonds inevitably interest some foreigners, and a French firm wants to start a diamond-cutting business in Monrovia. Firestone gave Liberia the plantation pattern, and whatever criticisms can be made of it, Firestone's own enterprise has given a base to the Liberian economy which otherwise it could never have had. Now there are many other plantations—the African Fruit Company, a German firm, is already establishing rubber, cocoa, and banana plantations: a big Swiss chocolate firm is interested in a cocoa plantation; other overseas firms want both to establish oil-palm plantations and to enter the palm produce trade; there is Dutch interest in cashew nuts—and so it goes on. Indeed there is already a labour shortage, and food is becoming very expensive—Liberia's population may not be much greater than a million. The public services, notably the Post Office, may find increased development a strain (the possibility of leasing the telephone service to an overseas firm has been considered), while there are obvious political problems when a flood of overseas enterprises arrive.

Yet President Tubman, calm and sure of himself, seems to know what he is doing. Once he had decided on his "open-door" policy, he had no reservations; and it is largely confidence in the man himself which gives overseas investors confidence in Liberia. He wants people who will put something into Liberia, who will train Liberians, add to the country's social services, diversify its economy, and lessen its dependence on any particular outside country, and he is getting them.

Into Monrovia, already so transformed physically that John Gunther's description is obsolete, there naturally has come a cosmopolitan crowd—to a visitor brought up on Graham Greene and "Top Hats and Tom Toms", they are a surprising feature of Tubman's Monrovia, whose well-established Liberian upper class and rapidly growing European population sustain reasonable restaurants, night clubs, and hairdressers—but poor shops.

Not all the Europeans have a contribution to make to develop-

ment. On the doors of bedrooms at the air-conditioned City Hotel is a notice reminding guests that dealing in precious stones, like hawking of any kind, is not permitted in hotel bedrooms. Some visitors naturally assume that the notice refers to diamonds smuggled in from Sierra Leone; in fact it refers to Liberia's own short-lived 1957 diamond boom, which President Tubman ended by closing the workings, to which thousands of men had rushed, until production could be organized in an orderly manner. Though no proper survey has been made it is likely that a rich diamond field exists here in an area not far from the Sierra Leone border: but the City Hotel, though accommodating a surprising number of overseas businessmen, now seems to house no dealers in precious stones, since Liberia's production is temporarily reduced, while the diamond slump and more successful police action seem to have stopped the leak from Sierra Leone.

Certainly there are a number of mystery men around, and an ideal place to see them is the bar at Monrovia airport, which now is well-developed for smaller aircraft like the Air France D.C. 3's which do not use the big Robertsfield airport 40 miles away—the recent visit of Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands, who piloted his own aircraft into Monrovia Airport, stimulated improvement. But most non-Liberians in Liberia are doing a good job, and are made welcome by everybody from the President downwards. In spite of fixed ideas to the contrary, Americans are not much in evidence outside Firestone's area—half the European staff of the U.S.-owned Bomi Hills iron-ore mines are Dutch and Swiss, while in Liberian government service there are now Germans, Spaniards and Italians.

President Tubman's critics say that he tries to do too much, and it is true that even minor appointments and contracts need his approval. The President of Liberia is invested with enormous power, including the making of judicial appointments, and President Tubman uses it. He has an eagle eye for proper dress on ceremonial occasions, and does not forgive infringements: he insists on formality not for its own sake, but because he believes that Liberia cannot afford slackness in anything. He has extended the franchise to women, many of whom play an important role in his administration; but visiting democrats find the one-party system still firmly established in Liberia, where the True Whig Party monopolises the chief offices, and opposition is both difficult and ineffectual (the attempt on the President's

life in 1955, however, seems to have had a personal motive). His foreign policy, too, has critics, who think him too "pro-Western," and his latest move, the acceptance of an Ambassador from Chiang Kai-Shek's China, testifies to a respectably zealous anti-Communism (though the term is loosely defined in Liberia).

President Tubman has been lucky, in that his rule has coincided with a period of high raw material prices, with the activities of U.N. specialised agencies in Liberia, and with American enthusiasm for "aid". But he has taken advantage of his luck, and has done his best to gear up his Government machine to cope with the problems of development, not hesitating to employ foreigners even in important jobs when necessary. It is precisely because of the changes he has brought that he is certain to be the last President to rule directly: his successor will rely on subordinates, and the right men will be hard to find.

Perhaps this picture suggests a man who is just a ruthless machine. The President is not that. Shadrach Tubman (in spite of numerous honorary degrees, he does not use "Dr.") loves a good story, and has a reputation as a bon viveur, at whose executive mansion, pleasant country house and yacht the finest food and wines are served. He likes to relax in the exclusive Saturday Afternoon Club, where he is accessible to his friends; but he is accessible, too, to the humblest of his people, and entry to the executive mansion for an interview is not difficult. Through 15 years of supreme power he has kept a sense of proportion, and in spite of the adulation he receives and the ubiquity of his name in Liberia, he is still "Shad". His wife Antionette, granddaughter of a former President, shares his popularity, and cheerful children make the big executive mansion into a home.

In all the Inauguration celebrations of 1956 the scene that typified him came the first day. Mr. Tubman was standing on a balcony wearing top hat, white tie, tails and covered with decorations, watching a military procession in the company of the Russian delegates. Past him floated one of the myriad balloons released in his honour. He caught it and negligently applied to it his famous cigar, to the delight of the crowd below. An actor, perhaps; but the man who, for the time being, seems to know what Liberia wants.