

TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES.

Sir,—While Labrador, the Falkland Islands, Queensland, and other localities more or less eligible have been proposed as new penal settlements, the best site of all has of late years dropped out of sight.

As far back as 1856 the late Mr. M'Gregor Laird, one of Africa's best and noblest friends, wrote as follows concerning the Cameroon Mountains and Amboise Bay, in West Africa:—

"The great value of this position to this country is undoubtedly its extraordinary adaptation for a penal settlement. Supposing, by black labour, a good road made to the superior level from the port, European prisoners might be kept there in perfect security; any attempt to escape would be defeated by the climate. They would displace no native population, for that is confined to the low ground. They would be completely isolated, and governed with greater ease than convict stations surrounded by white settlers. Employment could be found to any extent in cutting timber, making roads, and raising their own provisions. As long as they remained on the high land they would be safe; the penalty for leaving it would be levied by Nature herself. Ground could be allotted to the well-behaved, and the great source of depravity would be removed by allowing intermarriage with the native women. A mixed race would be the result, which experience has proved to be the most efficient way of improving mankind. As long as transportation continues, and the difficulty of finding a practical substitute for it is generally acknowledged, there is no part of the world where a convict can be placed with less injury to his fellow-creatures and with greater chance of reformation for himself."

I can confirm, from personal experience, every word above cited. In those days, however, little was known of the capabilities of a mountain region which has lately been explored, and upon which I spent my Christmas holidays last year.

The Cameroons Mountain, rising in the depths of the Bight of Biafra, and within 4.25 deg., or about 300 miles, of the Equator, is not, as has been supposed, an isolated mass breaking the continuity of the level and mangrove-growing coast. I believe it to be the abutment of a great *sierra*, which, connected by the "Rumbi" and "Qua" hills—they are visible to the naked eye from the sea—extends in a north-easterly direction to Mount Alantika, known to Europe by Dr. Barth's travels. The Cameroons buttress may contain 500 square miles of successive bush and jungle, wood and forest, grass and barren ground. If connected, however, with Alantika, the number might be multiplied by 50.

The first work to be expected from convicts located at Amboise Bay, at the foot of the Cameroons, would be a sanitarium. This poisonous coast calls aloud for some such establishment. During the last year Her Majesty's ship *Prometheus*, Captain Bedingfield, stationed at Lagos, lost by death and invaliding 84 out of 100 whites. In the Bonny River it is calculated that, of 280, some 134 died in 78 days. One ship, the *Csprey*, lost all her crew of 17 men except the master. The disease was yellow fever, which still continues in the New Calabar River, while in the Bonny it has been succeeded by a no less deadly typhus. At Fernando Po, 76 men died in two months, out of a total of 231 whites. I therefore conclude that we do want a sanitarium. It is vain to assert that a change to England is sufficient. Returning by the African steamship *Athenian*, Captain Lowry, I remarked that, despite the care of our excellent doctor, every passenger from the coast fell ill; one officer, who never had had fever in Africa, suffered from it on board. The first establishment at Amboise Bay would be on Mondori Island, an oval rock some 200 feet high at the entrance of the bay, and catching the pure Atlantic breezes, which at Clarence Town, Fernando Po, must pass over a long tract of jungly swamp backing the settlement. The second station—it is unwise to transport fever patients suddenly from low ground to high altitudes—would be on Mount Henry, an eminence about 150 miles from the mission station on the beach, and upwards of 1,500ft. above sea level. The third would be a ledge of ground, grass-grown, but not wholly out of the wooded region, 7,000ft. high, and sheltered from the north-east wind by a formation which my companions and I called the "Black Crater." A stream of degraded lava leads to this, the highest point where European invalids might be settled, and cutting and zigzagging would easily render it practicable for four-footed animals. Above the Black Crater all is grass and clover, lava and clinker. In places the land is level enough for pleasant riding; snow could be stored for the whole year, and those who enjoy cold can pass a night or two at "Saker's Camp," where at dawn the mercury stands below zero, the blankets are stiff, and the noble peak is hoar with frost.

Being unprepared to assert in England that felony would justify divorce, and not unacquainted with the horrors of Norfolk Island, I agree with Mr. Laird in thinking it no small advantage that the convicts who prove themselves orderly and industrious should be able to intermarry with the women of the country.

With respect to the chances of escape, a bottle of rum given to the natives would bring in any fugitive; and as the lowlands are deadly, as the highlands are healthy, as all the craft upon this coast is so frail that even the half-amphibious negroes often lose their lives—and, finally, as the mountain, though thinly populated and wholly desert above an altitude of 3,000ft., is almost surrounded by populous regions, full of well-armed men, commanded by "General Tazo," *alias* swamp fever—it is not to be expected that a convict station in Western Africa will ever breed a race of bush-rangers.

Lastly, the convict station at Amboise Bay would be well supplied with spiritual food; this, I believe, is deemed a requisite. The Protestant missionaries expelled from Fernando Po have taken refuge on the coast, and have founded stations at Amboise and on the neighbouring Cameroons River. These devout men will doubtless rejoice to see the field of their well-meant labours extended.

The details of the plan belong to those who are experienced in the management of penal settlements. It might be advisable to station an armed hulk at Amboise Bay, as the Spaniards have done at Clarence Cove, Fernando Po; or one or more companies from any of the West Indian regiments—before long I hope to see convict corps—could be detached for the purpose of guarding against outbreaks, which (flight would soon be deemed impossible) must constitute the sole excitement of the convicts and the greatest danger to those in charge of them. I can honestly recommend this plan to your favourable notice. No harm can be done by trying it, and, should it succeed in suppressing thuggee in England, a few pounds sterling—perhaps not more than are at present being invested by peaceful men and women in life-preservers, revolvers, and bowie-knives—will be right well spent. For some years an annual 5,000*l.* has been wasted upon that giant humbug, the Zambezi River, in South-western Africa. There is no one, I believe, who is not now convinced that the promised development of its resources was a dream of the sanguine. But, as great geographical results are still expected, the Zambezi River might retain half her present salary, and make over the remainder to Amboise Bay, on the West Coast of Africa. Enough, however, of this small matter.

In support of my statement regarding the eligibility of Cameroons Mountain for a sanitarium, a colony, or a penal settlement, and the perfect adaptation of Amboise Bay as a naval station, I can cite, besides Mr. Laird, General Sir Edward Nicolls, K.C.B., and Captains William Allen and Close, R.N., all personal and competent observers. Against it is the editor of a *quasi* missionary paper, who "protests" that "we have done evil enough in Africa already," and who should discover, by reading up a little colonial history, that stationing convicts makes a place. To the morbid few who would cry, "Cruel to transport the poor grotters to such a climate," I may reply that the coast is good enough, if an occasional ticket of leave be allowed, for myself and others who are not convicts.

I have the honour to be, Sir, your most obedient servant,

RICHARD F. BURTON, F.R.G.S.

14, Montagu-place, Montagu-square, Dec. 30.