

PhotoEssay

At the Height of Empire

“The round world is known, and more, it is accessible... Suddenly, in a sense unparalleled until within the last quarter of a century, we have taken possession of the world.”

– Halford John Mackinder, ca 1900¹

At the height of empire, Britain had explored large swaths of the round world. It had moved from the coastline to the interior of most landmasses, including North and South America, Australia and New Zealand, India, and Africa. The majority of unmapped spaces were either under water, near the poles, or on the tops of mountains. Consequently, this is where the British went. They took to the poles, they scanned the oceans’ depths, and they ascended mountains on every continent. They climbed for many reasons, but the consequence, if not always the motive, was imperial acquisition. A synoptic view from the heights proved metaphorically and practically significant. Trigonometric surveys, for instance, often used peaks as points of triangulation. In short, you could “see” from the mountaintops, and once you could see, you could order and control. By the turn of the twentieth century, explorers viewed high places as high commodities.

Halford John Mackinder was one such explorer. Although little known today, he was a giant among imperialists in the early twentieth century and today is considered the architect of British geography.² When appointed a Reader in geography at Oxford in

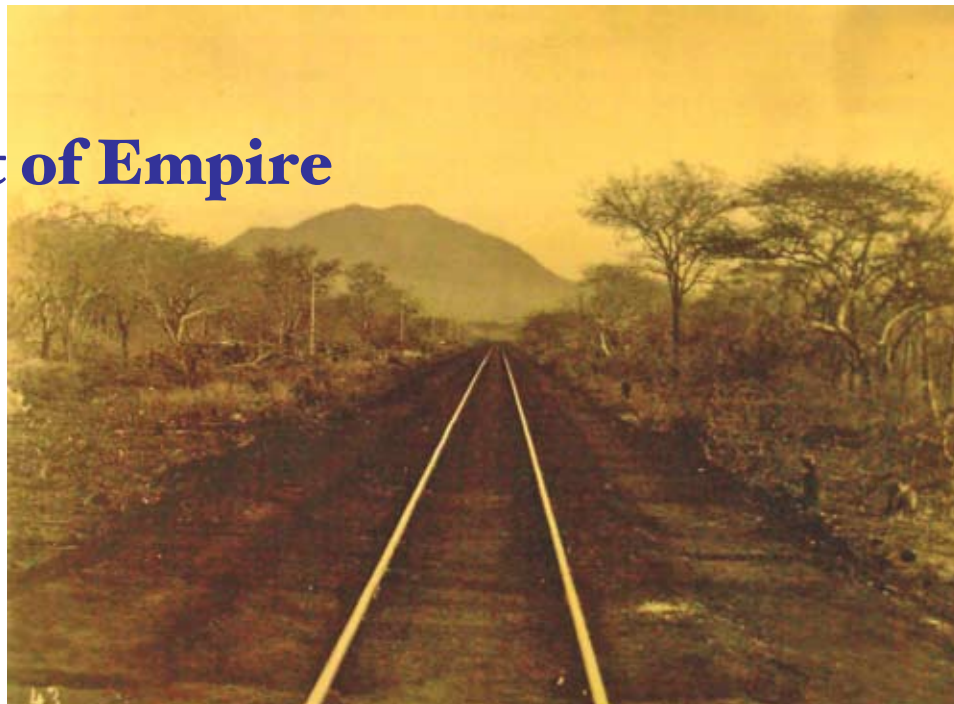


Figure 1: The Uganda Railroad with Mount Kenya in the background

1887, Mackinder was the only person in all of Britain to hold such a position. He went on to become the founder and Director of the first School of Geography in Britain (Oxford, 1899), in charge of hiring the faculty and organizing the curriculum. Among numerous other accomplishments, he helped establish the London School of Economics, serving as its second Director (1903-1908), and he served as Principal of the Extension College at Reading (1892-1903) (now the University of Reading). In the midst of all this, in the summer of 1899, he led the first successful summit attempt of Mt. Kenya (17,050 ft), the second highest peak in Africa.

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This past fall, I traveled to the University of Oxford in search of the papers relating to Mackinder's expedition. Rhodes House holds the most important material: the typewritten journals of the ascent along with 26 field notebooks, all neatly placed into specially form-fitted boxes. Everything was very tidy. However, the material relating to the planning and execution of the climb was a bit different. Those documents had been stored in the School of Geography, but this past summer the Library in the School of Geography merged with the Radcliffe Science Library, and several different institutions absorbed its holdings. The New Bodleian received the archives, and it was there that I experienced a quintessential archival moment. Collin Harris, the extremely helpful Superintendent of the Special Collections, wheeled in a large tin box, measuring about a foot by two feet and labeled simply "Mackinder, Esq." Plopping the trunk down on the floor, he gave a sly grin and told me to "go at it." Since they had only recently received the material, it was uncatalogued, unorganized, and exactly what I needed. To my excitement, along with all the written material relating to the organization of the expedition, it also contained 73 black-and-white photographs documenting the entire journey, stretching from Mombasa to Nairobi, into the highlands of the Teliki Valley, and up to the summit. For a historian interested in verticality, it was a gold mine.

The three pictures I have included here, viewed separately, do not amount to much: a railroad running into the distance, a glacier-clad mountain, and two men on a rock. Nevertheless, taken together, they represent something much more powerful – the construction of space in the imperial mind. They depict nothing less than the horizontal and vertical organization of empire.

Historians of science, at this point, understand the myriad ways in which science and technology create horizontal space – through lines of latitude and longitude, timetables and telegraph cables, and trigonometric surveys and railroads. Indeed, railroads are the quintessential horizontal engines of empire. From the American West to the Siberian frontier, they have provided Europeans access to the world's continents. The Uganda railroad pictured here (Figure 1) was merely the latest in a long line of imperial railroads. Yet, what interested me about the photograph was not simply the impending force of the railroad on African affairs, but rather, the manner in which the railroad opened Africa's interior plateau, a means,

There was considerable symbolism in capturing a summit, not too different from standing on the poles of the earth. It was a means to measure geographical space, of controlling and defining the place of empire. However, such symbolic, nationalist sentiments also had practical, imperial significance. Britain was at the height of empire and Europe was engaged in a mad scramble for Africa.



Figure 2: Mount Kenya with the Tyndall glacier

that is, of conquering its most fertile highland areas now known as "the white highlands." The mountain in the background is as significant as the railroad itself. Climbing Mt. Kenya, moreover, would not have been possible without the railway. Europeans, including the expeditions of Joseph Thomson in 1883, Count Teliki in 1887, and J. W. Gregory in 1893, had attempted to bag the summit without success. All had been rebuffed owing to the difficulty of gaining access to the interior highlands, a nearly impossible trek if one began on foot at the coast. Mackinder kept a close eye on the progress of the Uganda Railway when it began construction in 1895. Once it reached Nairobi in the summer of

1899, it made the mountain accessible; Mackinder dropped everything and departed for Kenya.

Mackinder climbed Mt. Kenya for several reasons. First, the climb helped him establish credibility as a geographer, a discipline still dominated by nineteenth-century notions of exploration of unknown regions. He employed the climb as a springboard for his new professorship, which he in turn used to help establish the teaching of geography in Britain as a national priority. Second, Mackinder unabashedly argued for the importance of the climb in terms of national prestige. The German geologist Hans Meyer had successfully led a party to the summit of Mt. Kilimanjaro in 1889, and Mackinder feared that the Germans would also attempt Mt. Kenya. The prize, he insisted, should go to the British. There was considerable symbol-

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significance. Britain was at the height of empire and Europe was engaged in a mad scramble for Africa. The partition of Africa begun in 1886 divided much of eastern Africa between Germany and Britain, but the superpowers left the western boundaries leading to the highlands of the central interior undefined. Viewed from this perspective, Mackinder's goal was to break into the great central plateau in the heart of Africa. It belonged to the larger geopolitical strategy of seizing control of the upper reaches of the Nile, the water reserve for the entire northeast of the continent.³ From the beginning, Mackinder viewed his voyage in these vertical, horizontal, and imperial terms.

The use of geographical space in Mackinder's journals is quite striking.⁴ It starts, like most travel journals, simply enough with the dates of the expedition: "June 8-10. We left Charing Cross by the evening mail..." The narrative continues in this manner upon his arrival in Africa and his subsequent gathering of materials, hiring of porters, and prolonged stay in Mombasa. However, these dates slowly fade to the background as he begins his journey on the Uganda railroad. The narrative is then broken up by mile markers: – "Mile 297: Athi Station..." Railroad mile markers carry the narrative until Mackinder begins his trek by foot into the highlands. Then, astonishingly, neither dates nor mile markers predominate. Rather, the narrative rotates around camps I – XXII, which are in turn based on altitude. Barometric readings and boiling point measurements become more meaningful than days of the week or distance traveled. Mackinder explicitly transitions his narrative from a horizontal to a vertical plane.

Mackinder's journals follow many of the common tropes of travel narratives, mimicking especially Joseph Conrad's fictional account of Charlie Marlow's adventure into the heart of the Congo (coincidentally published the same year as Mackinder's climb). One difference is its vertical orientation. Like Marlow following the river Congo, as Mackinder travels upward, he moves further and further from "civilization," entering a supposed "savage" darkness that is both symbolic and spiritual. Lines between morality and immorality become blurred the further Mackinder travels upwards. At Mombasa, Mackinder writes, "I never saw aggressive straight immorality. Almost all the bodies were plump and clean. -- They shave under their arms." Yet, as he gains altitude, "gradually the houses become poorer" and their owners "have not morals." The narrative thereby justified the acquisition of territory and the expansion of empire and Western civilization. But, as in Conrad's novel, events turn nasty: eight porters were "shot by orders" for

insubordination near the final base camp, a shocking but not necessarily surprising atrocity to 21st-century readers.

Mt. Kenya has twin peaks less than twenty feet difference in height. Figure Two shows the vertical relief of the twin peaks, with the Tyndall glacier streaming prominently down its side. From this vantage point, Mackinder wrote his impression of the mountain. "What a beautiful mountain Kenya (Victoria Peak) is. Very graceful and not stern, but with a cold feminine beauty – one of the sphinx-like she's of nature. ... Suddenly the sun must have set – all the glow went and the whole scene chilled in a moment and struck one with a new – Arctic – beauty." In both name and gender, the mountain was to be subjugated for the good of Britain. Moreover, the use of the metaphors here, of the Arctic and the

Sphinx, bespeaks an imperial world view, one where differences of geography are no longer important, where the world has become one and with the British imperial adventurer at its center. Figure Three shows not Mackinder, but his two Alpine guides, Cesar Ollier and Joseph Brocherel, on the summit. These pictures helped me think about imperialism vertically and not just horizontally, because they demonstrate how imperialists operated in the vertical realm. Indeed, two white Europeans standing on the top of Africa's second highest peak while the continent was in the midst of partition is about as imperial a photograph as one can imagine. We need to consider this verticality when we describe how the Victorians viewed the world, how they mapped out spaces – ocean spaces and land spaces, atmospheric spaces and mining spaces, and, of course, imperial spaces of struggle and domination.

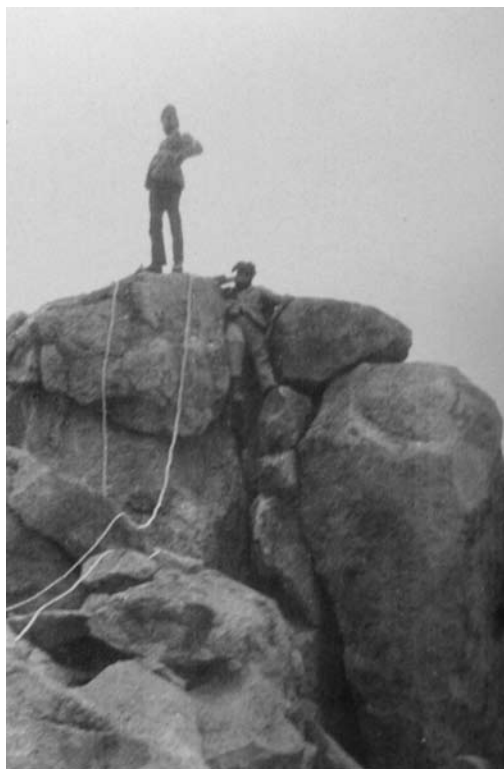


Figure 3: Cesar Ollier and Joseph Brocherel, Mackinder's Alpine guides, on the summit

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¹ Halford John Mackinder Papers, Special Collections, New Bodleian Library, MP/C/100.

² See, for example, *Geography* 32, No. 155, Part 1, March 1947: 136-7; Brian W. Blouet, *Halford Mackinder: A Biography* (Texas A&M U. P., 1987); D. I. Scargill, "The RGS and the Foundations of Geography at Oxford," *Geographical Journal* 142 (1976): 438-61.

³ See Alan Moorehead, *The White Nile* (Harper and Brothers, 1960).

⁴ Mackinder MSS Afr.r.29-30, Rhodes House, Oxford. See also *H. J. Mackinder, The First Ascent of Mount Kenya*, edited with an introduction and notes by K. Michael Barbour (Ohio U. P., 1991), and Reuben Ellis, *Vertical Margins: Mountaineering and the Landscape of Neo-Imperialism* (U. of Wisconsin P., 2001).