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Robert Hermann Schomburgk

Excerpt

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DESCRIPTION OF GUIANA.

I.

GEOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION.

GUIANA*, Guyana, Guayana, or Guianna, is that part of South America which lies between $8^{\circ} 40'$ N. lat. and $3^{\circ} 30'$ S. lat. and the 50th and 68th degree of longitude, west of Greenwich. It is bounded on the north by the Atlantic and the eastern course of the river Orinoco, on the east likewise by the Atlantic, on the south by the rivers Negro and Amazon, on the west by the northern course of the Orinoco, the natural canal of Cassiquiare, and the southern course of the Rio Negro. Its greatest extent between

Names and
boundaries
of Guiana.

* The British portion is called Guiana in official documents; Guayana is the Spanish name, Guianna the Portuguese. The earliest Dutch settlers called it Guiana, or the wild coast. It is said to have received its name from a small river, a tributary of the Orinoco.

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Cape North, and the confluence of the Rio Xie with the Rio Negro, is 1090 geogr. miles; its greatest breadth between Punta Barima, at the mouth of the Orinoco, to the confluence of the Rio Negro with the Amazon, 710 geogr. miles. Its line of sea-coast extends between the Amazon and the Orinoco, and is divided into Brazilian, French, Dutch, British, and Venezuelan Guiana, but its definite limits have never been obtained. All that has hitherto been done, between Spain, Portugal, and France, is regarded as only provisional, and the boundary which separates the British settlements from Venezuela and Brazil has never been determined.

British Guiana, undetermined state of its boundaries.

The following description is limited to those parts which comprehend British Guiana; but the exact knowledge of its area depends upon the determination of its boundaries; and in the uncertainty whether the pretensions of the Brazilian and Venezuelan governments will be attended to, it is impossible to come to a result. Some modern geographers extend British Guiana from the mouth of the Corentyn in $56^{\circ} 58'$ W. long. to Punta Barima in $60^{\circ} 6'$ W. long.; in consequence of the early Dutch settlers having had occupation of the eastern bank of the river Barima, where they had constructed a military outpost, before the English in 1666 had destroyed the fort of New Zealand, or New Middleburgh. The Republic of Venezuela claims the country to the mouth of the river Morocco, from thence to the confluence of the rivers Cuyuni and Mazaruni, along the western bank of the river Essequibo, to the confluence of the river Rupununi. The Brazilians having lately claimed as far north as the mouth of the Siparunus, its area would then be reduced to about 12,300 square miles, and it would form the smallest of the three colonies in Guiana, which

Area.

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are possessed by European powers*. If we follow the limits which nature prescribes by its rivers and mountains, and include all the regions which are drained by the streams which fall into the Essequibo within the British territory, and adopting the river Corentyn as its eastern boundary, the counties Demerara, Essequibo, and Berbice, which constitute British Guiana, consist of 76,000 square miles.

Physical Aspect of the Colony.

The banks and low lands adjacent to the chief rivers of British Guiana, namely the Essequibo, Demerara, Berbice, and Corentyn, consist of a blue clay, impregnated with marine salt mixed with decayed vegetable matter, which in its decomposed state forms rich mould and is highly productive. This alluvial flat extends from ten to twenty, and in some instances (as between the rivers Berbice and Corentyn,) even to forty miles inland, and is terminated by a range of sand-hills, from about 30 to 120 feet high, which approach the sea within two miles of the Arabisi coast of the Essequibo; if we follow them upwards from that point, they take first a S.E. by S., and afterwards a S.E. direction, traversing the whole colony. Almost parallel with the ridge of sand-hills run several detached groups of hillocks, of moderate elevation, being seldom more than 200 feet high; they cross the river Essequibo at Osterbecke Point, in lat. $6^{\circ} 15' N.$, the Demerara at Arobaya, in $6^{\circ} 5'$, the Berbice in 5° .

In the fifth parallel of latitude a chain of mountains is met with, which consists of granite, gneiss, and trappean

* It is called the smallest European colony in Guiana, in the Dictionnaire Géographique Universel, Paris, 1828, vol. iv. p. 615, where the area is stated to consist only of 3120 leagues.

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rocks, and their various modifications; they are an offset of the Orinoco mountains, with which they are connected by the Sierra Ussipama of geographers; they traverse Guiana in a south-eastern direction, and may be considered the central ridge of the colony. Whenever this chain crosses any of the rivers which have been under my investigation, it forms large cataracts, namely, those of Twasiniki and Ouropocari in the Essequibo, Itabrou and the Christmas cataracts in the river Berbice, and the great cataracts in the river Corentyn. The highest peak appears to be the mountains of St. George, at the Mazaroni, the Twasinki, and Maccari on the Essequibo (the latter rising about 1100 feet above the river), and the mountains of Itabrou, on the river Berbice, the highest of which, according to my barometrical admeasurement, was 662 feet above the river, and 828 feet above the sea. This chain appears to be connected with the Sierra Acarai by the Marowini mountains, and I am inclined to consider it the old boundary of the Atlantic, the geological features of the chain conducing to such a supposition. Further north commence hillocks of a lower elevation, and those ridges of sand the consequence of a retreating sea.

Pacaraima mountains.

The mountains of Pacaraima approach the Essequibo in lat. 4° N., and are an offset of the Sierra Parima; their general direction is east and west, and as far as I have been able to ascertain, they consist only of primitive formation.

Roraima.

The culminating point of this chain is a range of sandstone mountains, of which the highest is called Roraima by the Indians, in lat. $5^{\circ} 9' 30''$ N., long. $60^{\circ} 47'$ W. This remarkable mountain group extends twenty-five miles in a north-west and south-east direction, and rises to 5000 feet above the table-land, or 7500 feet above the sea;

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the upper 1500 feet presenting a mural precipice, more striking than I have ever seen elsewhere. Down the face of these mountains rush numerous cascades, which eventually form tributaries to the three great rivers of the northern half of South America; namely, the Amazon, the Orinoco, and the Essequibo. These mountains form the separation of waters of the basins of the Orinoco and Essequibo on the north, and the Amazon on the south, and they are therefore of the greatest importance in deciding the boundary of British Guiana.

The mountain Makarapan was formerly considered the highest point in Guiana, before I visited the Roraima mountains. This mountain approaches the river Rupununi in $3^{\circ} 50'$ N. lat., and rises to a height of about 3500 feet above the sea.

Makara-
pan.

The Cannucu or Conocon mountains, in 3° N. lat., connect the Pacaraima mountains with the Sierra Acarai, in which the largest river of Guiana, the Essequibo, has its sources. The Acarai mountains likewise give rise to the river Corentyn, and form the southern boundary of British Guiana. I shall designate them as the mountains of the equator, that imaginary line cutting their axis. They are densely wooded, and display the vigorous and luxuriant vegetation which is the striking feature of Guiana. These mountains do not reach the height of the Roraima; I estimated the highest at about 4000 feet. The Ouangouwai, or Mountains of the Sun, form the connecting link between the Acarai and Carawaimi mountains; the Tarapona mountains between the latter and the Cannucu and Pacaraima mountains.

Cannucu
and Acarai
Mountains.

A peculiar feature of British Guiana are the savannahs, which extend between the rivers Demerara and Corentyn, and approach the sea-shore at the river Berbice. They are not directly connected with the great savannahs of

Savannahs.

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the Rupununi, as the second ridge of mountains intervenes. These great savannahs are encompassed by the Sierra Pacaraima to the north, the Cannucu, Taripona, and Carawaimi mountains to the south, the thick forests of the Essequibo and isolated mountains to the east, and the mountains of the Mocajahi, and offsets of the Sierra Parima to the west*. The winding course of the rivers are generally marked with fringes of trees; and, if we except in some places tufts of trees which rise like verdant isles or oases in a desert from amidst these plains, they are merely covered with grasses and a few stunted trees.

The geological structure of this region leaves but little doubt that it was once the bed of an inland lake, which by one of those catastrophes, of which even later times give us examples, broke its barrier, forcing for its waters a path to the Atlantic. May we not connect with the former existence of this inland sea the fable of the lake Parima and the El Dorado? Thousands of years may have elapsed; generations may have been buried and returned to dust; nations who once wandered on its banks may be extinct, and exist even no more in name: still the tradition of the lake Parima and the El Dorado survived these changes of time; transmitted from father to son, its fame was carried across the Atlantic, and kindled the romantic fire of the chivalric Raleigh.

These Savannahs are the probable site of the lake Parima and El Dorado.

Lake Amucu.

This tract contains the lake Amucu, which in the dry season is of small extent and overgrown with rushes; but during the rainy season it not only inundates the adjacent low countries, but its waters, as I have been assured by the Indians, run partly eastward into the Rupununi, and partly westward into the Rio Branco. The small river Pirara has its sources somewhat south of lake Amucu, flowing through it towards the Rio Mahu. On

Pirara.

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[More information](#)

the banks of this small lake stands the Macusi village Pirara. With the exception of these savannahs, and the swamps of the river Berbice, the interior is thickly wooded, the forests consisting mostly of useful timber trees.

The large rivers with which the colony is intersected continually bring down quantities of detritus. The land at the mouths of these æstuaries is therefore on the increase, forming a fringe of low ground, which is soon covered with Mangroves (*Rhizophora Mangle*) and Cou-rida Bushes (*Avicennia nitida*); it is the first step of the shore's encroachment upon the sea. The sandy flat extends from twelve to fifteen miles to seaward, and in proportion as its distance from shore increases, it is covered with from three to four feet of water. These outskirts of new land may, it is more than probable, be hereafter gained from the sea, and form a valuable addition to the productive land. It has within the recollection of many advanced considerably, though in absence of precise data the yearly progress cannot be ascertained.

Geology.

The geology of British Guiana presents phænomena that are in accordance with what has been observed in the eastern hemisphere; the alluvial soil and clays, of which the strata along the sea-coast consists, rest upon granite; and it is to be observed as a remarkable feature, that masses which have been discovered by boring for water, at a depth of 100 feet on the coast, are to be seen at a distance of 150 miles *in situ*.

The alluvial flats are in many instances covered with a black vegetable matter, the detritus of the numerous rivers of Guiana, committed during the periodical rains to their current, and swept towards their æstuaries, where the tides have caused it to be deposited. The atmo-

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spheric air has assisted in its decomposition, and it forms now a carbonaceous vegetable matter, vulgarly called *pegass*. On the Arabisi coast of the river Essequibo, and in the vicinity of the Pomeroon, it is often found to have a depth of five to six feet.

At Ampa in the river Essequibo, a distance of about fifty miles from George Town, is an extensive bed of granite with hornblende; it has a south-western direction, appearing again at the site of the old post, in the river Mazaruni. This granitic bed has become of advantage to George Town, where it is much used for building material. A dyke, consisting of greenstone, traverses the Essequibo, and forms the first cataract in $6^{\circ} 11' N.$ lat.; it is called Aritaka. The rocky regions commence now, denoting primitive formation in all its component parts: granite, porphyry, and other of the extensive family of trappean rocks, may be traced at the base and on the top of the mountains. A peculiar feature are large tracts of boulders, mostly of granite, which are more or less accumulated in particular places, sometimes with great confusion; and which, wherever they traverse the rivers, form rapids and cataracts. They assume their grandest feature in that tract which is called Achra Moucra in the river Essequibo, in lat. $4^{\circ} 20'$. Veins of quartz frequently traverse the great masses of granite; and vast tracts of brown iron ore are met with in the mountains and the flats which extend between the rivers, from the admixture of which the soil receives a reddish tinge. This is chiefly the case in the savannahs on the Rupununi, which are frequently covered with black shining pebbles. In the vicinity of Roraima rock-crystals are found in the form of hexagonal columns, sometimes solitary, sometimes apparently agglutinated: they grow out of beds of sandstone, are perfectly transparent, and generally terminate

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in a single pyramid, with from three to six faces. The leading features of the mountainous regions are coloured ochres, indurated clays, granite-gneiss, and trappean rocks, and a total absence of limestone or its modifications.

Mr. Hillhouse, in his voyage up the Mazaruni, observed at some distance a conical peak, resembling the crater of a volcano*. Volcanoes and mineral springs.

There is a tradition that a volcano still in action exists up the river Siparuni, and it is mentioned by Hartzink that it had been discovered in 1749†. Though I attempted repeatedly to procure information on this subject, when in those regions, I did not succeed. If, therefore, an active volcano existed, it is probable that it is now extinct. The Indians of Pirara told me that there was, on the south-western angle of the Sierra Pacaraima, a mountain whence, from time to time, detonations are heard.

Earthquakes are very seldom felt in Guiana, and the shocks are but slight; if therefore the connexion between volcanoes and earthquakes be admitted, the rarity and slightness of the shocks do not point to the circumstance that volcanic phænomena find much fuel in Guiana. Major Staple, well known for his experiments, and in many instances for his great success in obtaining fresh water in George Town by boring, discovered a mineral spring on his own premises in Cumingsburgh, which is strongly impregnated with iron. I have frequently met with springs in the interior which were more or less impregnated with that metal, sometimes so strongly that the water was of an ochreous colour, but none which possessed thermal waters.

Guiana is not devoid of phænomena which are of interest to the geologist, and which add to the picturesque and magnificent scenery of that colony. The greatest Geological phænomena. Ataraipu, the natural pyramid.

* *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, vol. iv. p. 32.

† *Hartzink Beschryving van Guiana*, vol. i. p. 266.

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geological wonder of Guiana is no doubt Ataraipu, which, with full right, may be called a natural pyramid, far surpassing in height and grandeur the Egyptian piles constructed by the labour of man.

The Ataraipu is on the western bank of the river Guindaru in $2^{\circ} 55'$ N. lat. Its base is wooded for about 350 feet; from thence rises the mass of granite, devoid of all vegetation, in a pyramidal form for about 550 feet more; making its whole height about 900 feet above the river.

Pourae-
piapa.

A column fashioned by nature, and compared by the Indians to the trunk of a crownless tree, is called Pourae-piapa, or "the felled tree," and is of great interest. It occupies the summit of a small hillock at the outskirts of the Pacaraima mountains, and is about twenty-five miles N.N.W. from the Macusi village of Pirara. This column, the regular form of which would cause any one who viewed it at some distance to suppose it to be the trunk of a decayed tree, is about fifty feet high.

Comuti or
Taquiare.

Two gigantic piles of granite rise on the western banks of the Essequibo, from the declivity of a hill to a height of about 140 to 150 feet. The Comuti or Taquiare consists of a huge boulder of granite, surpassing in size the celebrated pedestal of the statue of Peter I.; on this rests an oval piece of granite, which bears a third in the shape of a jar; it is covered by a fourth, and the resemblance of the two latter to a water-jar with its cover is so great, that the Indians have called it Comuti or Taquiare, which in the language of the Arawaaks and Caribs signifies respectively a jar.

Kamai.

The second pile is called Kamai, which signifies the tube or strainer which is used for expressing the juice of the cassada root, before it is made into bread.

Roraima.

The mural precipices of Roraima, which I have already mentioned, deserve the notice of every geologist and lover of the picturesque. They are not only remarkable for