

Charles Stokes

Charles Stokes (1852-95). He was born in Dublin, Ireland, to John and Louise (nee Wherland) and was educated in Enniskillen; the family moved there when his father, was appointed Chief Railway Engineer but died 1872.

He migrated to Liverpool with his mother (died 1897) and was employed as a shipping clerk. Inspired by Henry Morton Stanley he joined the Church Missionary Society (CMS) as a lay evangelist and arrived in Zanzibar in 1878 and put in charge of the organisation of supply caravans to the widespread network of East African missionaries. In 1882 he married Ellen Sherratt, a nurse, in Zanzibar; she died the following year a week after the birth of their daughter Ellen Louise.



In 1885 Stokes abandoned the CMS and was excommunicated when he became an independent trader specialising in the arms for ivory trade and married Limi, a relative of the chief of the Wanyamwesi clan who supplied his porters. He developed good contacts and even though his trade was theoretically illegal the English turned a blind eye. In 1890 he lent Lugard, a consignment of 300 rifles during the royalist power struggle that allowed the Protestant faction to become rulers of Buganda and the English their colonial masters. The King gave him Nanjala Malyamu Magudaleene, relative of the Prince of Koki, and her handmaiden Zaria as a gift; they became his concubines. He also supplied German East Africa military in Tanganyika from the same year and became an Assistant Commissioner.

In 1894 he led a large expedition to north-east Congo to trade with Swahili merchants there and landed in the middle of the Congo-Swahili trade dispute; he brought weapons for trade for ivory when Leopold had ordered that all ivory be shipped through Kinshasa. He was captured while his men were foraging for food, brought to Lindi where Captain Lothaire set up a drumhead court martial. He was found guilty of smuggling and hanged from a tree the following morning.

It became a cause celebre in England, largely driven by the media given the dubious legality of the trial as the government would have been happy to ignore it. The Belgian Government, under pressure, set up several commissions of enquiry and predictably found Lothaire innocent of any wrongdoing. Queen Victoria however pressured Leopold to grudgingly pay £8,000 compensation to the British and German governments.

It was one of the many reasons used by campaigners against Leopold's regime in Congo and his life and death are said to have partially inspired Conrad's Kurtz in *The Heart of Darkness*. Eventually, it was another Irishman, Roger Casement, who exposed the horrors of Leopold's regime.

His daughter, Ellen Louise, was after a court case, transferred from her mother's relatives to be raised by her father's sister. She married and emigrated to Canada. His son by Nanjala (died 1968 aged 90)



Figure 1 Nanjala, in the 1950s



Figure 2 Minnie Watson and Charles Kasaja Stokes

was Charles Kasaja Stokes who was raised by Minnie Watson, a missionary of Kikuyu, (one of her students was Jomo Kenyatta) He trained as a medical orderly in Scotland, returned to Uganda and, after independence, organised and ran the blood transfusion service. He married Sarah Nambalilwa and six of their eight children married and live in Uganda, Kenya, UK and USA. Zaira was the mother of his half-sister Louise.

Appendices

According to the *Review of Public Events*, 1895, “It was alleged that [Stokes] had large quantities of arms, ammunition, and ivory, and that he had bought the ivory at a low price from Kibonge, the assassin of Emin Pasha. Captain Lothaire, an official, an official of the Congo State, with a strong force, was then advancing from Stanley Falls to attack this Arab chief Kibonge, in revolt against the Congo State. On Lothaire’s arrival at Kilunga, Kibonge was already a prisoner in the hands of his own native subordinates, who refused to join him in fighting the State. Stokes applied to Lothaire for protection of his ivory and goods, which he desired to carry towards the East Coast. Lothaire claimed that letters were found among Kibonge’s effects which went to prove that Stokes had sold large quantities of arms and ammunition to this chief, to be used in war against the Congo State. Mr. Stokes was arrested by Captain Lothaire’s orders, brought before a court-martial composed of two non-commissioned officers and Lothaire, and sentenced to be hanged. The execution took place the following morning.” (<http://www.executedtoday.com/2009/01/15/1895-charles-stokes-congo-free-state/>)

The Rise of our East African Empire: early efforts in Nyasaland and Uganda, Frederick Lugard, London 1968 (He also wrote *The Story of the Uganda Protectorate*, London, 1900)

Mwanga was now restored amid acclamations, and the whole country declared for him. The Europeans returned, and settled again at the capital. Mr Walker thus sums up the position at the time:

“There were three separate interests among the Europeans:

- (1) The English missionaries, who were anxious to see the British power in the Country, so as to ensure peace, and put an end to ceaseless war and carnage
- (2) The French Fathers, as represented by Pere Lourdel, who had an exclusive influence with the king, and discouraged the advent of all Europeans, preferring rather that arms should be imported for the natives
- (3) Mr Stokes, who wished to obtain a paramount influence, so as to offer terms to any European who came to Uganda. He represented himself as the Consul’s agent; promised British assistance; got 120-130 *frasilahs* (1 *frasilah* = 35lb) of ivory (£2,400), and expected 1000 more *frasilahs* (£20,000) for the assistance he had given.

The Mohommedans were for the moment overpowered, but neither was their strength nor their spirit broken.”



Jackson states that it was supposed that there was a considerable amount of ivory buried in Uganda, most of which belonged to the *Fransa* party. This ivory was only to be disposed of for arms and powder, and he believed that if the *Wa-Fransa* acquired these arms they would attack their rivals. Gedge had instructions to retire to Usoga with the *Wa-Ingleza*, rather than allow the Christians to come to blows. He adds it as his opinion that 500 drilled and disciplined soldiers and 16 Europeans were required to hold the country, and Gedge was instructed to buy off Stokes sooner than allow him to sell arms in Uganda.



On the 5th May Mr Stokes arrived, and heralded his approach by sending me indignant letters, repudiating the accusation that he had brought arms and ammunition from the coast. We, however, became very friendly, and he promised most emphatically not to attempt to import arms or powder. This was an important matter, for though I might prevent his doing so openly, he himself pointed out that he was able to evade my efforts in many ways, - as for instance, by issuing powder to his elephant hunters at the south of the lake, and conniving at their selling it in Uganda. He said that the demand for powder here was so great now, that he could make a profit of something like £250 on every porter load! Possibly, as a matter of fact, he could have made (for a small quantity only) something like half that sum. I spoke very strongly to him on the subject, saying that the import of powder at the present moment would mean civil war, and he agreed that it would be little better than murder. On the other hand, I promised to facilitate his legitimate trade, and agreed that natives sent by him with goods could come to Uganda and traffic on his behalf. I promised also to store his ivory, and, so far as I might be able, to buy his goods and promote his interests with the Company.

Later he took advantage of these offers, and a party of his men traded, under our protection, during the whole time I was in Uganda, while we stored his ivory, which otherwise (a year later) would have been lost in the war. I told him to submit proposals in writing for the sale of his goods, and he did so. They included 50 loads of gunpowder, 4 loads of gun-caps (70lb each), and 250 guns! Yet he said, when he first came, that he had no powder or arms, and resented my letter, in which I stated that it had been reported he had this stuff! The prices he asked were so enormous that I would not buy, and he then begged me to store it for him, so that he might not be tempted to sell it. This I willingly agreed to do and I sent down for it as I shall narrate presently. Stokes left (14th Feb), after giving me promise that he would place his powder and arms under my charge; and I told him frankly, that if he behaved honourably in the matter, I on my part would help him in every way I could. He had not reached the south of the lake, however, before he wrote to say he had changed his mind, and would retain his arms and powder himself.



As regards other matters, I heard that Bagge had made a successful trip to the south of the lake, and had brought up all Stokes' guns and powder, which were safely stored in Kampala. Mwanga tried to claim a percentage in taxes, but Williams had, in a very plucky way, sent down his handful of men to the lake and brought everything up without yielding to Mwanga's demands. His prompt action probably saved trouble, for, from what I heard, it appeared as though Mwanga had intended to seize what he wanted.

Thomas Pakenham, *Scramble for Africa: White Man's Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876 to 1912*, London, 1991

Stokes had dined well (at Bagamy). He woke up the party, shouting strange oaths in an Irish brogue, and kicking on the door, "undecided between pugilism, and excessive affection". He dragged Stairs out of bed to shake him by the hand, then tried to make off with the Marquis's boots in the confusion.

(Kampala) The most immediate threat, as it turned out, came from that incongruous white trader, Charles Stokes, who owned a steamer based on the southern side of the lake, the shore controlled by the Germans. Stokes arrived at Mengo on 5 February 1891, an indignant Irishman dressed in Muslim robes, protesting his innocence of arms smuggling. He swore he hadn't an ounce of powder with him. Lugard gave him a candle-lit dinner in his camp and calmed him. No doubt he told Stokes about the provisions of the Brussels conference. What he wanted was an assurance that Stokes would not sell guns or powder to Mwanga or either of the two factions. They were already 2,000 or 3,000 muzzle-loading guns in the country, any more guns would make war virtually inevitable. Stokes explained he could make £1,440 for every load of powder sold. But he was fed up with the heavy-handedness of the Germans (though they paid him £1,000 a year to organise supplies), and would prefer to come north and work with the British Company. Would Lugard buy his current stock, which incidentally included fifty loads of powder and 250 guns, worth £5,000? Lugard bought some cloth and proposed that he develop the ivory trade in Buganda. Stokes asked Lugard to give him a chance and not to put too much temptation in a poor man's way. Would he agree to store the powder for him at Kampala to keep him from selling it to Mwanga? Lugard could hardly believe his ears. Of course he was delighted to oblige.

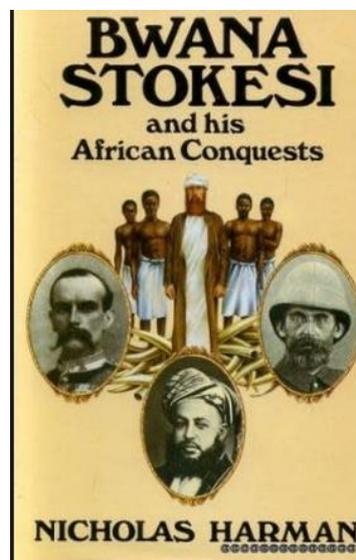
(Belgian Congo) It was this majestic self-confidence that had kept the shine on Leopold's armour throughout the last, dangerous phase of the Scramble. Only once, in 1895-6, had the armour shown a conspicuous dent. There was the unfortunate business of the British trader, Charles Stokes, who had insisted on selling Congolese ivory to German East Africa, and German guns to the Congolese. In January 1895 he was caught gun-running in the Congo, then tried and hanged by a Belgian officer, Captain Lothaire.

The story of the hanging had somehow slipped into the English newspapers and there had been a fine hullabaloo. Salisbury's government protested about legal irregularities. As a result, Captain Lothaire had to endure three trials himself. He was conveniently acquitted, through lack of State evidence, and promoted director of the main concessionary company in the Congo. Leopold found the whole business distasteful. He had no wish to publicize the rough-and-ready way in which justice was dispensed on the Congo's eastern front and he took steps to protect the good name of the Congo.

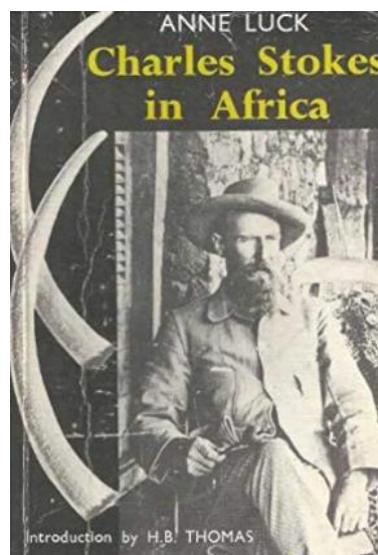
(He set up a commission to investigate human rights with some well-known people that apparently never made any report)

Other sources

Nicholas Harman, *Bwana Stokesi and his African Conquests*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1986



Luck Anne, *Charles Stokes in Africa*, London, 1972



Raymond Moloney, Charles Stokes (1852-1895): An Irishman in 19th Century Africa. *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*. **87** (346): 128–134. 1998

For his family tree, wives, children and grandchildren see

<https://s3-us-west1.amazonaws.com/www.moyhu.org/StokesFamily/famstokes.htm>)