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THE AMAZON,

AND

THE ATLANTIC SLOPES

OF

SOUTH AMERICA.

A SERIES OF LETTERS PUBLISHED IN THE NATIONAL INTELLIGENCER AND UNION NEWSPAPERS, UNDER THE SIGNATURE OF "INCA,"

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REVISED AND CORRECTED BY THE AUTHOR.

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1853.
These Letters were originally published by the National Intelligencer and the Union, of this City. They treat of one of the most important commercial questions of the age: they are attracting much attention in the public mind: they are eagerly sought after in all parts of the country; and though they have been extensively read, the demand for them in a more permanent shape than that of a newspaper is such that the Publisher has obtained leave of their Author to reissue them in their present form.

WASHINGTON CITY, January, 1853.
THE AMAZON, AND ATLANTIC SLOPES.

CHAPTER I.

True policy—The Amazon country, its climate and productions; healthy—Why the Amazon is a well-watered country, and why it is different from other inter-tropical countries.

The "policy of commerce," and not "the policy of conquest," is the policy of the United States.

The spirit of the age, animated by private enterprise, is every day seeking new fields for its peaceful triumphs, and commerce can accomplish throughout the world no achievements like those which will note its coming, and signalize its marches up and down the Amazon, and the other great rivers of that greatest of water-sheds, the Atlantic slopes of South America.

Men may talk about Cuba and Japan; but of all the diplomatic questions of the day, the free navigation of those majestic water-courses, and their tributaries, is to this country the most interesting and important. It surpasses them all. It is paramount.

The country that is drained by the Amazon, if reclaimed from the savage, the wild beast, and the reptile, and reduced to cultivation now, would be capable of supporting with its produce the population of the whole world.

It is a rice country. The common yield of rice is forty for one. It is reaped five months after planting, and may be planted at any time of the year. Thus the farmer may plant one bushel of rice to-day—in five months hence he will gather forty from it. Planting these forty, he may, in another five months, gather sixteen hundred bushels. In ten months the earth yields an increase there of a thousand-fold and more.

Corn, too, may be planted at any time, and in three months is fit for gathering. Thus the husbandman there may gather four crops of corn a year. Its seasons are an everlasting summer, with a perpetual round of harvests.

It is the policy of commerce—and commerce is the policy of these United States—to open that river to steam, and its valley
to settlement and cultivation; its earth, its air, and its waters to the business and wants of trade and traffic.

There, upon that Atlantic slope of South America, in the valley of the La Plata, and in the valley of the Amazon, Nature in all her ways has been most bountiful.

There the vegetable kingdom displays its forces in all their most perfect grandeur, and in all their might; and there, too, the mineral kingdom is most dazzling with its wealth.

In that region of country wagon-roads are few, turnpikes unknown, and the first railway has yet to be built; and though the La Plata drains a country nearly as large and many times more fertile than is our own Mississippi valley, and though that of the Amazon is twice as great, and its tributaries many times longer, more navigable, and numerous, yet the steamboat upon those waters is a problem almost untried. In the valley of the Amazon the plough is unknown; and the American rifle and axe, the great implements of settlement and civilization, are curiosities.

For more than three hundred years the white man has been established in that Amazonian basin, and for more than three hundred years it has remained a howling wilderness. Owing to the mismanagement of its rulers, the European has made no impression—none—no, not the least—upon its forests. How long shall this continue to be so?

Has diplomacy no arts, commerce no charms, by which this policy may be broken up; by which its rivers may be opened to navigation, its forests to settlement, its pampas to cultivation?

What commerce has done for South America is as nothing in comparison with what it will do. It has fringed only the sea-coast of that continent with settlement and cultivation. The great interior has never been touched. The heart of the country is a commercial blank; nor is it to be reached except through the powers of steam, and the free use of its majestic water-courses.

It is of this country—of the importance of settling it up, of sending there the emigrant, the steamboat, the axe, and the plough, with the messengers and agencies of commerce—that I wish to speak.

Let us, therefore, first see where it is, how far off it is, and what is its actual condition, and then we will be enabled the better to judge as to the true course of policy which it would be best for the commercial nations of the earth to take with regard to it.

The semi-continent of South America is very nearly in shape that of a right-angled triangle. Its hypotenuse rests on the Pacific: one of its legs extends from Cape Horn to Cape St. Roquo. Here the right angle is formed with the other leg, which
extends from Cape St. Roque, in latitude 5 deg. south, to Cabo La Vela, of the Caribbean sea, in latitude 12 deg. north.

The longer leg is that between Capes Horn and St. Roque; it is 3,500 geographical miles in length. The other leg has only 2,500; but the hypotenuse, which stands on the Andes and rests on the Pacific, is more than 4,000 miles long.

This configuration exercises a powerful influence upon the climates of South America, especially as it regards its hyetography. The great rivers of that country, the mighty Amazon and the majestic La Plata, are resultants of this configuration. In consequence of having the sea-front which rests upon the short leg in the northern hemisphere, and looking to the northeast;—and in consequence of having the sea-front which rests upon the long leg in the southern hemisphere, to look southeast, the northeast and the southeast trade winds, as they come across the Atlantic filled with moisture, go full charged into the interior, dropping it in showers as they go until they reach the snow-capped summits of the Andes, where the last drop, which that very low temperature can wring from them, is deposited to melt and feed the sources of the Amazon and the La Plata with their tributaries.

The northeast trade winds commence to blow about the Tropic of Cancer, and coming from the quarter they do, they blow obliquely across the Atlantic. They evaporate from the sea as they go; and, impinging at right angles upon the South American shore-line that extends from Cape St. Roque to Cabo La Vela, they carry into the interior the vapor that forms the clouds that give the rain which supplies with water the Magdalena, the Orinoco, and the northern tributaries of the Amazon.

The volume of water discharged by these rivers into the sea is expressive of the quantity which those northeast trade winds take up from the sea, carry in the clouds, and precipitate upon the water-shed that is drained by these streams. They are but pipes and gutters which Nature has placed under the caves of the great water-shed that has the Andes for a ridge-pole, the Caribbean sea and North Atlantic for a cistern.

The trade-wind region of the North Atlantic affords the watersurface where the evaporation is carried on that supplies with rains, dews, and moisture, New Granada, Venezuela, the three Guianas, and the Atlantic slopes of the Ecuador.

On the other hand, the southeast trade winds commence to blow about the parallel of 30 deg. or 35 deg. south. They, too, come obliquely across the Atlantic, and strike perpendicularly upon the South American coast-line which extends from Cape St. Roque towards Cape Horn. They pass into the interior with their whole load of moisture, every drop of which is wrung from
them before they cross the Andes. The quantity of moisture which is taken up from the sea and rained down upon this wonderfully fruitful country may be seen in what the La Plata and the Amazon discharge back into the ocean.

Now, there is no tropical country in the world which has to windward, and so exactly to windward of it, such an extent of ocean in the trade-wind region. Consequently there is no intertropical country in the world that is so finely watered as is this great Amazon country of South America.

Along the Atlantic coast of the United States, along the coast of China and the east coast of New Holland, the land trends along with the direction of the trade winds of those regions. These winds, with their moisture, travel along parallel with the land. They do not blow perpendicularly upon it, nor push their vapors right across it into the interior, as they do in South America. The consequence is, none of those inter-tropical countries can boast of streams and water-courses like those of South America.

The shore line of eastern Africa is arranged like that of the South American water-shed; but it has not sea enough to windward to supply the vapor to feed springs enough to make large rivers.

The southeast trade winds, when the monsoons of the Indian ocean will permit them to blow, strike perpendicularly upon the east coast of South Africa, as they do upon that of South America. In the American case, they blow perpetually—in the African case, for not half the year. They, therefore, cannot give Africa half as much rain as South America receives.

At Cape Guardafui the right angle of the African coast line is formed, as it is at Cape St. Roque for America; but the winds which cross this line between Cape St. Roque and the isthmus have traversed the Atlantic ocean and Caribbean sea—hence they reach the land dripping with moisture; whereas, in Africa, the northeast trades, which cross the coast line from Cape Guardafui to the isthmus of Suez, have sucked up vapors from the Red sea only—therefore the quantity of moisture which these winds carry into the interior of Africa is not by any means so great as that which those of the Atlantic carry over into South America. The difference is as great as is the difference of the evaporating surface exposed to the northeast trade winds by the Atlantic on the one hand, and by the Red sea on the other.

The two systems of trade winds—the northeast and the southeast—meet in the interior of South America, somewhere between the equator and the isthmus of Darien. This place of meeting is a place of calms, and where it is, there it is rainy.

This circumstance, and other meteorological agents, divide the seasons in the northern portions of South America, especially the