

George Cobb Westbeeck

By Lawrence Flint

The degree to which George Westbeeck is relevant to Barotseland's history is something of an enigma. Certainly, today, few Lozis would be able to say who Westbeeck was or what his legacy is today. Yet Westbeeck, or 'Joros' as he was known locally, was pivotal in mediating the character and identity of both colonial and missionary influence in Barotseland. He was a larger than life eccentric whose original purpose in Barotseland had to do with hunting, ivory and money but who became sufficiently seduced by the lifestyle he led and the reputation and status that he commanded that the attraction of life in European settler society in the Cape or back home in England, gradually lost its appeal. Unfortunately, Westbeeck also played an instrumental part in the destruction of several components of the indigenous fauna of the region, including several species of antelope, lechwe and, most particularly, the long suffering elephant, which paradoxically, became the insignia of Lozi Litungas from the end of the nineteenth century. This role Westbeeck achieved not just by the killing carried out by himself and the somewhat rough and ready band of men who worked for him but also by the other hunters attracted to the region by the huge quantities of ivory he sent south.

Much of the information to be gleaned today on George Westbeeck and his life in Barotseland is gleaned from the remnants of his personal memoirs (which are only available for the last four years of his life),¹ and the copious notes and literary work of the Czech adventurer and naturalist, Emil Holub. Several attempts have been made to interpret Westbeeck's contribution to Barotseland's history, one being E.C. Tabler's appreciation of Westbeeck's memoirs, others being Richard Sampson's *Man with a Toothbrush in his Hat* later republished as *The struggle for British Interests in Barotseland 1871-1888* and the Reverend W.F. Rea's *George Westbeeck and the Barotseland Missionaries 1878-1888*.² A chapter was also written on Westbeeck by

¹ Contained in E.C. Tabler (ed.), *Trade and Travel in Early Barotseland*, Chatto and Windus, London.

² Sampson, R. (1972) *The Struggle for British Interests in Barotseland 1871-1888*, Multimedia Publications, Lusaka and Rea, W.F. (1968) *George Westbeeck and the Barotseland Missionaries 1878-1888*.

Brelsford in his *Generation of Men: The European Pioneers of Northern Rhodesia*.³ All of these tend to rely on the aforementioned memoirs and comments by Holub and the Rev. F. Coillard whose entry into Barotseland was premised on the mediation of Westbeeche with the chiefs of Sesheke and Litunga Lubosi Lewanika.

Westbeeche spent much of the last 17 years of his life based at Pandamatenga on the wagon route south from Kazungula on the Zambezi, hunting and trading throughout Barotseland and Caprivi, transporting vast amounts of ivory to South Africa. Holub stayed at Sesheke and Pandamatenga in the 1870s and early 1880s, depending largely on the facilities and good will between Westbeeche and the Lozi Litungas Sipopa and Lewanika and faithfully recorded life in the last capital of Sipopa and his own adventures to the Mashukulumbwe, which ended in near catastrophe.

Westbeeche was born into the lower middle class of England in 1844, and by the age of eight, had lost his mother, father, and only brother (there were no other children) as well as his grandfather to whom he had become attached. Brought up by his widowed grandmother, Westbeeche, who was a healthy child and known to have undertaken at least elementary education, soon developed a wanderlust and, possibly influenced by the exploits of David Livingstone, left England for Natal in 1862 at the age of seventeen, never to return.⁴ Few details exist of the means or motivations that Westbeeche relied upon to promote his travels but it seems that shortly after landing in Natal, he moved north to Matabeleland where he arrived in 1863 and met Mzilikaze and his son Lobengula, to whom Westbeeche was to become a trusted confidant.

From the age of 19 until his premature death at 44 years of age, possibly due to liver disease, Westbeeche rarely left the region, trading and hunting mainly for ivory, in business with his partner, George Arthur Phillips. Phillips was known locally as 'Elephant Phillips' due to his size and propensity for hearty behaviour and roaring laughter; to local people he was known as 'Vela Impi' or 'behold an army!'⁵ Phillips, like Westbeeche, was a 'larger than life' character who inspired respect among those he came across and could

³ W.V. Brelsford, *Generation of Men: The European Pioneers of Northern Rhodesia* (Stuart Manning, Harare, 1965).

⁴ Sampson, op. cit., pp. 6-7.

⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

not be satisfied with life in European society. While partners however, Philips and Westbeeck, with their strong personalities, were unable to stomach one another's company for very long. Thus, after hunting and trading in Matabeleland with Philips for almost a decade, Westbeeck was to move on to the region north of the Zambezi, firstly because he had heard that elephants were more numerous there and, secondly, because of competitive pressure from the south in the form of other European hunters and traders.

Westbeeck's relationship with Barotseland and Lozi royalty commenced in the era of the 'restoration', specifically with Litunga Sipopa who assumed the Kingship after having been nominated by Njekwa, the leader of the overthrow of the Sotho who, in turn, became Sipopa's Ngambela after the latter came to power. Westbeeck had arrived in Barotseland, like the Paris missionaries who were to follow in his wake, from South Africa VIA the Matabele in present-day Western Zimbabwe. He was not the first British trader to access Barotseland from the south after the departure of Livingstone but he was the first to be welcomed formally and, in his dealings, was to have the most lasting impact. In the two decades or so between Livingstone's first confirmed encounter with Sibusane and Westbeeck's arrival at the confluence of the Chobe and Zambezi around 1871, several traders and adventurers made it to the Upper Zambezi and the courts of the Makololo and Sipopa. Many of these came from the west. These were the Mambari traders, largely Ovimbundu and mixed race, often trading as middlemen for the Portuguese at the coast although, occasionally, pure Portuguese such as Silva Porto and Serpa Pinto came to Barotseland personally. Others were British and Dutch adventurer-traders who came from the south but, were generally not well received, and rarely progressed beyond the Zambezi-Chobe junction.

Tabler suggests that this was due to fear and suspicion in Barotseland that the Matabele could somehow take advantage of any access given to traders from the south.⁶ Maybe it was also because Mambari trade goods were, initially at least, considerably cheaper (if of lesser quality) than those of traders from the south due to reduced overheads related to distance from the coast and the absence of bureaucratic

⁶ E.C. Tabler (ed.), *Trade and Travel in Early Barotseland*, p. 4.

barriers on the route from the west coast. Perhaps it was also due to the inability of white traders from the south to instil much confidence in the Makololo-Lozi chiefs they came across. This, in turn, may have been due to a heightened sense of racial arrogance on the part of white traders originating from the Cape.

George Westbeeck, however, succeeded where others had failed and achieved considerable influence in Barotseland, particularly with the Lozi Kings, Sipopa and Lewanika. In Barotseland he was known as 'Joros' or 'Georos Umutunta' meaning 'Great George', Georos being as close as Lozis could get to pronouncing the name George.⁷ His influence, like that of Livingstone, was also instrumental in the ability of later interlocutors of British influence to gain a foothold in Barotseland. That influence was premised on Westbeeck's preparedness to locate and base himself in the region, to learn local languages (specifically Sindebele and Sikololo) and to act as an honest broker between locally competing forces. Perhaps the goods brought by the English from the south were also of better quality than those originating with the Portuguese, particularly where guns were concerned. In essence, Westbeeck built up relationships of trust, respect and friendship with local chiefs and Kings, particularly the Matabele, these being equally valuable to the Lozi elites as trade. In addition, Westbeeck was judged to be a just man, who traded fairly and did not ask for slaves.

This is not to say that slaves were not traded in the aftermath of Makololo rule, it is clear from Holub's accounts that they were. Yet the legacy of slaves being more valued in local productivity persisted from pre-Makololo days and it is clear that there was a feeling that trading a commodity like ivory, which quickly came to assume enormous value in the Lozi economy, for the luxury wares of the approaching European world economy was a more prudent and preferable mode of commerce. Westbeeck was to be the standard bearer of this preferred mode of commerce. He was also a man of gregarious tastes, whose character and reputation spread far and wide. He is recorded as enjoying the company of local mistresses up and down the Zambezi between Sesheke and Lealui and also of the 'demon drink', both of which habits appalled European

⁷ R. Sampson, *The Struggle for British Interests in Barotseland 1871-1888*, p. 32. Tabler, p. 39, refers to 'Joros Mtunya' or Great George to distinguish him from his agent George Blockley who accompanied Westbeeck to the Zambezi in 1871 and became known as Little George.

missionaries (with the exception of Frederick Arnot), Coillard, in particular, studiously avoids talking about Westbeeche, despite his obvious debt to him in terms of access to Barotseland. Yet Westbeeche was seen as a humane and friendly man by both black and white, someone who would help virtually anyone in need, despite any reservations he might hold about them. The nature of Westbeeche's success is worthy of some analysis.

In 1871, during Sipopa's reign, Westbeeche arrived at the confluence of the Chobe and Zambezi Rivers where, it seems, Sipopa, with many of his followers, came to meet him.⁸ Westbeeche succeeded in endearing himself to the Lozi having also, remarkably, achieved the same with their enemies, the Matabele. Here, Westbeeche, like David Livingstone and like Robert Moffat in Kuruman and Matabeleland became conceived of as a powerful agency, a member of a scarce and valued band of people, capable of mediation with other power sources, African and European. When he arrived at the Zambezi, Westbeeche, also like Livingstone and Moffat before him, and unlike other European interlopers who unsuccessfully attempted to trade with Barotseland during the same period, spoke the local languages (quickly learning Sesotho, Sindebele and Setswana),⁹ and had already proved capable of winning the confidence of other strong peoples in the region. In other words, his value to local elites travelled before him and his usefulness as a political intermediary as well as a trader soon became apparent.

However, for reasons that are not altogether clear, when Westbeeche first arrived, Sipopa simply wanted him to stay, regardless of his trading abilities; this being perhaps due to Westbeeche's good offices with Mzilikaze and Lobengula of the Matabele.¹⁰ One reason could be that Westbeeche was known to have good relations with the Matabele chiefs and might therefore be relied on to forestall possible Matabele raiding intentions. For Westbeeche, the attraction was originally undoubtedly ivory and the potential to become rich but he quickly became accustomed to life among the Lozi and was reputed, as mentioned previously, to have innumerable Lozi mistresses dotted around Barotseland, something that outraged the Boer woman whom he married in 1875, a

⁸ Sampson, *The Man with a toothbrush in his Hat...*, p. 30.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 17.

¹⁰ A view certainly espoused by Tabler in his 'Introduction' to E.C. Tabler (ed.) *Trade and Travel in Early Barotseland* (Chatto and Windus, London, 1963), p. 7.

short-lived union that fell apart in acrimony in 1878.¹¹ By this time, however, Westbeech was reported by the adventurer and hunter F.C. Selous to be '...no longer a white man, but had become to all intents and purposes an African'.¹² Westbeech was to become the main purchaser as well as hunter of ivory in the Upper Zambezi Valley, much in the manner that Livingstone had dreamt of and recommended to the Makololo. Such was the devastating cull of elephants north of the Zambezi during Westbeech's time there that, by the time of his death in 1888, the trade in ivory in this region had already become unprofitable due to scarcity and the remoteness of remaining elephants. This aspect of Livingstone's legacy has been overlooked to date. Presumably, Livingstone never foresaw the destruction of the local fauna as a result of his advice, although the dense proliferation of wildlife at the time of Livingstone's sojourn in the region renders this understandable.

By the end of the 1870s, Westbeech was spending longer and longer periods in the Zambezi Valley without going south; like Livingstone before him, clearly finding this preferable to life amongst his peers in South Africa. Also like Livingstone and unlike most Europeans, he had been able to withstand the ravages of malarial fever and had settled at Pandamatenga, thirty-seven miles south of Kazungula on the Zambezi in present-day Botswana, which he made his base.¹³ Significantly, Pandamatenga was then considered by Schultz and Hammar as being in 'the Barotse country',¹⁴ although Sampson says it was in a kind of 'no man's land' at the periphery of both Lozi and Matabele influence.¹⁵ Westbeech created such an impression in the region that, on a visit to his base camp in 1884, Schulz and Hammar referred to: 'George Westbeech, who is a chief here, established by both the Barotzi and the Matabele...'.¹⁶ The visitors were amazed that, at a moment's notice, Westbeech could summon and receive ninety bearers to assist them with their passage from a chief located one hundred and sixty miles away.¹⁷

¹¹ ...and which, according to Sampson, *The Man with a toothbrush in his Hat...*, op. cit., p. 69, she was to complain about for forty years afterwards!

¹² Quoted in Sampson, *The Man with a toothbrush in his Hat...*, op. cit., p. 69.

¹³ L. Holy in introduction to L. Holy (ed.) *Emil Holub's Travels North of the Zambezi 1885-6*, (Manchester University Press, Manchester for the University of Zambia) a translation by C. Johns of part of the second volume of E. Holub *Von der Capstadt ins Land der Maschukulumbe...* op.cit.

¹⁴ Clay, op. cit., p.16.

¹⁵ Sampson, op. cit., p. 19.

¹⁶ A. Schultz and A. Hammar, *The New Africa: A Journey up the Chobe and down the Okavango Rivers – A Record of Exploration and Sport* (William Heinemann, London, 1897), p. 43.

¹⁷ Ibid.

In fact, Westbeeche behaved like, and was treated as an Induna or local chief, and was often called upon to adjudicate in local disputes, his advice and decisions being much respected, not least as he was known to have the ear of successive Litungas. For a time at least, there was something in the way that Sipopa looked upon Westbeeche which is reminiscent of the way that Sibituane and Sekeletu looked upon Livingstone although it is clear that Westbeeche brought no spiritual message with him. Westbeeche's clearly stated preference for promoting Anglophone influences that would also promote development in Barotseland were to have far-reaching impacts on the political future of the region.

The time that Westbeeche spent with Sipopa in 1871 then, was the beginning of an intimate and mutually remunerative relationship between the two, which was subsequently continued by Lubosi-Lewanika after his accession to the kingship, a relationship that was only really brought to a close by the increasing scarcity of ivory and Westbeeche's declining health. Put simply, Sipopa and Lewanika appeared to like Westbeeche and certainly trusted him, and, from the Czech explorer Holub's account, came to rely on their English friend for information and trade.¹⁸ Lewanika also set great store by Westbeeche's advice while not trusting him to the same degree over the Kingdom's declining ivory resources. Coillard's niece, Christine Mackintosh, in 1907, paid Westbeeche an interesting tribute by saying 'the name of Westbeeche must never be forgotten as one of those who first inspired the Barotsi with confidence in white men and in the English.'¹⁹

No photographic record or illustration of Westbeeche is known to exist so we can only guess at his likely appearance

¹⁸ Holub, *Seven Years in South Africa...* II, op. cit., pp. 284-285.

¹⁹ C. W. Mackintosh, *Coillard of the Zambesi...*, (T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1907), p. 327.