Directors of Veterinary Services in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan: V R Smith, 1902 (Principal Veterinary Officer)

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During the 1880s the people of Sudan rebelled against Egyptian rule. A charismatic religious leader claiming to be the Mahdi ("Guided One") led the uprising and was succeeded by the Khalifa ("Successor"). The Sudanese were victorious over the Egyptian occupiers and took control of the country when a British expeditionary force attempted to rescue the British General Gordon who was killed and Khartoum was captured. A decisive victory by the British military with some support from Egypt at the Battle of Omdurman in September 1898 resulted in the reconquest of the country. The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, nominally a joint administration by the two countries but essentially a British enterprise, was established as a Condominium shortly afterwards [1,2]. A large military presence maintained to a large extent law and order and enabled the Condominium to be administered. This arrangement required enormous numbers of cavalry and transport animals (horses, mules, donkeys and camels) to govern and control the turbulent population. The health of these animals was a major consideration in the setting up of a fledgling veterinary service. In all, 12 people served as Principal Veterinary Officers (to 1910) or as Directors of Veterinary Services (from 1910 to 1956) in the 55-year period from the setting up of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan in 1901 to the achievement of independence by the Republic of Sudan on 1 January 1956. During the early years the small number of veterinarians were military officers who were seconded, usually for short periods, from the British to the Egyptian Army which in turn employed them directly or seconded them to the Sudan. V R Smith was the first of the twelve expatriate personnel who served as head of the Sudan Veterinary Service, occupying that post for a short period in 1902. Sudan was the seventh of all tropical countries to establish a veterinary service and the fourth in Africa after Zimbabwe (1890), Lesotho (1896) and Kenya (1897) [3].

According to one source [4]:

The earliest available record of the profession in the Sudan dates back to 1902. In that year Captain V. R. Smith, of the Army Veterinary Department, was Principal Veterinary Officer

This information is repeated by another source [5]. It appears, however, they were both wrong. No V R Smith is listed in the Army Veterinary Department section of the 1902 nor the 1903 editions of a major source of military personnel [6,7]. He is not mentioned in an authoritative history of the Royal Army Veterinary Corps (as the veterinary services had then become) [8]. His name does not appear in a journal article about the veterinary services in Sudan [9] and there is no entry for him in what is claimed to be a complete biography of British Army Officers who served in Sudan [10]. A thorough search of the relevant literature failed to find any V R Smith in any Regiment or Corps of the British Army at any time from 1895 to 1915. In addition to these lacunae, no VR. Smith was ever a Member of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons [11].

V. R. Smith wrote the Annual Report of the Veterinary Service in 1902 and signed himself PVO and ‘miralei’ (Appendix A) [12]. The title Principal Veterinary Officer implies subordinate staff but there is little evidence that were any other than a Mr Hill, described by Smith’s successor George Richard Griffith as a Civil Veterinary Surgeon to the Sudan Government (that is, he was not employed by the Egyptian Army) [13]. Hill’s role appeared to be to collect information on rinderpest from his own observations

1'miralei' was an Egyptian Army rank equivalent to Brigadier but British officers serving in the Egyptian army were given higher ranks than their substantive British ones: officers of this rank were also entitled to use the honorary title 'bey'. 'kaimakan' (Colonel) and 'bimbashi’ (Lieutenant Colonel) were titles used by British officers of lower substantive ranks seconded to the Egyptian Army with a 'kaimakan’ also being awarded the honorific ‘bey’.

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and from reports from guard posts and other areas of the country. Smith’s report provides more information on the general disease situation than might have been expected from a military vet and also considers the use of equines and oxen for draught and transport purposes.

The only other reference to Smith in Sudan that has been found is from a report of February 1902 [14]. This covers the actions of a camel patrol from Khartoum to Gule (now in the Republic of South Sudan). Towards the end of the patrol period [14]:

On 10 February 1902 Smith Bey left Gule to investigate a recent raid near Jebel Surkum.

Jebel Surkum lies to the south east of Gule near to the Sudan-Ethiopian border: the raid in question was probably a cross-border one by Ethiopian bandits to rustle cattle. Smith was probably already Principal Veterinary Officer at this early stage of 1902 as he is referred to as ‘bey’. In addition it can be assumed that he left the post sometime during the year because in his Annual Report on conditions in the Sudan for 1902, written on 13 January 1903, the Governor General already refers to George Richard Griffith as Principal Veterinary Officer.

There are no records of any campaign or bravery medals ever being awarded to VR. Smith. It is not only in his military service, however, that he is an enigma. No records have been found in any census or civil registration records nor in the main genealogical and family history web sites of a possible candidate for this particular Smith. This notwithstanding Miralai V R. Smith is important in the pantheon of Sudan’s chief veterinary officers during the Condominion period not only because he was the first to occupy such a post but also because of his recognition that “domestic” stock, as opposed to “military” animals, would make important contributions to the economy of Sudan in future years.

References

Appendix A

ANNUAL REPORT.

VETERINARY DEPARTMENT.

1902

Cattle Plague.—During the past year the Sudan has been free from cattle plague; it is now over a year and half since this disease was stamped out.

Rumours of Cattle Plague.—Cattle were reported to be suffering from a mysterious disease near Bahr in October last, but the disease turned out to be nothing serious. It was reported in March that cattle plague existed near Galabat. Mr. Hill proceeded there to hear what truth was in the statement; the natives there denied any cases more than five days within the Abyssinian boundary; but the Shiek of Galabat last month (November) admitted to Mr. Hill that three bullocks died in the month of March, a day’s journey from Galabat of cattle plague, but at this time the people would admit it as they were frightened of trade being stopped.

Galabat quarantine station.—This year so as to allow of cattle coming in to the Sudan from Abyssinia and to encourage trade a quarantine station has been established at Galabat where cattle are branded and Zorbered, but allowed to grace outside during day.

On the termination of the quarantine (15 days) if healthy they are set free and given a certificate signed by the Mosaic.

Two men are employed in the quarantine work and a post is placed some miles on main road inland, so as to catch any cattle that may go round Galabat so as to avoid quarantine.

There are also four other posts guarding the principal roads from Abyssinia into the Sudan.

Up to 11th November few people had come in from Abyssinia into Galabat owing to the difficulties of travelling, grass not being dry enough to burn, but people with their cattle were expected to commence arriving about the end of the month.

Epidemic amongst Goats & Sheep.—In March, goats at Kamalo were reported to be dying in numbers. Some 700 of them were Zorbered there. The disease, Bubonic, called the disease “Shamrock” in other parts of the Sudan this disease is called “Aba Senoe.” This disease is prevalent in many parts of the Sudan, and shows itself most marked in the rains.

Post-Mortem examination of these organs shows lesions strongly resembling contagious Pustul-Pustulamenta of cattle.

Dulah.—Another disease, which affects goats, called by the Arab “Dulah,” is merely due to irritants such as thorns getting between the claws; but it sometimes causes great mortality, animals dying from the pain and exhaustion caused by the suppuration amongst the tissues of the foot.

This disease is confined to these districts, such as part of the Bander and the Blue Nile near Aesmara.

Anthrax.—This disease (one of the most fatal) exists round Kamalo between Kacher & March, round Galabat and Gashenf Districts up both Blue and white Niles. It is more prevalent in low swampy districts where the soil is rich in organic matter. These conditions being most favourable to the development of these low forms of vegetable life.

The eight Artillery horses that died of the Shambie Field Force, I have not the slightest doubt, died of this disease from the symptoms described, and rapidly fatal results. It shows that these districts of certain times of the year more specially are fatal to horses, mules, donkeys and cattle, especially those not acclimatized, and it should be borne in mind, the great danger of taking animals into these districts. If it has to be done, they should be removed if possible before the rainy season sets in.

Poor condition of young stock.—South and East of Kharitoom after the fall of the Nile young cattle fail off in condition. The natives say “it is due to the flies,” the young animals skin being tender they suffer more than the old ones.

Up the White Nile more especially, were to be seen some extremely fine bulls amongst the herd, they are gradually disappearing, and the natives say “it is due to people from outside giving high prices for them forimg work.” The cattle owners suffer eventually, because when they have parted with their finest bulls, they have to breed from inferior animals.
The mules used for conservancy work are at present time in poor condition. This is due to the heavy nature of their work, drawing carts over deep sand, if the mules are not in good condition they have not the weight or strength to draw a heavy load. I have recommended that they be given an extra ration of grain.

I think for heavy draft work, much might be done with oxen, they are half the price of the mule, they are certainly slower, but they have great endurance, they have the weight to throw into the collar, they can work many hours at a time.

Small mules are no use for draft work, they are swamped in a cart of an ordinary size, and they have no weight to start the vehicle; a draft mule should be between 14. and 14.2 hands.

Now and again good horses are cast from the Cavalry and Artillery for eyesight, pulling &c. Many of these horses, by judicious selection, would make excellent draft animals.

They only realise a few pounds when sent to Cairo but if worked in draft here they would take the place of an animal costing three times their price.

The Government Sagia cattle have much improved in condition since last year when they were thin and weak; owing to a more liberal diet, they now are looking well and strong, no deaths amongst them in past twelve months.

(Signed) V. R. SMITH, MIRALAI,
P.V.O.