

# POSTOJNSKA JAMA IN SLOVENIA, THE SÜDBAHN AND THE VISIT OF JOHN CHARLES MOLTENO: THEIR INFLUENCE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF RAILWAYS IN SOUTH AFRICA

## POSTOJNSKA JAMA, JUŽNA ŽELEZNICA IN OBISK JOHNA CHARLESA MOLTENA V SLOVENIJI: NJIHOV VPLIV NA RAZVOJ ŽELEZNIC V JUŽNI AFRIKI

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**Abstract** UDC 551.44(497.4 Postojna)(091)  
*Stephen A. Craven: Postojnska Jama in Slovenia, the Südbahn and the Visit of John Charles Molteno: Their Influence on the Development of Railways in South Africa.*

In November 1871 a successful businessman and politician from South Africa toured Europe with his daughters. They arrived at Postojnska jama by train from Vienna. He wrote to the governor that it would be very desirable that the engineers should visit the Südbahn which crosses a rugged terrain comparable to that of the Cape mountains where technical problems and increased construction costs slowed the advance. The discovery of diamonds inland was eventually responsible for the extension of the railway to Beaufort West and beyond.

**Key words:** history, Molteno, Southern railway, Slovenia, South Africa.

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*Stephen A. Craven: Postojnska jama, Južna železnica in obisk Johna Charlesa Moltena v Sloveniji: njihov vpliv na razvoj železnic v Južni Afriki*

Novembra 1871 je uspešni poslovnež in politik iz Južne Afrike potoval s svojima hčerama po Evropi. Obiskali so tudi Postojnsko jamo, kamor so prispeli z vlakom z Dunaja. Pisal je guvernerju, naj si inženirji ogledajo južno železnico, ki poteka po še bolj razgibanem terenu kot so gore v Kaplandiji, kjer se je gradnja upočasnila zaradi tehničnih problemov in dviga stroškov. Vendar je odkritje diamantov pospešilo dokončanje železniške proge v notranjost do Beaufort Westa.

**Ključne besede:** zgodovina, Molteno, Južna železnica, Slovenija, Južna Afrika.

### INTRODUCTION

For three centuries the spectacular Postojna Cave in Slovenia (Habe 1986) has attracted the great, the good and lesser mortals. Until the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian empire in 1918 the cave was known as the Adelsberger Grotte. Fortunately for the historian since 1819 the early visitors were required to sign the visitors' books which have survived, and which are kept at the Karst Research Institute in Postojna. Most of the visitors came from Europe, but also from the Americas and from Asia (Shaw 2000; Shaw & Čuk 2002). There were very few visitors from Africa.

There are two reasons for the paucity of South African visitors. There were, compared with the northern hemisphere, very few people with the necessary financial and temporal resources. The Cave was difficult of access from the Cape. The Union-Castle Mail Steamship Company and its predecessors operated fast mailships from Cape Town via Las Palmas to Southampton in England. There were also intermediate ships which served Cape Town and the east African ports. The much slower round-Africa ships sailed through the Suez canal and the Mediterranean, calling at Naples, Genoa and Mar-

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seille before docking in England (Harris & Ingpen 1994). Trieste, the port of access for Postojna, is situated at the north-easterly limit of the Adriatic Sea. Ships plying the South African trade did not call there because there was insufficient demand for a diversion from the standard routes to a port which offered very little South African business.

Trieste was a busy and important port, being the most convenient maritime access which was controlled by the Austro-Hungarian empire. The Government in Vienna in 1841 decided to build the Southern Railway (or Südbahn). The tracks reached Postojna in 1856 and Trieste in the following year (Enciklopedija Slovenije, 1990). This railway greatly facilitated visitors' access to Postojna and the Cave.

Three such visitors were John Charles Molteno and his two eldest daughters, Caroline and Elizabeth Maria (Betty), on 10 November 1871 during their European tour (Fig. 1). Molteno was born in London on 5 June 1814 and emigrated in 1831 to the Cape where he soon pros-

During their tour of Europe Molteno and his daughters wrote letters to their family and friends (University of Cape Town Archives and Manuscripts Department BC 330: Molteno – Murray Papers). On 6 November 1871 Betty Molteno wrote from Vienna to her brothers Charlie, Percy and Frank announcing her intention to visit the Adelsberger Grotte. On 18 November 1871 her father wrote from Venice to his wife confirming the visit:

*"I write [sic] you last from Linz in Austria. Since we have visited several places, Vienna, Adelsberg Grotto, Trieste &c and reached this on the 15th. but as usual I must leave the girls to tell you all this ... The Adelsberg Grotto which we were in for near three hours is a truly wonderful sight a large (river) runs up to the hill where you enter the grotto and entering (the) cave entirely disappears and the water comes out again some 20 or 30 miles off."*

The daughters were not impressed with Postojna and its Cave. Betty's next letter, dated 21 November 1871 and written from Brindisi to her step-mother, made no mention of the Cave. Her diary is similarly silent. Caro-

	Datum	N a m e n	Seburtsort	Charakter
Nro.	Data	N o m e	Nativo	Condizione
	Date	N o m	Natif	Rang
	10/11	S. H. Pulliam	Virginia U.S.	
		J. C. Molteno	Cape of Good Hope	
		Caroline Molteno		
		Elizabeth Molteno		
	11	Julius or Kager		Lieutenant

Fig. 1: The entries of Molteno and his daughters in the Postojna Cave visitors' book, 10 November 1871.

pered in business, and in sheep farming at Nelspoort near Beaufort West. He became a wealthy and influential man (Harrington 1972). In 1854 he was elected Member of the Legislative Assembly for Beaufort West (Cape of Good Hope Almanac 1855). Following the achievement of internal self-government in 1872 he was re-elected Member for Beaufort West (General Directory and Guide Book to the Cape of Good Hope 1872), and was appointed Prime Minister on 1 December 1872 (Kilpin 1938).

line likewise wrote no letter between Graz and the east coast of Italy, and overlooked the Cave.

Although Molteno was prompted to write a couple of sentences about the Cave, his mind was clearly on other things including the inter-related Cape politics and Cape railways. Indeed, he had always been an enthusiastic supporter of railways in the Colony. The Cape Town Railway and Dock Company had been floated in London in 1853 and had reached Wellington, 96 railway

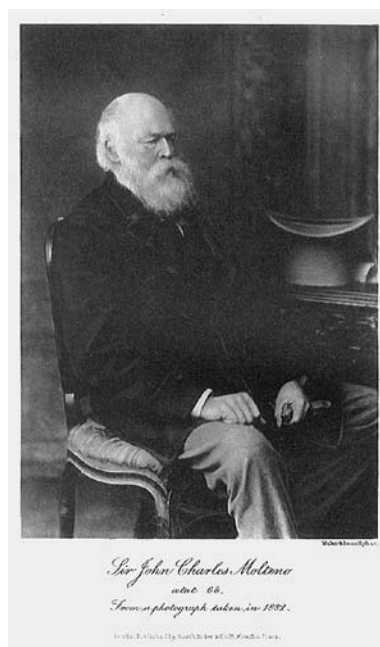


Fig. 2: Sir John Charles Molteno in 1882, aged 68 years (Molteno 1900).

km. (Durrant, Jorgensen & Lewis 1981) from Cape Town over easy country, on 4 November 1863 (Cape Argus 1863). This slow rate of construction is explained in part by the sparsely populated countryside and lack of industry (Houghton 1978). The 1865 census reported a population of 236,300 in the Western Division, of which only 16% were economically active, and a low population density of 3.25 per square mile (1.25 per square km.) (Cape of Good Hope 1866; Colony of the Cape of Good Hope, 1866). To proceed beyond Wellington into the hinterland the railway had to cross the Cape mountains. This led to technical problems and increased construction costs per kilometre, a possible solution to which occurred to Molteno as he travelled on the Südbahn across the mountains from Vienna (Wien) through Graz (Graz), Maribor (Marburg) and Ljubljana (Laibach) to Postojna (Adelsberg) and Trieste (The Times Atlas 1898). A visitor to Slovenia in 1845 during the construction of the Südbahn well summarised its significance for Molteno:

*“Until Marburg you ride along the [route of the] miracle railway under construction from Graz to Trieste. Tunnels several hundred metres in length, viaducts, and stone-walled cuttings will make this railroad one of the greatest.”* (Windisch-Graetz 1908).

A later advertisement for the Cape Government Railways did not exaggerate:

*“The Pioneers of railway construction were faced with apparently insurmountable difficulties in climbing over and winding round Nature’s great upheavals before the tracks could be laid which were to connect the coastal towns with the interior.”* (The Mountain Club Annual 1908).

Accordingly Molteno wrote to the Governor, Sir Henry Barkly, from Suez on 8 December 1871. After discussing the Egyptian railways which had been constructed over easy, flat, country he waxed eloquent about the Südbahn:

*“But of all the railways I have yet seen, that from Vienna to Trieste is the most difficult, and is acknowledged to exhibit the greatest amount of engineering boldness and skill, and the similarity of some of the mountain gorges and other difficulties which will have to be overcome if railways extend very much at the Cape, would, I should imagine, render it very desirable that the engineers who have to plan and construct these should visit this line; it is 365 miles in length, and would in itself re-*

*pay all the trouble and expense of a visit from the Cape for those who take an interest in such undertakings. But on the whole I find that what we shall have to contend with in constructing lines from the two ends of the Colony inland traversing the more level parts, especially say from the Wellington terminus towards the Diamond Fields, is small comparatively speaking, and looking to the changed condition of things consequent upon the Diamond Fields and extension of the Colony in every way, I think that even those who are inclined to be most cautious in committing the Colony to large and expensive undertakings, must admit that things which might have fairly been looked upon as tasks a few years ago, may be viewed in a very different light now.”* (Molteno 1900).

There is no record that an engineer was sent to inspect the Südbahn. Indeed, there would have been insufficient time between receipt of the letter by the Governor and the appointment of the Select Committee in May 1872.

Molteno returned from his European tour on the R.M.S. Northam from Southampton on 18 April 1872 (Cape Argus 1872), and resumed his political activities. The railway problem had become more urgent with the discovery of diamonds near what became Kimberley in the northern Cape, and with the subsequent expansion of that industry in 1868 (Rosenthal 1964). On 10 May 1872 the House of Assembly appointed a Select Committee to report on the Cape Town Railway and Dock Company, which was tabled the following month. Molteno attended every meeting. The Committee confined its enquiry to the financial implications of exercising the Government’s option to buy the railway. There was no discussion about its extension beyond Wellington (Cape of Good Hope Report 1872). The problem was solved by the purchase of the railway company by the Cape Colonial Government at midnight on 31 December 1872 (Cape Archives Depot), and by reducing the gauge from 4 ft. 8½ ins. (1.435 m.) to 3ft. 6 ins. (1.067 m.).

Sir John Charles Molteno retired in 1883 (Molteno 1900), and died in Cape Town on 1 September 1886 (Cape Argus 1886). He was doubtless content in the knowledge that the railway which he had encouraged throughout his political career had eventually crossed the Cape mountains, and had reached his adopted Beaufort West on 6 February 1880 (Cape Argus 1880).

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