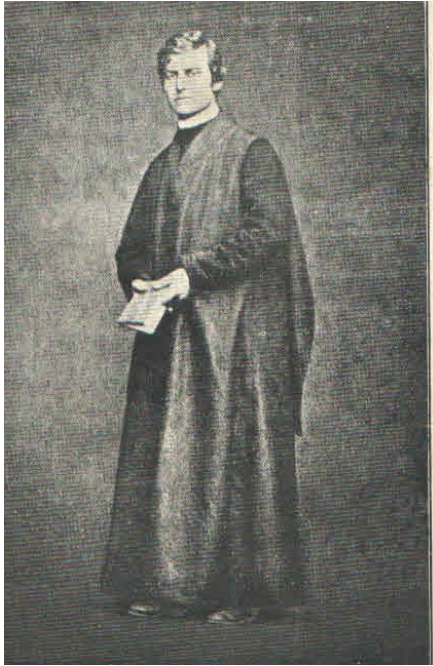


25 November

Fr AUGUSTUS LAW 21 October 1834 – 25 November 1880



Anyone writing a life of Augustus Law will find a wealth of information in his letters and journals as well as the accounts of his life culminating in his final passion at Mzila's. Though there were many courageous men on the Zambezi Mission, and its subsequent manifestations, Law has stood out for us like a Francis Xavier; an inspiration to those who followed. Born in Trumpington, Cambridgeshire, he entered the navy aged twelve and retired from the service aged nineteen having entered the Catholic Church in 1852. Two years later he knocked on the door of the novitiate and in 1866 he went to the English province mission in Guyana where he served for five years in Berbice. Recalled to the UK he gave a number of missions in England and Scotland before his health began to weaken and the province did, what it was so often to do subsequently, sent him to South Africa to recover.

He arrived in 1875 and worked for four years helping to found the new college at St Aidan's. Chosen as one of the eleven for the mission beyond the Limpopo in 1879, he made his way – 15 kms a day on average – by ox wagon to Old Tati (Botswana) and finally Bulawayo. The party of Jesuits there, at King Lobengula's capital, spent months finding their feet and winning acceptance but the king refused all their requests to teach or evangelise. The Jesuits settled down to wait – and plan. One group went north to the Zambezi and beyond to the Lozi territories (Western Zambia today) while Law led a group of four to the east, the territory of King Mzila.

The account of their journey has been told in detail elsewhere. Here we can just focus on the person of Law who brought all his experience, on land and at sea, to bear on a complex mission which had no precedents. He used his own form of Sat Map to record his route and planned in detail the provisions for the journey. Where he seems to have failed was in taking enough medication to combat malaria and in letting Mzila's emissaries, who had come to Bulawayo, to return without him. This was not his fault but Depelchin's dithering. But it was a disastrous omission.

After an arduous journey from May to September 1880, he reached Mzila's in a weakened state. The king received him kindly but was unable to help him and the meagre supplies they had – they had abandoned the wagon - gradually ran out. Br Joseph Hedley cared for Law as best he could but he too was weakened by fever. Hedley did not die and lived to tell the tale of Law's decline and death. 'I don't think I could despair even if I tried', were among Law's final words. Fr Peter Prestage sought out his grave in 1904 and brought his remains to Chishawasha where Law's brother, who was serving in the British army in South Africa at the time of his death, built a magnificent tomb surmounted by a Celtic (?) cross.