

Mastering the Niger: James MacQueen's African Geography and the Struggle over Atlantic Slavery. DAVID LAMBERT. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013. Pp. viii + 309, maps, diagrams, index. \$50.00 cloth ISBN 978-0-226-07806-9. \$7.00-\$40.00 e-book ISBN 978-0-226-07823-6.

Mastering the Niger is a comprehensive and complex account of the engagement of the Scotsman James MacQueen (1778-1870), in one sense and location a "sedentary" or "armchair" geographer, with various forms of the production, dissemination and reception of geographical knowledge and their relation to opposing discourses on Atlantic slavery, notably at the time up to and beyond the British abolition of the slave trade (1807) and slavery (1833) with particular reference to Granada, the West Indies, the River Niger, and West Africa. Three contextual chronologies are offered for this analysis: "from the emergence of the British anti-slavery campaign to the peak of humanitarian influence on the early Victorian state; the intensification of British exploratory activity in West Africa, the solution of the so-called Niger problem, and the subsequent commercial and humanitarian expeditions up this river, and the institutionalization of British geography as a field of knowledge and set of practices" (p. 7).

The book is in three parts, prefaced by an introductory chapter entitled "Mastering the Niger," which narrates MacQueen's production of *A New Map of Africa* in 1841, incorporating over twenty-four years' assembly and analysis of geographical data, its publication in journals such as *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, and its links and those of earlier maps that he had produced in relation to the question of the course and termination of the River Niger. MacQueen correctly asserted, in 1816, that the Niger terminated in the Atlantic Ocean between the bights of Benin and Biafra, a fact confirmed by the Landers' expedition in 1830. His map also linked with the Niger Expedition of 1841-42, intended, among other things, to help eradicate slavery from non-British territories through a substitution of legitimate commerce. From 1796 to 1821 MacQueen was manager of a sugar estate in Grenada in the West Indies, from part of whose labour force he had extracted knowledge of West Africa. The growth of abolitionism towards the end of the eighteenth century had promoted debates about the "representation" of Africa through intertextual debates, "fought not only on worldly and textual sites, but also *across* them, as those on both sides cited earlier accounts and made comparative points to substantiate their arguments" (p. 9).

The first of the three parts of the book, entitled "Sources," analyses anti-chronologically the detail and sophisticated inter-linkages of many different sources of geographical knowledge, starting with MacQueen's ideas and proposals from 1821 and 1822, moving to his commercial occupation in Glasgow in the early 1820s, and a demonstration of links between commercial bookkeeping methods and later systems of geographical data collecting and processing, and then to his experience in Grenada. Actions and ideas discussed include proposals for the establishment of a West Africa Company; the contexts of geographical research in the late eighteenth century; and the Atlantic culture of commercial speculation and MacQueen's construction of his Niger theory.

The second part, "Courses," incorporates responses to his Niger theory and related African proposals, tensions and contrasts between "armchair" knowledge and first-hand observation; the outcome of consideration and attempted practice of his ideas for Sierra Leone and for the Niger scheme, including the Niger Expedition of 1841-42. The final section "Termination" analyses the main issues between the early 1840s and 1870, the year of MacQueen's death, with particular reference to such questions as the source of the Nile and the Livingstone Zambezi expedition, together with his increased contacts with the Royal Geographical Society, which had changed since the early contact with John Barrow, who had charged MacQueen as being a "closet" geographer in a review of his *A Geographical and Commercial View of northern central Africa: containing a Particular account of the Course and Termination of the Great River Niger in the Atlantic*

Ocean (1821), in *The Quarterly Review* in 1821.

The essence of the Lambert book is described by the author, following Ian Baucom, as comprising not only a struggle between competing theories of right (slaves' right to freedom and traders' right to trade), but also the context of the links between geographical knowledge, African exploration and Atlantic slavery - a struggle between competing theories of knowledge, so that "Geographical discourse played a dual role...providing a means for debating slavery and representational forms for doing so, but also helping to reveal the competing theories about the locations - literal and figurative -from which credible knowledge concerning slavery could be produced" (p. 27).

David Lambert has produced in many respects a highly original and innovating piece of research and writing. Its structure, outlined above, is quite unusual and differs from conventional chronological narrative structures and sequences. The prime reason is that it is written mainly about attempts to master knowledge within a fairly restricted geographical context. The arguments are tightly reasoned, and raise many new questions about the moral geographies of slavery and sources for related knowledges, not least the provision of geographical information by the slaves themselves of the regions from which they had been forcibly exported.

This sophisticated book is very well referenced and illustrated, with a good bibliography and index, including links to many manuscript and printed sources. It contains interesting maps, though the scale at which some are reproduced makes for some difficulty of interpretation.

The innovative style of the narrative does periodically pose problems of interpretation of what is presented, with occasionally slowing of the pace of the argument, sometimes by the partially helpful periodic *vade mecum* summaries of where we have got to and where the author tells us we are going, and in some other sections, where the density of semiotic technicalities again slows the pace.

The wider contexts of slavery and its moral/immoral geographies are rather taken for granted, and the non-expert reader could have been helped a bit more with this. On the whole, however, this is a work which contributes much to the knowledges underpinning and forming a history and historical geography of a crucial topic, and does so with an impressive technical and conceptual expertise. It is undoubtedly a significant trail-maker in the field of the historical geography of knowledge and its attempted applications.

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