

## ● The World and Africa: Rediscovering African Geographies

‘One always turns back to Winwood Reade’s *The Martyrdom of Man* for renewal of faith’. So wrote W. E. B. Du Bois in the preface to his path-breaking essay on *The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part which Africa has played in World History*, published in 1947. It was an unlikely tribute. A few months earlier, George Orwell had reviewed a new edition of *The Martyrdom of Man* (‘that queer, unhonoured masterpiece’), describing it as ‘a kind of vision, or epic,...repudiating almost from its first pages the values of bourgeois society’. While Orwell presented Winwood Reade’s idiosyncratic narrative, originally published in 1872, as a compelling humanist history, Du Bois claimed it as one of the foundations of a genuinely Pan-African historiography. This is all the more remarkable given that Reade’s more obviously Africanist writings – tales of travel and exploration gathered together in *Savage Africa* (1863) and *The African Sketch-Book* (1873) - have often been dismissed as the product of racist Victorian fantasy: the epitome, to quote one account, of *The Africa That Never Was*.<sup>1</sup>

What, then, did the African-American intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois find in the work of British writer and traveller Winwood Reade? In short, he found Africa as a world-historical subject. Not the Africa of the philosophers, like Hegel, who could not imagine an African history worthy of the name. Nor the Africa of the diplomats and statesmen, for whom the map was always more important than the territory. But the Africa of human history, conceived as a vast pageant on the world stage. Under the heads of War, Religion, Liberty and Intellect, *The Martyrdom of Man* charted an epic in four acts: the rise and fall of the ancient Egyptians, Persians, Greeks and Romans; the origins of Judaism, Christianity and Islam; the history of modern Europe and America, especially in relation to the Enlightenment and anti-slavery; and the prospects for the future of the human race in the light of scientific progress. World history was imagined as a succession of collective migrations, struggles and crises, each folding into the next, and each becoming ever more global. And instead of being at the margins, the peoples of Africa were at the heart of this story, actively making history rather than being left behind by it. ‘I began it’, Reade tells us in the preface, ‘intending to prove that “Negroland” or Inner Africa is not cut off from the main-stream of events, as writers of philosophical history have always maintained, but connected by means of Islam with the lands of the East; and also that it has, by means of the slave-trade, powerfully influenced the moral history of Europe and the political history of the United States. But I was gradually led from writing the history of Africa into writing the history of the world’.<sup>2</sup>

In connecting Africa to a narrative of global progress, *The Martyrdom of Man* offered Du Bois a model for his own attempt to re-think African history at a key moment in the history of empire and decolonization. In fact Reade originally intended to call his own book ‘Africa’s Place in World History’, anticipating Du Bois even more precisely. If African historical experience looms less large in the *Martyrdom* than its successor, it nonetheless shaped Reade’s perspective – from his account of the influence of ancient Egypt on the Greeks, through the history of Islam to the ‘moral revolution’ against the trans-Atlantic slave trade which was situated in a longer history of rebellion against feudal and religious oppression. Although he proudly counted himself a disciple of Darwin, Reade’s version of evolutionary history (like that of H. G. Wells in *The Outline of History*) owed more to the



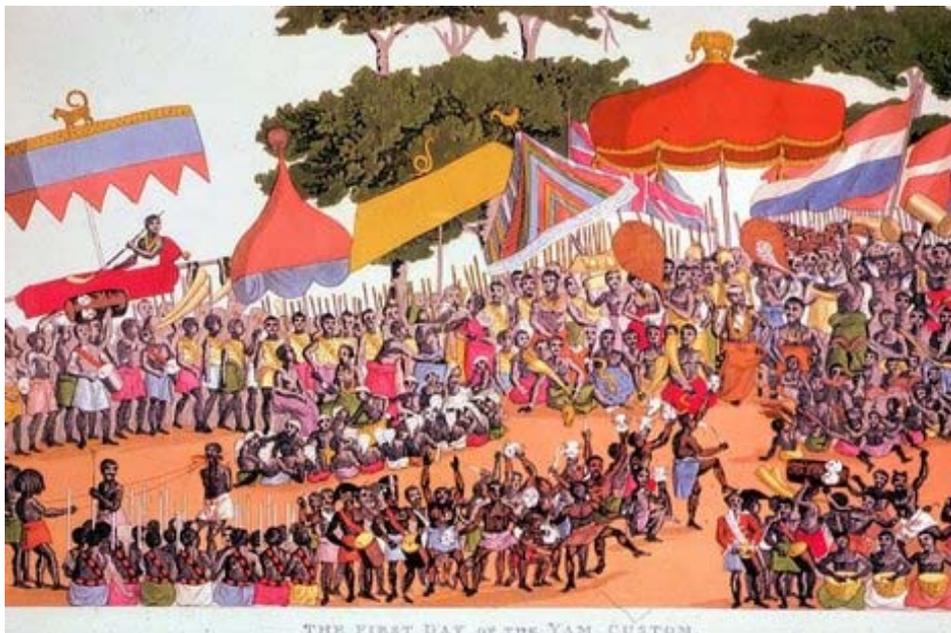


'Map of African Literature', from *The African Sketch-Book* by William Winwood Reade (1873)

As these examples suggest, the historical collections of a body like the RGS may provide evidence of unfamiliar aspects of the history of travel and exploration in Africa. True, the RGS – like many geographical societies across Europe – was closely associated with the history of empire-making, notably in the era of the 'Scramble for Africa' in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. It was not just that projects of geographical discovery yielded new facts about African worlds: these projects, as conceived in Europe, also frequently depended on an explicitly imperial vision, expressed as much in the rhetoric of European philanthropy in the 'Dark Continent' as it was – eventually - on the map of Africa itself. Yet in amongst the vast collections of the RGS – its maps, books, journals,

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pictures and artefacts – there are fragments of other views, pieces of evidence that may offer the twenty-first century explorer a different course through African history.

Take the literature of African travel, for example. The same sorts of sources which were used to construct Reade's map of African literature have since been used for very different purposes by modern historians of African societies. A book such as Thomas Bowdich's *Mission From Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee*, published in 1819 by John Murray, provides one example. Essentially the product of an intelligence-gathering expedition organized by a trading company, it can nonetheless yield much more than simply evidence of European power or prejudice (although it certainly does that). Read critically, and alongside other kinds of evidence, it remains an important account of the powerful Asante state at the height of its power, including valuable evidence concerning its history, law, culture, economy and language. Bowdich's diplomatic mission, intended to establish closer trading relations between British traders and the Asante, was more or less a failure: but his report remains a key source for historians of the Asante to this day.<sup>6</sup>



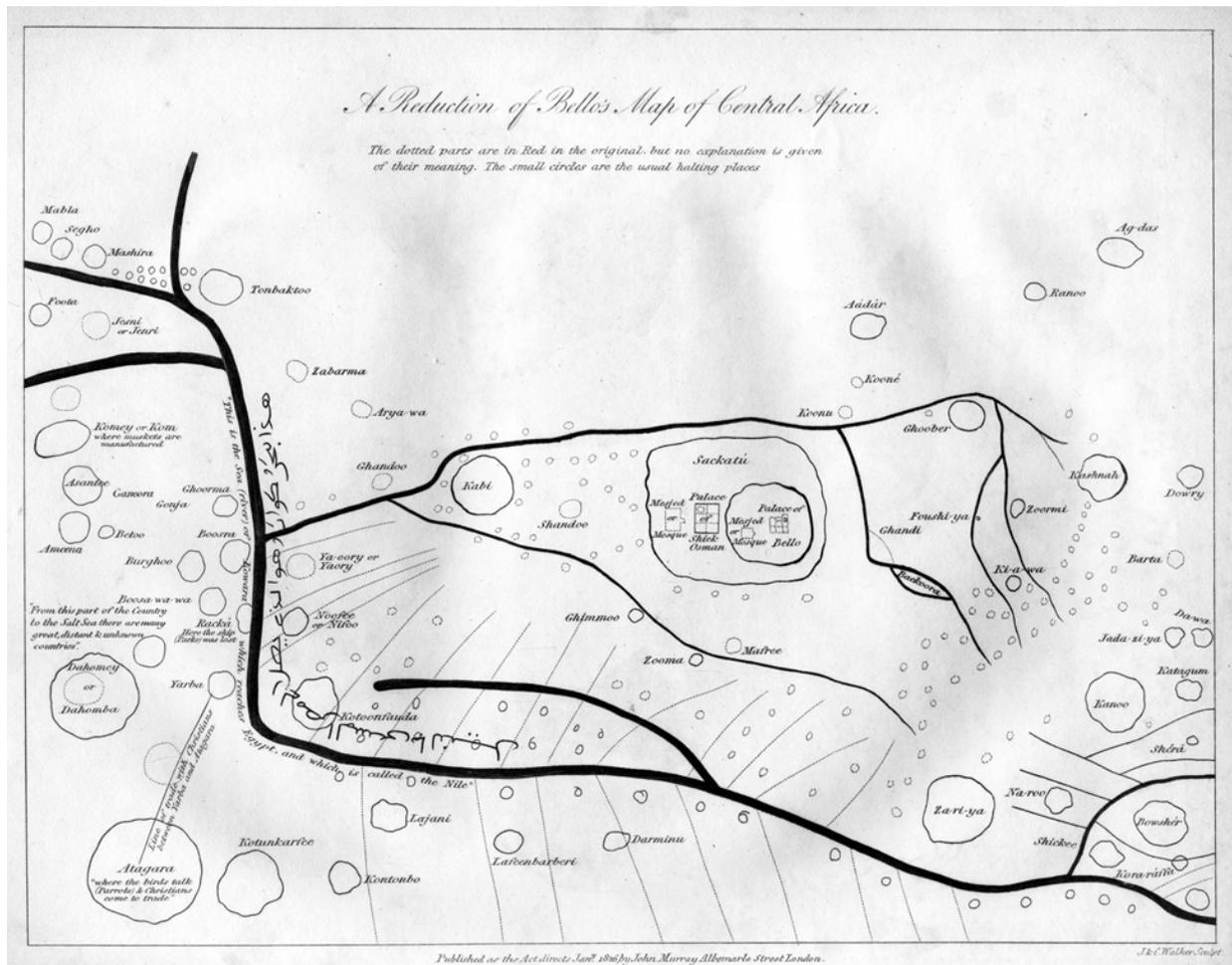
*Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee* by Thomas Bowdich (1819)

Also of interest to historians are still earlier travel narratives, many of which were direct products of the economic exploitation of Africans. The writings of Willem Bosman, a Dutch slave-trader on the Gold Coast at the end of the seventeenth century, or Jean Barbot, a Huguenot slave-trader writing about West Africa in the same period, have thus proved valuable resources for African historians when handled judiciously and in context. These texts certainly cannot be regarded as neutral sources: they do not speak for themselves, but neither do they speak purely of their authors. In the work of historical geographers such as Judith Carney, the observational evidence scattered throughout such texts may be placed alongside other sources – including many other written accounts, oral history and archaeological evidence – in order to reconstruct aspects of the diet and food cultures of enslaved Africans, and their transfer to the Americas. In the process, a wholly new view of the transatlantic influence of African food culture and botanical knowledge has emerged in which the endurance, creativity and memory of Africans takes centre-stage.<sup>7</sup>

Much of the European literature on exploration portrays Africa through European eyes: so many landscapes to be described, river courses traced, resources assessed, peoples observed. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to







Sultan Bello's Map of Central Africa, as published in *Narrative of Travels and Discoveries in Northern and Central Africa in 1822-4*, by Dixon Denham and Hugh Clapperton (1826)

This perspective on maps as documents of intercultural exchange can be useful more in considering other kinds of maps produced by both Africans and Europeans in the nineteenth century. Explorers' maps frequently absorbed aspects of indigenous knowledge as reflected in their use of place names and in the conjectural mapping of rivers. Meanwhile, the process of African mapmaking increasingly reflected European influences, notably in the materials used, orientation and survey methods. One good example is provided by the major topographic survey of Bamum in the western Cameroon undertaken by the enterprising King, Ibrahim Njoya (c. 1875-1933), in the early twentieth century. In this case, just as in the colonial maps of the same period, cartography was as much a political tool as a scientific object.<sup>16</sup>

Modern geographical collections, such as those of the RGS-IBG, provide exciting opportunities for those who wish to rediscover African geographies – not just the geographies we think we already know, but the unfamiliar and indeed unknown geographies that may be encountered by today's intrepid explorers who know where and how to look. While research in these collections is undoubtedly enhanced by a knowledge of African history and by a knowledge of the history of the collections themselves, in an age of electronic media the fruits of these knowledges are now much more readily accessible than ever before. In any case, prior knowledge alone is insufficient to guide the twenty-first century explorer on journeys through the archive. One thing more is needed, and that is a willingness to be surprised: from Africa, still, new things may come.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> D. Hammond, A. Jablow, *The Africa that Never Was* (New York, 1970). On Reade and Du Bois, see F. Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire* (Oxford, 2001), chap. 5; R. Law, 'Du Bois as a pioneer in African history' in M. Keller and C. J. Fontenot, eds., *Re-cognizing W. E. B. Du Bois in the Twenty-First Century* (Macon, Georgia, 2007).
- <sup>2</sup> W. Reade, *The Martyrdom of Man* (London, 1943 ed.), xxi.
- <sup>3</sup> For an interesting application of such a perspective, see D. Northrup, *Africa's Discovery of Europe, 1450-1850* (Oxford, 2002). For current research on African history, see the contents of periodicals such as *Journal of African History*, *History in Africa* and *African Affairs*.
- <sup>4</sup> P. Brantlinger, 'Victorians and Africans; the genealogy of the myth of the Dark Continent' *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985) 166-203.
- <sup>5</sup> M. Delany and R. Campbell, 'Geographical observations on Western Africa', *Proceedings of the RGS* 4 (1859-60), 218-22. An important work which puts Delany's expedition in the context of transatlantic thinking about race is P. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (London, 1993). On other African American expeditions, see J. Fairhead, T. Geysbeek, S. Holsoe and M. Leach, eds., *African-American Exploration in West Africa: Four Nineteenth-Century Diaries* (Bloomington, 2003).
- <sup>6</sup> T. E. Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee, with a Statistical Account of that Kingdom, and Geographical Notices of Other Parts of the Interior of Africa* (London, 1819). See also J. D. Fage, 'On the reproduction and editing of classics of African history', *Journal of African History* 8 (1967) 157-61; T. C. McCaskie, *State and Society in Pre-Colonial Asante* (Cambridge, 1995).
- <sup>7</sup> J. Carney and R. N. Rosomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (Berkeley, 2010).
- <sup>8</sup> F. Driver and L. M. Jones, *Hidden Histories of Exploration* (London, 2009).
- <sup>9</sup> D. Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa* (London, 1857).
- <sup>10</sup> S. Koelle, *Polyglotta Africana: or, a Comparative Vocabulary of Nearly Three Hundred Words and Phrases, in more than One Hundred Distinct African Languages* (London, 1854), iv.
- <sup>11</sup> P. D. Curtin and J. Vansina, 'Sources of the nineteenth-century Atlantic slave trade', *Journal of African History* 5 (1964) 185-208; P. Hair, 'The enslavement of Koelle's informants', *Journal of African History* 6 (1965) 193-203.
- <sup>12</sup> On Speke, see A. Wisnicki, 'Cartographical quandaries: the limits of knowledge production in Burton's and Speke's search for the source of the Nile', *History in Africa* 35 (2008) 455-79; on MacQueen, see D. Lambert, 'Taken captive by the mystery of the great river: towards an historical geography of British geography and African slavery', *Journal of Historical Geography* 35 (2009) 44-65.
- <sup>13</sup> T. J. Bassett, 'Indigenous mapmaking in intertropical Africa' in E. Woodward and G. Malcolm Lewis, eds., *The History of Cartography, vol. 2 Book 3: Cartography in the Traditional African, American, Arctic, Australian and Pacific Societies* (Chicago, 1998), 24-48.
- <sup>14</sup> D. Denham and C. Clapperton, *Narrative of Travels and Discoveries in Northern and Central Africa* (London, 1826); C. Lefebvre, I. Surun, 'Exploration et transferts de savoir: deux cartes produites par des Africains au debut du XIXe siècle' (2008), <http://mappemonde.mgm.fr/num20/articles/art08405.html>
- <sup>15</sup> C. Lefebvre, 'Itinéraires de sable: parole, geste et écrit au Soudan central au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle', *Annales HSS* 64 (2009) 797-824. The route maps collected by Clapperton were later presented to the RGS by W. D. Cooley.
- <sup>16</sup> Njoya's maps survive in various forms in European archives: Bassett, 'Indigenous mapmaking in intertropical Africa', 41-5.