Mastering the Niger: James MacQueen’s African Geography & the Struggle over Atlantic Slavery

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How can you know about somewhere you’ve never been? This predicament is at the heart of David Lambert’s superb new book, Mastering the Niger: James MacQueen’s African Geography and the Struggle over Atlantic Slavery. In 1841 the Scottish geographer and proslavery propagandist James MacQueen published A New Map of Africa. MacQueen had never visited the continent. He had however spent over ten years working as a plantation manager in Grenada. As a proslavery campaigner, MacQueen dismissed metropolitan abolitionists on the basis that they could not understand the conditions of West Indian slavery from afar. Yet at the same time, MacQueen sought to piece together his African geography whilst sitting in a Glasgow study. With this map, and this paradox, Lambert opens his impressive account of the entangled relationship between geographical knowledge and Atlantic slavery.

Certainly not a biography, Mastering the Niger is nonetheless centred around the life and work of MacQueen. Born in late 18th-century Lanarkshire, MacQueen departed for Grenada aged 19. There he managed the Westerhall Estate until his return to Scotland in 1810. MacQueen spent the rest of his life defending both West Indian slavery and his account of the geography of Africa. Lambert convincingly shows that the two were not unrelated. Chief amongst MacQueen’s geographical claims was that the River Niger terminated in the Atlantic Ocean. With the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, West Indian slave owners were keen to preserve their advantage over the United States and other rivals. If the Niger terminated in the Atlantic, then it potentially provided a route through which to establish ‘legitimate commerce’ with the African interior and stem the supply of slaves. As Lambert explains, ‘It was precisely because slavery was effective on Caribbean plantations that its continued supply to the colonies of Britain’s imperial rivals posed a threat to the British West Indies’ (p. 36).
Whilst we know plenty about leading abolitionist figures such as Zachary Macaulay, there are few detailed studies of the pro-slavery movement. Such a dichotomy can only be sustained under the ahistorical premise that abolition came as a result of inevitable moral progress. The focus on MacQueen, a pretty unsavoury figure, is therefore a welcome corrective. *Mastering the Niger* illustrates how both anti-slavery and pro-slavery rhetoric developed in relation to one another. When MacQueen deployed statistics and tables, campaigners like Macaulay had little option but to respond in kind.

As a complement to Christopher Brown’s *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (1), Lambert’s work therefore represents a significant contribution to the history of slavery in its own right. But the real strength of *Mastering the Niger* lies in Lambert’s ability to carefully weave together a range of sources and methodologies. In doing so, he has produced an account which should appeal to two groups of readers: historians of slavery and historians of science. Up to now, these groups have had little to say to one another. However, by putting the history of knowledge at the centre of his work, Lambert shows exactly why we cannot reduce the history of abolition to either moral or material causes. What we need, as David Turley suggests in the case of antislavery, are detailed studies of styles of argument and practices of rhetoric. (2) Lambert’s close reading of sources ranging from maps and letters to periodicals and slave narratives speaks directly to this concern.

*Mastering the Niger* is divided into three parts. In turn these cover the production of MacQueen’s African geography, the initial reception of his Niger theory, and the on-going influence of MacQueen’s work into the later 19th century.

Part one sets out the ‘Niger problem’ in detail before exploring exactly how MacQueen marshalled his sources. Two chapters really stand out here. The first, ‘Keeping account of Atlantic commerce’, makes a convincing case for the relationship between commercial practices of accounting and geographical practices of mapping. The notion of ‘balance’ dominated MacQueen’s thinking, as exemplified in double-entry bookkeeping. Lambert’s argument here is simple but effective. He draws an analogy between the transfer of information into the waste book, the journal and the ledger and MacQueen’s use of sources in his geographical work. The waste book corresponds to travel accounts and other miscellaneous sources collected together in the library. The journal corresponds to the more technical and structured ordering of this information in pamphlets such as MacQueen’s *A Geographical and Commercial View* (1821). Finally, the ledger corresponds to the most formal and abstracted rendering of this information: the map.

Readers not already familiar with the work of scholars such as Mary Poovey and Theodore Porter may find Lambert’s close attention to the technicalities of accounting practices somewhat dry. (3) But the reality is, as Lambert persuasively argues, that Atlantic slavery relied just as much upon the pen and ledger book as the whip and chain. Still, historians of slavery might have benefitted further if Lambert had made a more explicit link between his commercial argument and existing debates surrounding the economics of slavery. In the wake of Eric Williams’s *Capitalism and Slavery* and Seymour Drescher’s response, neither of which are discussed, Lambert’s work could well have been pitched as an important intervention. (4) Read with these debates in mind, *Mastering the Niger* in fact suggests that the application of 20th-century economic theory to explain the actions of 19th-century gentlemen is simply not appropriate. Instead, we need to reconstruct the ‘counter-revolutionary’ styles of accounting particular to the period.

The second standout chapter in part one is simply entitled ‘Captive Knowledge’. Here Lambert painstakingly reconstructs the role enslaved Africans played in the production of MacQueen’s geography. Lambert is open about the speculative nature of some of his claims, explaining his examples should be read as ‘proxies for a broader field of occluded captive knowledge’ (p. 112). The result is well worth the risk. MacQueen managed over 400 slaves in Grenada. Amongst these were a ‘Houssa Negro, who said he rowed Mr. Park across the Niger’ and ‘Mandingo Negroes … who were well acquainted with the Jobila’. MacQueen elicited ‘oral maps’ from these slaves in order to expand and corroborate his geography of Africa. Lambert really pushes the analysis here. By examining the names and ages of the slaves listed at the
Westerhall Estate, he is able to indicate which individuals may have been MacQueen’s informants. Lambert also deploys recent ethno-historical work on the Mande-speaking peoples in order to give an impression of the educational background of these slaves. Most importantly, Lambert also discusses why slaves might have wanted to help MacQueen. As is indicated by the term itself, ‘captive knowledge’ was always produced under conditions of coercion, a ‘relationship more akin to prostitution’ in Lambert’s words (p. 106).

The result is an exemplar of how both historians of science and historians of slavery might recover silenced voices in the absence of first-hand archival sources. Of particular interest to historians of science and exploration is Lambert’s claim that MacQueen’s mapping practices undermine easy distinctions between ‘armchair’ and ‘field’ work. The information required to produce *A New Map of Africa* was collected from enslaved informants in a displaced colonial field, a West Indian plantation. But it was then collated and compared to pamphlets and books once back in the metropole.

Part two explores the reception of MacQueen’s geographical work. The first chapter, ‘Credibility and truth making in the Atlantic World’, presents a series of intriguing tensions within both the anti-slavery and pro-slavery campaigns. In 1831 the anti-slavery campaigner Thomas Pringle arranged for the publication of *The History of Mary Prince*, a narrative of a former West Indian slave, recorded ‘from Mary’s own lips’. This first-hand account of the brutal realities of slavery directly challenged the claim that Africans were ‘quite happy in slavery’. The strength of the argument relied upon Prince’s testimony as a witness (‘I have been a slave myself – I know what slaves feel’). MacQueen, a leading pro-slavery propagandist, responded with a damning review in the Tory periodical *Blackwood’s Magazine*. Crucially for Lambert’s argument, MacQueen attacked the status of Prince as a reliable witness, calling the work a ‘pretended history’. But as we learned in the previous chapter, MacQueen depended upon the testimony of slaves to produce his African geography.

How then could a slave be a credible witness on the course of the Niger but not on the conditions of West Indian slavery itself? Lambert shows that there is more at play here than mere inconsistency. In resolving this tension, MacQueen made specific claims about the ‘epistemological geography’ of the Atlantic world. He claimed that, because the West Indies had long been a British colony, the most trustworthy witnesses were white Europeans resident there. In contrast, because of the lack of European presence in West Africa, the most reliable witnesses were in fact the local population. In uncovering this argument, Lambert shows how Richard Huzzey’s recent work on the moral geography of antislavery might inform the history of science.(5) Here *Mastering the Niger* also provides a fresh take on the uses and reception of a classic slave narrative.

The remaining chapters in part two situate MacQueen’s geography within two West African colonial schemes. First, the British free labour colony of Sierra Leone established in 1790 to accommodate liberated slaves. Second, the 1841–2 government-sponsored Niger Expedition. Together, these chapters successfully illustrate how geographic knowledge produced in the West Indies and Britain made its way back to West Africa.

MacQueen insisted on the unsuitability of the location of Sierra Leone, describing it as one of ‘the most sickly of all the sickly swamps of that, to Europeans, sickly continent’. To support his claim, MacQueen produced tables of the mortality of British officers. Again relying on his African geography, MacQueen promoted the creation of an alternative British colonial settlement on the island of Fernando Po. According to MacQueen, Fernando Po’s location at the mouth of the Niger made it much more suitable for establishing commercial links with the West African interior. Here, Lambert claims that ‘an attack on Sierra Leone was an attack on the antislavery campaign and an implicit defense of British colonial slavery’ (p. 148). This is too strong and runs against the grain of a book which otherwise complicates the straightforward division of ‘pro-slavery’ and ‘anti-slavery’ interest. In fact, in the following chapter we learn that the anti-slavery campaigner Thomas Buxton took up MacQueen’s suggestion to establish ‘legitimate commerce’ via the Niger. Additionally, the history of the American Colonization Society and the support it generated amongst slave owners indicates that we cannot straightforwardly link places like Sierra Leone or Liberia to either pro-
For historians of slavery, the penultimate chapter on the Niger Expedition provides a fresh perspective on the abolition movement post-1838, one that puts claims about knowledge at the forefront. Buxton, a prominent member of the African Civilisation Society, believed the best way to combat Brazilian and Cuban slavery was to promote ‘legitimate commerce’ in West Africa. Provincial abolitionists like Joseph Sturge, stalwart of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, did not agree. Nonetheless, after reading about MacQueen’s earlier Niger scheme, Buxton wrote to the former West Indian plantation manager. Even though the two had clashed over slavery earlier in the century, Buxton believed MacQueen knew ‘more about Africa than the whole Admiralty’. By 1841 the plans had been finalised and three ships set out from London. The expedition was charged with exploring the Niger, establishing commercial trade, setting up a model farm and forming anti-slavery treaties with local leaders. MacQueen’s involvement did not go unnoticed. This final tension, a leading abolitionist seeking the help of a pro-slavery propagandist, enacting a plan initially conceived to protect West Indian slavery, wonderfully encapsulates all the major themes of *Mastering the Niger*.

In these two chapters, Lambert also does his best work in analysing the maps themselves. He details how the relative positions of the River Senegal (representing French expansion), Sierra Leone (representing the anti-slavery campaign) and Fernando Po (representing the mercantile interest) articulated MacQueen’s specific ‘counter-revolutionary’ Atlantic worldview. Lambert also contrasts two charts provided by the Admiralty for the Niger Expedition, one prepared by MacQueen and one prepared by the mission’s naval commander William Allen. MacQueen’s map, based on ‘speculative geography’ and ‘captive knowledge’, presented an optimistic vision of the West African interior as a healthy space in which to conduct commerce. In contrast, Allen’s map, based on an actual survey of the region, was more pessimistic, leaving the interior unaccounted for. When Allen reached the Niger aboard HMS *Wilberforce*, he proceeded up the tributary identified during the earlier survey, ignoring MacQueen’s chart. By attending to the specific uses of these different maps, Lambert again productively reveals the tension between ‘armchair’ and ‘field’ geography.

Geographers and historians of cartography would no doubt have appreciated similar close analysis much earlier in the book, particularly of the 1841 *A New Map of Africa*. Indeed, in chapter two, Lambert indicates that, in his approach to maps, he will be ‘steering between a series of unhelpful binaries’. He sees maps neither as ‘floating signifiers of colonial desire’ nor as ‘gradual progress towards greater truth’ (p. 33). This is fair enough. Still, without further elaboration or a discussion of the existing literature, it falls rather flat. As a trained geographer, Lambert is clearly well aware of the development of ‘critical cartography’ and has opted not to bog the reader down. Throughout the book, Lambert does a magnificent job of uncovering the detailed processes behind the production of these maps. But at the beginning, even the non-specialist is left wondering: if maps don’t faithfully depict the world and don’t straightforwardly project imperial power, then what do they do? Later in the text, *Mastering the Niger* answers this question in passing, when it might have helped to be more explicit upfront. Lambert writes that maps represent ‘the visual counterpart to MacQueen’s writing in general’ (p. 170). In the case of Atlantic slavery, maps functioned as arguments. They were arguments about who could be trusted and how British imperial commerce should be organised.

The remaining criticisms that might be levelled against *Mastering the Niger* are negligible. The concluding chapter which forms part three is not as strong as the previous ones, merely introducing a few short case studies to show how MacQueen’s African geography extended into the later 19th century. Lambert explores how the Niger Expedition patterned later geographical work such as David Livingstone’s Zambezi Expedition and debates over the source of the Nile. Of greater relevance is Lambert’s account of how John C. Calhoun, United States Secretary of State under President John Tyler, deployed MacQueen’s *Blackwood Magazine* articles in arguments supporting the annexation of Texas. This provides a brief but important connection with slavery in the United States, completing a full circuit of the Atlantic world. Still, the concluding chapter might have been better spent setting out Lambert’s own position in relation to key debates within the historiography of slavery and cartography as discussed earlier. Additionally, for some, the exclusive reliance on European and North American archival sources will prove problematic. But there is little to be gained in privileging the colonial archive for its own sake. In fact, Lambert’s treatment of ‘captive
knowledge’ illustrates how global histories of science might equally be grounded in the close reading of traditional sources, particularly when combined with ethno-historical work.

Mastering the Niger is therefore an accomplished and creative account of the troubling connections between Atlantic slavery and geographical knowledge in the 19th century. It is interdisciplinary in the best way, engaging both historians of slavery and historians of science. In this work, Lambert has set a course which others must surely follow.

Notes

4. Eric Williams, Capitalism and Slavery (Chapel Hill, NC, 1944) and Seymour Drescher, Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition (Pittsburgh, PA, 1977). Back to (4)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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