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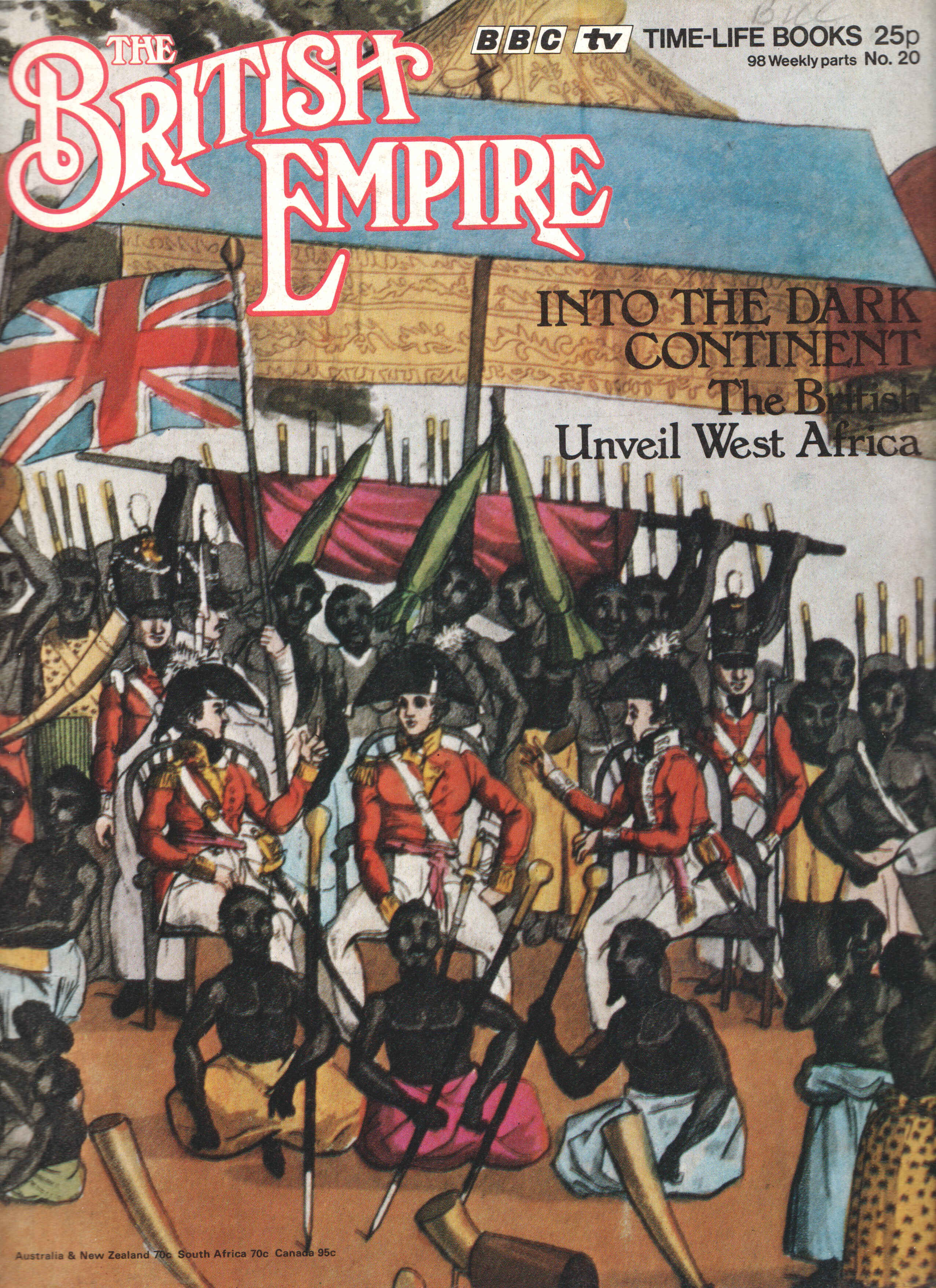

INTO THE DARK CONTINENT

The British Unveil West Africa

Australia & New Zealand 70c South Africa 70c Canada 95c

THE BRITISH EMPIRE

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BASIL DAVIDSON is a noted writer on many aspects of African history. After the war, he was at one time correspondent for *The Times*, the *New Statesman* and the *Daily Herald*, and leader-writer for the *Daily Mirror*. As a specialist in African affairs, his best-known works are *Old Africa Rediscovered*, *Black Mother*, *The African Past*, *Africa in History*, *The Africans* and *Africa: History of a Continent*.

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BY THE WAY

When *The British Empire* started, we were inundated with letters from readers in Scotland, Ireland, Wales and the Isle of Man protesting at the use of "England" to describe the United Kingdom. Technically, they were quite right to protest, but they raised a problem for which there is no all-embracing solution.

Historically, various specific terms have been used to describe different political combinations within the British Isles, and most of them are in some sense inadequate for wider use. "Britain" was a Roman province which included England, Wales and part of Scotland. "Great Britain" came into official existence with the 1707 union of England and Wales with Scotland. In 1801, there emerged "The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland," and with Irish partition in 1921 this became "The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland."

This last, the official present-day title, is often shortened to "Great Britain" – incorrectly since the term, refers either to a political entity in existence between 1707 and 1801 or, geographically, to the largest of the British Isles, and nothing more.

Another more correct shortening, "The United Kingdon," has only come into wide usage since the war. In a pre-20th-Century context, it sounds odd.

No general, innocuous term exists to describe all the changing areas of which London has been the capital. At the moment, the best compromise seems to be "Britain," because it combines wide use and is therefore the least likely to stop the reader in his tracks. Despite its technical inadequacies, this is the term we have adopted generally.

However, there are instances when we have chosen to use "England" instead. There are good reasons for this apparently reprehensible practice. Next week's issue will discuss a few of them.

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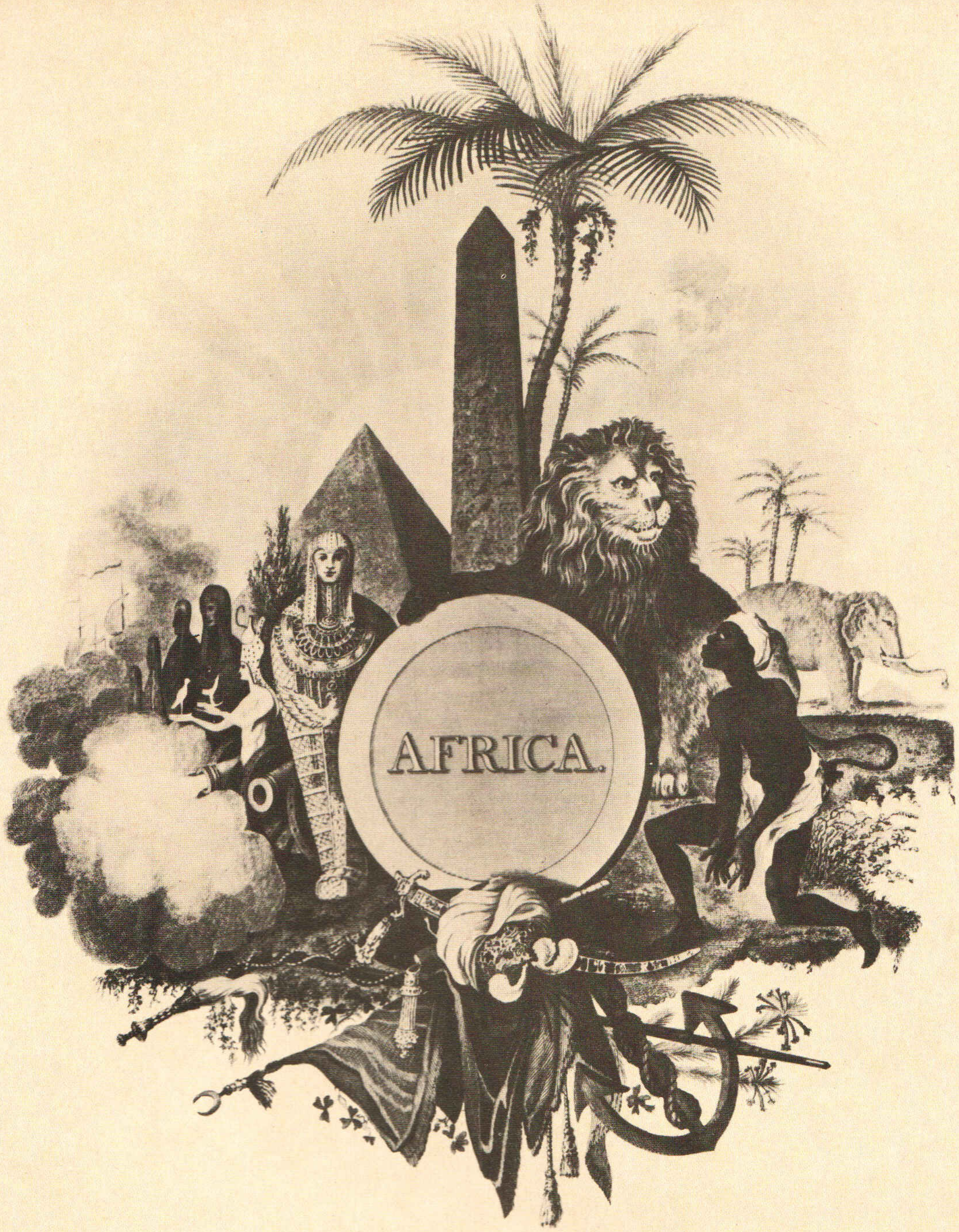
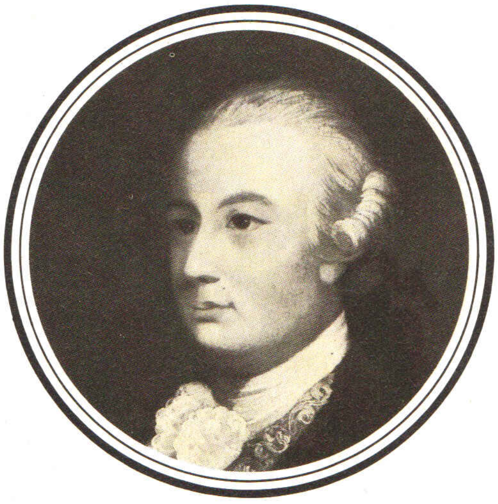
Cover: British soldiers watching a festival among Yoruba tribesmen on the upper Niger testify to the growing strength of British influence in late 19th-Century West Africa.



INTO THE DARK CONTINENT

The interior of Africa was still, in the late 18th Century, shrouded in mystery and legend. Leaping beyond the exotic, but at least realistic symbols of coastal Africa – lions, negroes, pyramids (above) – popular opinion peopled the hinterland with monsters and dreamed of fabulous cities. Over the next 70 years, explorers, many of them obsessed with these same dreams, pioneered European expansion in West Africa and found that the truth was very different – but equally fascinating

By Basil Davidson



James Bruce, wine-merchant and antiquarian scholar, was the first modern explorer of the upper Nile. In 1770, he traced the Blue Nile to its source in Abyssinia.

The exploration of Africa—indispensable prelude to Empire and one of the grand adventures of the 19th Century—had its genesis in London on a summer's evening of 1788, when there came together at the St. Alban's Tavern a company of nine of the twelve gentlemen who made up the Saturday's Club.

Small the club may have been but what it lacked in numbers its members more than supplied in brains and social push. In 18th-Century London, that ever curious city where spoof and speculation flourished, they represented one of the cutting-edges of serious scientific inquiry that was eager for knowledge, hungry for fact, passionately conscious of a whole wide world awaiting explanation. The gentlemen of the Saturday's Club were aware of the role they should play. The Spirit of the Age, they felt, was with them. And the Spirit demanded action.

On this occasion of June, 1788, their leading member was Sir Joseph Banks, a botanist who had been the chief scientist on Captain James Cook's great expedition to the southernmost parts of the Pacific Ocean. Now a man of much influence in London's dawn of modern science, Banks convinced his fellow members that they should issue a manifesto. In bold and challenging phrases, this document asserted: "Nothing worthy of research by sea, the Poles themselves excepted, remains to be examined, but by land, the objects of Discovery are still so vast, as to include at least a third of the habitable surface of the earth; for much of Asia, a still larger proportion of America, and almost the whole of Africa, are unvisited and unknown." So wide an ignorance, they declared, "must be considered as a reproach upon the present age." Yet what priority should be fixed in a field as vast as this? India was scarcely a mystery, nor even China or Japan. Cook and his companions had gone to the South Seas.

The Saturday's Club decided to concentrate upon the largest area of contemporary ignorance. They formed an Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa, and laid each of their members, prospective or present, under a subscription of five guineas a year for three years, cautiously adding that "at, or after that period, any member, on giving a year's notice, may withdraw himself from the Association." The beginning was a modest one. But it grew into a great, many-sided and highly influential enterprise.

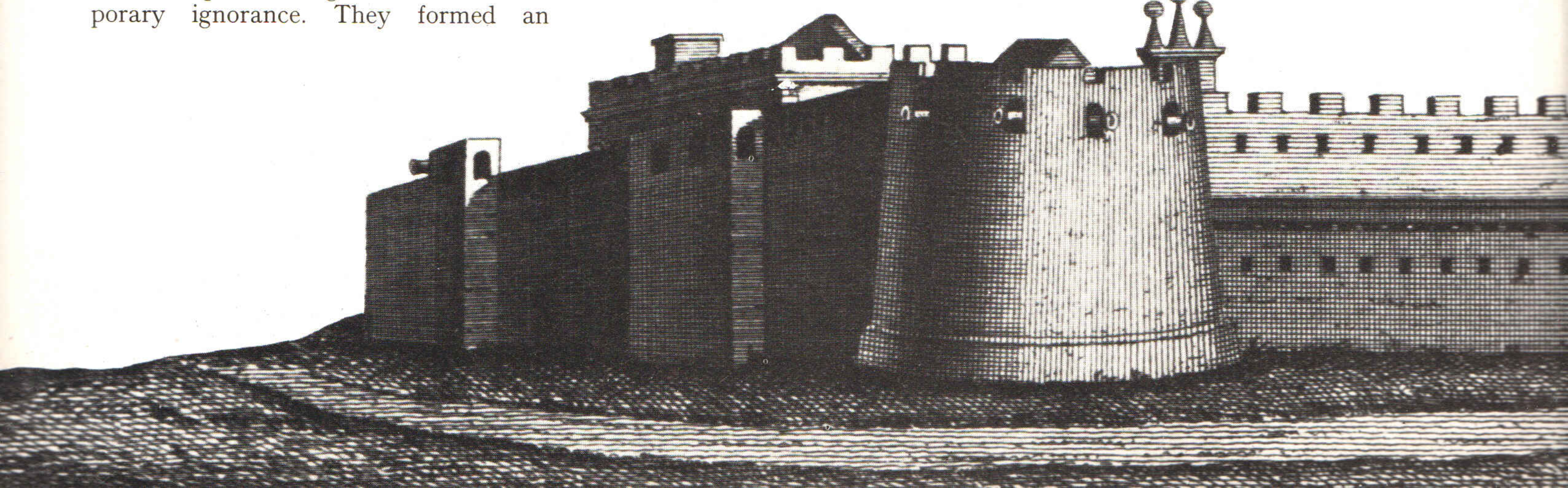
There were several powerful reasons why this came about, although not all of them were present at the African Association's birth. To an initial concern with geographical exploration, other driving motives were soon added. High on the list of these was Britain's growing belief in the virtue of oversea trade, provided of course that the trade was British. It was this consideration that gained the support of great manufacturers like Josiah Wedgwood, the potter.

Arguing for enterprise in West Africa, Sir Joseph Banks was eventually able to persuade colonial administrators, who in any case had little function now that the North Americans had so rudely removed themselves from that control, that "whoever colonizes in that part of Africa with spirit will clearly be able to sell colonial products of all kinds in European markets at a cheaper price than any part of the West Indies or America can afford it." Let the Old World right the balance lost to Britain by departure of so much of the New. The administrators listened, and hoped that it could be so.

Then, within less than ten years after the Association's founding, there came the long struggle with France. Always mercantile in character, often violent, Anglo-French rivalry now increasingly acquired on both sides an overlay of patriotic motivation. Decades later, this nationalist rivalry was to become the spring that would uncoil much of the drive for empire in Africa. Meanwhile it spurred on the work of discovery. For it soon became clear that it would not be enough to get into Africa: it would also be necessary to get there first.

More and more, as the years passed, discovery responded to the call of patriotism. The old questions about geography continued to be asked. But as French commerce recovered in the wake of Waterloo, these questions began to be asked in ways more attractive to practical merchants or to ambitious politicians conscious of the rising waves of anti-foreign fervour that beat and burst against their hustings. Where lay the regions of inland Africa that would be best for trade? How could you reach them from the coast? Which then were the most useful ports along the coast to seize and hold against malicious rivals? To Englishmen still smarting from the loss of the North American colonies, or Frenchmen still sullen after Napoleon's defeat, these became the kind of questions that promised consoling answers.

Other sources of public interest absent at the beginning, but growing in strength as the old century ended and the new century began, helped Banks and the African Association to find the money and the men they needed. Considerable assistance was derived from the pressure of British philanthropists who wanted to end the slave trade by land as well as by sea. The best way to do this, they thought, was to promote other types of trade.



For Abolitionists like Wilberforce, another man of influence who early joined the Association, it became self-evident that without inland exploration important questions would remain unanswered. Who were the inland traders? What kind of "legitimate trade" could tempt or induce them to change their ways, and give up selling slaves? But if answers could be found, profit could go hand in hand with charity, and the light of civilization would cast its saving gleam in dark places. This idea was not to reach its full plenitude of beneficent complacency till High Victorian years, but it had its influence in Banks's time as well.

Responding to these incentives, the whole subject of Africa became fashionable, and that also helped. The "Dark Continent's" mysteries had long provoked curiosity; now they began to evoke romance. It was with several high-flown verses entitled *Timbuctoo* – a name which then and for long afterwards seemed to echo all that was most curious about Africa – that the 19-year-old Alfred Tennyson carried off the Cambridge Chancellor's poetry prize in 1829:

Wide Africa, doth thy sun
lighten, thy hills unfold a
city as fair
as those which starred the night
o' the older world?
Or is the rumour of thy
Timbuktoo
a dream as frail as those of
ancient time?

The poet went on to guess that Timbuktu, whenever it might be reached, was going to prove a sorry disappointment, and the prediction proved better than the poetry. But the dream was there all right, as William Thackeray's contribution of the same year somewhat flippantly insisted:

In Africa (a quarter of the world)
Men's skins are black, their hair
is crisp and curled;
And somewhere there, unknown to
public view,
A mighty city lies, called
Timbuktoo. . . .

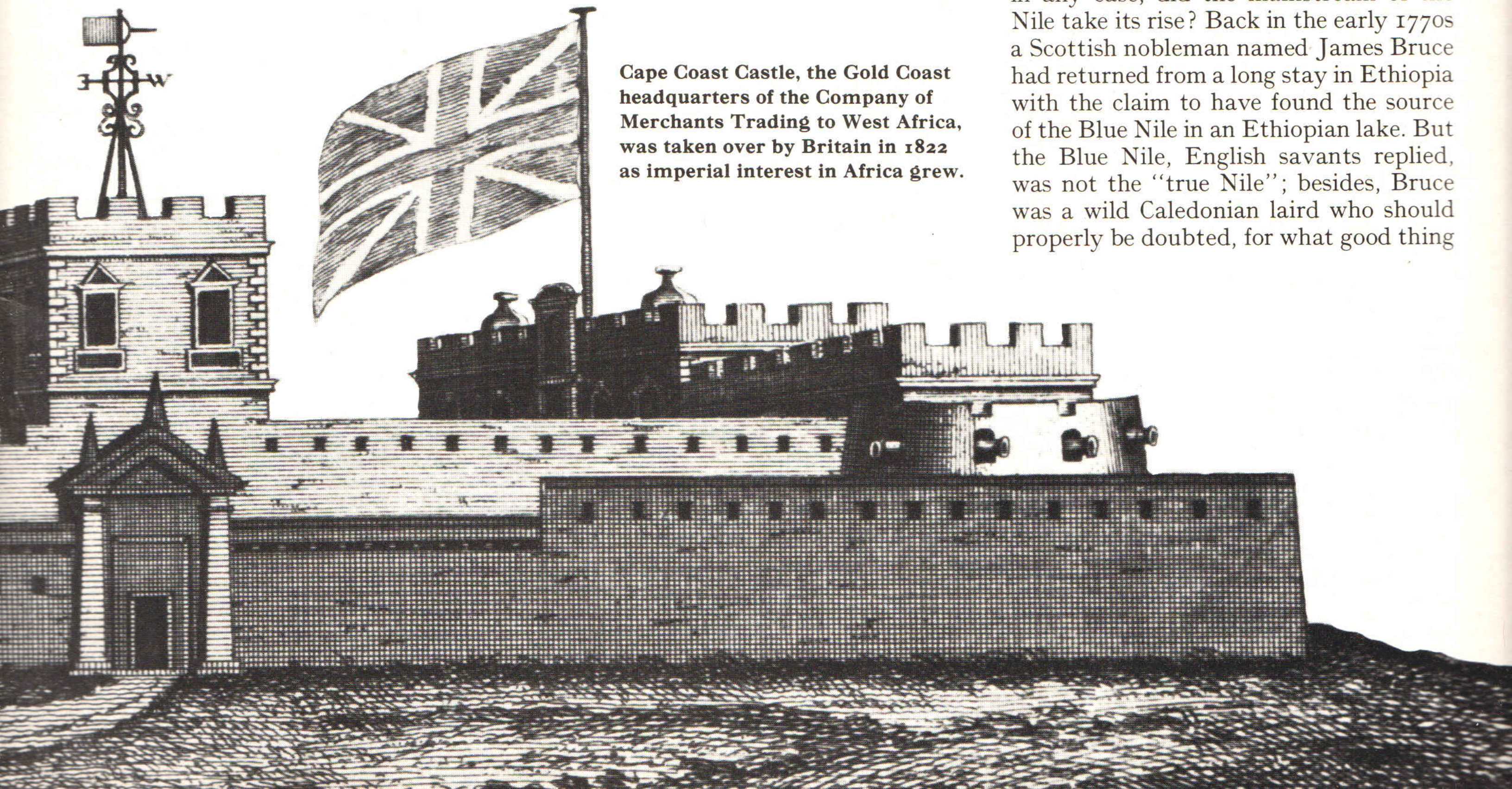
At the outset of the great adventure, however, the main demand was merely for the facts of geography. The Association's early volunteers might if they wished, dilate upon the peoples whom they found, just as they might report upon the lions, elephants and other amazing fauna they met upon their way; but that was not their task. What the Association wanted to know was the lay-out of the land; and it is easy to see why. The map of inland Africa was an almost total blank but for scraps of dubious information inherited from medieval or even Graeco-Roman atlases.

It might have been less of a blank, and the information more reliable, if the science of history had been better developed; earlier times had yielded what may now be recognized as quite a fair harvest of more or less factual knowledge on a number of inland regions. But the science of history had yet to be applied. This being so, storehouses in several European countries continued for a long time afterwards to guard their dusty stacks of mariners' records, travellers' memoirs and other documents untouched by any inquiring hand.

Banks and those who followed him concentrated upon two problems of geography that were judged of central value. These concerned the source and course of two great African rivers, the Niger and the Nile. If those problems could be solved, it was argued with good reason, at least a basic skeleton for Africa's inland topography would become available.

It may seem strange, looking back, that the source and course and termination of the Niger, if not of the Nile, could lie in serious doubt. But so it was. Most European geographers believed that the Niger took its rise somewhere in the middle of Africa, and possibly in a vast lake which also, if inexplicably, might be the source of the Nile as well. Again following ancient errors, they likewise believed that the Niger flowed westward through Africa until it became the Senegal River and so joined its waters with the Atlantic. There were some who questioned this, arguing that the Niger flowed eastward, but they in their turn had no idea where it ended.

Did the Niger perhaps join the Nile? Or possibly another great river, the Congo, of which nothing was known but its lower course and estuary? And where, in any case, did the mainstream of the Nile take its rise? Back in the early 1770s a Scottish nobleman named James Bruce had returned from a long stay in Ethiopia with the claim to have found the source of the Blue Nile in an Ethiopian lake. But the Blue Nile, English savants replied, was not the "true Nile"; besides, Bruce was a wild Caledonian laird who should properly be doubted, for what good thing


Cape Coast Castle, the Gold Coast headquarters of the Company of Merchants Trading to West Africa, was taken over by Britain in 1822 as imperial interest in Africa grew.

could ever come out of Scotland? That apart, Bruce had written copiously and worse still admiringly of the African peoples among whom he had lived. No reliable scientist, it was thought, would have done that.

All these questions about Africa's two major rivers, and many others of the same kind, were to be answered in two chief periods of discovery. Between 1797 and 1830 the course and termination of the Niger, and much of the general topography of the countries through which it flowed, were fixed beyond further doubt.

The Nile had to wait until the second wave of discovery in mid century; it was not until 1862 that John Hanning Speke at last stood on the brink of the Nile in what is now the Republic of Uganda. There, in a flush of forgivable euphoria he told his men that "they ought to shave their heads and bathe in the Holy river, the cradle of Moses." Others soon confirmed his claim, and took it further; and after that there was little to do, in terms of exploration, save fill in the details.

The men who marched into Africa on these journeys of discovery were a mixed bag; but they had certain things in common. They were all strong on optimism. It could scarcely have been otherwise, for they plunged into a "darkness" that was practically complete. Modern space explorers, by comparison, travel on well-charted routes to destinations securely understood before their journeys begin.

The inland Africa explorers seldom had the vaguest notion of where they were going or what, if they ever got there, they would find. Their clothing and equipment was almost always wildly inappropriate. They wore serge or other heavy woollens, tight trousers and long jackets, boots made for the drawing rooms of Europe or the barrack squares of northern latitudes. They carried with them far too much baggage or, more often, far too little. They all took fearful risks, mainly from the climate. They never had enough money. Several had no money at all.

Up to the 1840s they were all amateurs. Most were "men of no family," as the Victorians would have said. Many were half-pay officers from the lower commissioned ranks of an army or navy in which

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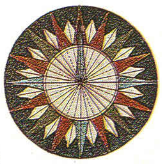
Land of Myths and Monsters



Until the travels of the first explorers in the early 19th Century, the Dark Continent was illuminated only fitfully by beautiful and imaginative – and often mythical – maps which incorporated snippets of knowledge and legend handed down from scribe to scribe over the centuries.

Medieval map-makers compensated for their geographical ignorance by peopling the emptiness of Africa with brilliant cities, fabulous creatures, headless men and hideous monsters. Many of their beliefs had age-old mythological origins in the classics, then being translated into modern languages. According to Pliny, the Roman naturalist, African fauna included "*pegasi*" – winged horses with horns – and the terrifying "*mantichora*" which "has a triple row of teeth, meeting like the teeth of a comb, the face and ears of a human being, grey eyes, a blood-red colour, a lion's body, inflicting stings with its tail in the manner of a scorpion, with a voice like the sound of a pan-pipe blended with a trumpet, of great speed, with a special appetite for human flesh."

Solinus, the Third-Century Roman author, mentions in his book on natural history "ants as big as a mastiff that have talents [talons] like Lyons, wherewyyth they scrape up sand of golde which they keepe that no man may fetch it away and if any man adventure, they persue him to death."

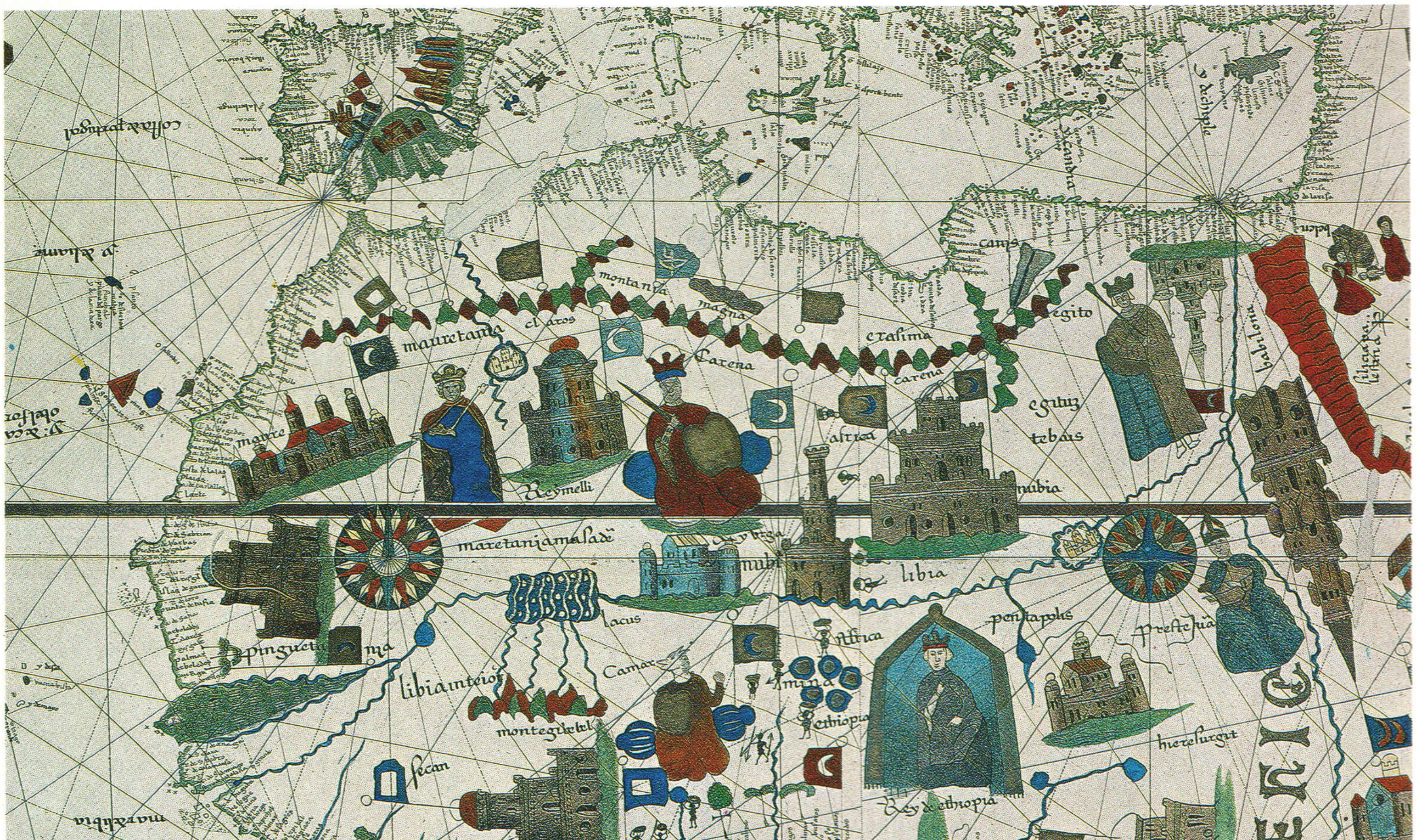
The native men of Africa were believed to be equally strange. Pliny records the presence of "Blemmyes" – men who "by report have no head but mouth and eies in their breasts." Even when the Africans were later credited with heads, they were dismissed as completely savage barbarians.

Charles Middleton, the 18th-Century English geographer, alleged that Africans' savagery, like the vast arid areas known to exist in Africa, was due to the extreme and unbearable heat: "The barrenness in several places, the brutality and savageness of the natives and the ferocity of its countries evince that the rays of the sun are here so fervid and powerful as to dry and burn up the juices of the vegetable and overheat the blood of the animal creation, so that the first is rendered futile and the latter furious."

The existence of a Torrid Zone – the equator – "where the Sunne hath his way and keepeth his course, scorched and burnt with flames," is one thing that most authorities correctly agreed upon. Some, however, confused it with the Sahara, which led a certain de Monas to append a note to his 1761 map of Africa about the evolution of monsters there: "Scarcity of water forces different animals to come together to the same place to drink. It happens that finding themselves together at a time when they are on heat, they have intercourse, one with another, without paying regard to the difference between the species. Thus are produced those monsters which are to be found there in greater numbers than in any other part of the world."

The general attitude of 18th- and 19th-Century Europe to Africa was summed up in one of the letters that the Earl of Chesterfield wrote to his son: "The Africans are the most ignorant and unpolished people in the world, little better than the lions, tigers and leopards and other wild beasts which that country produces in great numbers."

The accounts of the bizarre creatures and the savage natives had their counterpart in the 18th-Century fables of the wealth and splendour of Africa's empires, based on travellers' tales of the African kingdoms which dominated large areas of tropical Africa. And the greatest magnet of all was Timbuktu, the essence of mystery. Stories of a city paved with gold, of a centre of learning and culture, spurred on explorers. When one explorer, René Caillié, finally exploded the myth early in the 19th Century he was indignantly refuted: the world preferred to cling to its romantic notions.


mauretania
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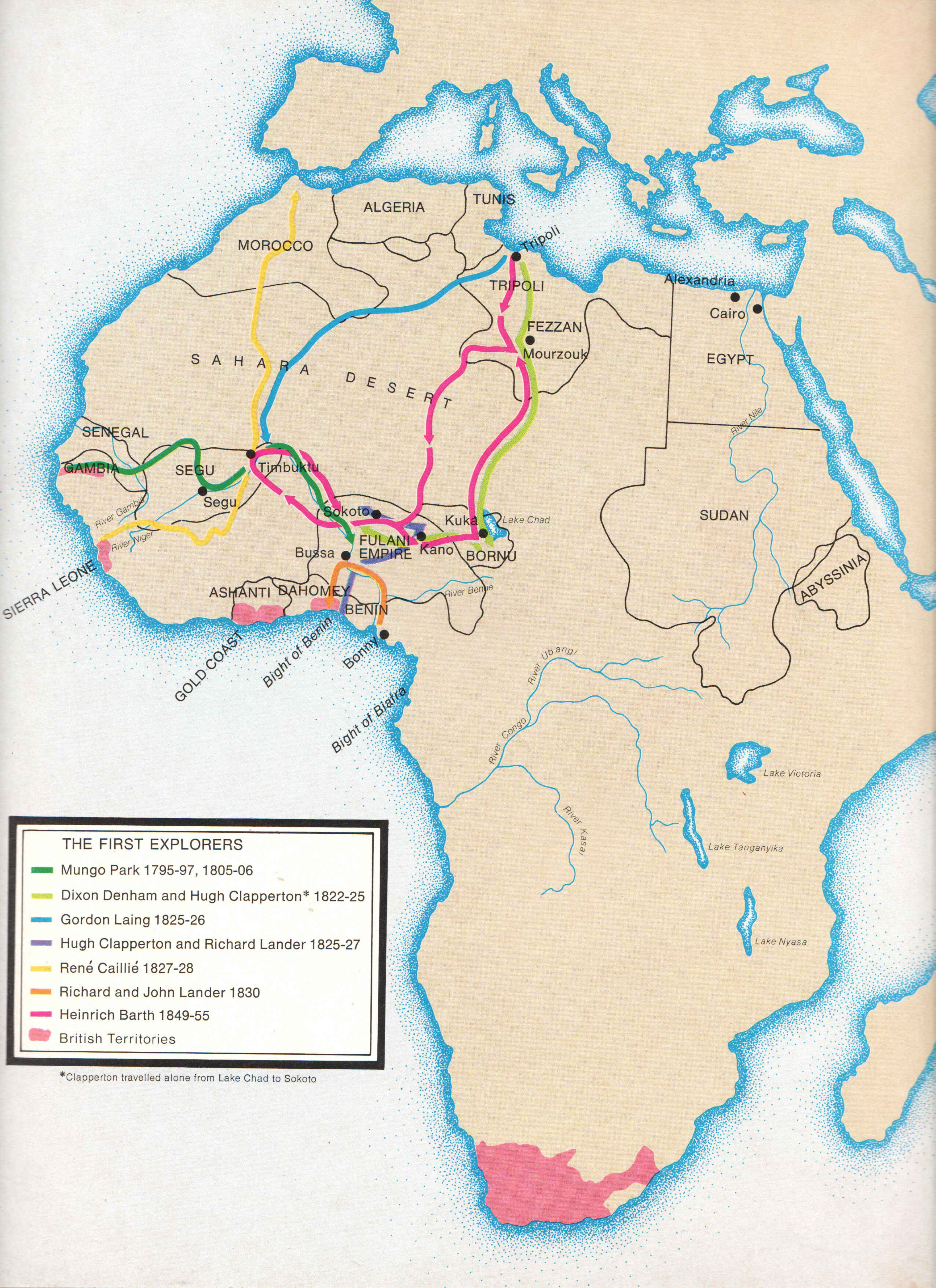
A 15th-Century map of Africa shows a largely mythical interior in which Ethiopia appears in several places and the Niger flows into the Nile.



THE FIRST EXPLORERS

🟩 Mungo Park 1795-97, 1805-06
🟩 Dixon Denham and Hugh Clapperton* 1822-25
🟦 Gordon Laing 1825-26
🟪 Hugh Clapperton and Richard Lander 1825-27
🟨 René Caillié 1827-28
🟧 Richard and John Lander 1830
🟥 Heinrich Barth 1849-55
🟥 British Territories
ALGERIA
TUNIS
MOROCCO
Tripoli
TRIPOLI
Alexandria
Cairo
FEZZAN
Mourzouk
EGYPT
SAHARA DESERT
River Nile
SENEGAL
GAMBIA
SEGU
Segu
Timbuktu
River Gambia
River Niger
Sokoto
Kuka
Lake Chad
FULANI EMPIRE
Bussa
Kano
BORNU
SUDAN
ABYSSINIA
SIERRA LEONE
ASHANTI
DAHOMEY
River Benue
BENIN
Bonny
GOLD COAST
Bight of Benin
Bight of Biafra
River Ubangi
River Congo
River Kasai
Lake Victoria
Lake Tanganyika
Lake Nyasa

*Clapperton travelled alone from Lake Chad to Sokoto promotion, at least after the Napoleonic wars were over, was next to impossible without private means with which to buy advancement. Several were doctors hard up for the next week's rent in days before medicine had ceased to be a trade and become a respectable profession. Later on it would be said that the British Empire was won on the playing fields of Eton. But its obscure early victories were scored on the kicked-up grass of academies that any sound Etonian would have blushed to recognize.

Some volunteered for African exploration because they lacked employment at home. Others went because they were ambitious men offended by the barriers to promotion in a Britain still dominated by aristocratic privilege. A few, and those among the best, answered the call of Christian duty, fervently believing that exploration could somehow help to rescue Africa from a pagan misery and damnation. If fame was a spur to many of them, it was a modest fame they sought: social acceptance at home and a "decent competence," a small but sure place in the sun of Britain's rising imperial grandeur and growing prosperity.

A few achieved these aims, and one or two of these were afterwards to figure high among the folk heroes of Britannia's pantheon of glory. Of those who survived, one or two also made money. But not many survived, and the money was never very much.

Even when they contrived to escape death upon their travels, it was rare for the leader of an expedition to get any more than a congratulatory scroll as his reward. And farther down the line, among the servants or enlisted men who went with some of these expeditions, the case was sorrier still. By 1840 the total of British servicemen lost in trying to establish the truth about the Niger had passed the 150 mark. Even their names are utterly forgotten.

The note of mortal danger was struck, and struck hard, from the very start: as it happened, by an American of Groton, Connecticut. In the first year after its founding, the African Association looked and found a ready volunteer in John Ledyard; not only was Ledyard willing to go at once, but Sir Joseph Banks already knew him as a fellow voyager with Captain Cook. Apart from that he had proved his courage and determination by an attempt to walk round the world from Hamburg in Germany. He had only got as far as Siberia but this could not be held against him since the Russians, finding him without a permit from their monarch, had seized him and sent him back again.

Ledyard seems to have been an archetypal Uncle Sam, wide-eyed and wide-minded, ready for anything, liking nothing better than to take a good sound kick at the conventions of a crassly pompous Europe. Ledyard won admiration even in London from men who could admire a character who "seemed to consider all men his equals." In a grandiose gesture, the Association gave him the tidy little task of crossing the Sahara from Egypt and then of "traversing from East to West, in the latitude attributed to the Niger, the widest part of the Continent of Africa." Ledyard proceeded to Cairo, and there he died.

Though disappointed, the Association persevered. About a year later, in 1790, they commissioned a 50-year-old Irishman named Daniel Houghton to try for Timbuktu, but this time by way of the estuary of the Gambia River on the far west coast. Houghton had married a wealthy wife who had scattered her fortune, and seems to have been happy to escape his creditors. Having landed at the mouth of the Gambia River, this rather pathetic optimist wrote bravely to his wife that he hoped to reach Timbuktu within a month but she was not to worry him "if my silence appears long." He forthwith vanished up-river, and his silence proved as long as the grave.

The Association now began to be dismayed, fearing that Africa could never be made to yield its inland secrets. But in 1795 Sir Joseph Banks heard of another volunteer from his friend and scientific colleague, James Dickson, a prominent Scots botanist who was one of the founders of London's Linnean Society. Dickson had a youthful brother-in-law lately returned from a long voyage to Indonesia and now eager to try his hand at African discovery. After Banks and his friends had seen him, they agreed he would be suitable. They did better than they knew. With Mungo Park they achieved their first big breakthrough.

Park sailed from Portsmouth in May, 1795, with orders to reach the Niger from the Gambia estuary and find out the truth about its direction of flow and its termination. He carried out the first part of his orders, though it nearly cost him his life on at least half a dozen occasions, and was able at the beginning of 1798 to assure his employers that, for the 300 miles along which he traced its course, the Niger undoubtedly flowed east, not west. But he had been forced to turn back at the town of Bamako, hundreds of miles short of the point at which the great river swings nearly 90 degrees from its northeastward course to a generally southeastward direction. He returned to England, having failed to reach the mouth of the Niger, and wrote an account of his remarkable journey which was published in 1799.

Not long after Park sailed off to the Gambia estuary, another of the Association's earliest volunteers, a young German named Frederick Hornemann, became the first European of modern times to cross the Sahara from Egypt to Tripoli, dipping deep into the Libyan desert on his way. From Tripoli, he dispatched his journals to London; then he plunged into the desert once again, only to perish in 1801 somewhere along the middle reaches of the Niger, leaving no trace behind. Although the Association may have been shaken by Hornemann's disappearance, it was sufficiently encouraged by Park's initial results to ask him in 1805 to try once more to reach the mouth of the Niger. He went, and after tracing the river's course for hundreds of miles as it flowed to the south, drowned.

Geographically speaking, Park's was only a half-success. Yet in other ways it proved a triumph. His two journeys were perhaps the most influential of all the early ventures into Africa, at least among the British, if only because Park's heroic courage and endurance set the tone and temper for most of those who followed after him. They also set a high point in personal modesty, not the least of this attractive man's qualities. Already in its

This map traces the routes of explorers who, with official British support, pioneered the mapping of West Africa in the early 19th Century. They brought back news of sub-Sahara native kingdoms of considerable military and political sophistication.

In 1795 Mungo Park (inset) became the first European to attempt to establish the course of the Niger. At each village he was greeted with hospitality. But after six months at Kamalia (right), the natives begged him for his own safety to return home.

fifth edition by the time of his second departure, Park's account of his first great journey revealed a traveller whom people at many levels of society could and did admire.

Even today, after a veritable flood of traveller's tales, his book remains among the most readable of its kind. Park himself wrote that it was no more than a "plain unvarnished tale, without pretensions of any kind, except that it claims to enlarge, in some degrees the circle of African geography." It was all of that, and also much more. Even in the broad light of modern knowledge, Park's observations of 1795–7 remain a valued source of information to present-day historians who study western Africa.

He was a man whose early background and formation stood him in peculiarly good stead for the tremendous challenge that he undertook. A small-farmer's son of the Scottish Lowlands, one of a large and penniless family, Park was framed in a dour frugality of manners and material expectation. Like others of his kind, he might well have trained for the ministry of the Scottish Church, and seems to have had a strong inclination in that direction. As it was, he managed to qualify as a medical practitioner, though with much sacrifice and difficulty.

Again, like others of his background, he was no respecter of persons; and to that useful attitude he added a wonderful capacity for penetrating beyond the exotic to the stuff of humankind. "Whatever difference there is between the Negro and the European in the conformation of the nose and the colour of the skin," he concluded after his first journey, "there is none in the genuine sympathies and characteristic feelings of our common nature." Not many of the later explorers found it possible to utter any such sentiments. But the great imperial century had yet to persuade Europeans of their natural superiority to Africans, and Park had no such notion.

The Association sent him off at the age of 23 with the same careful hand on the purse strings as they had displayed with their other volunteers. His material preparations were minimal; they would probably have been so in any case, given the nature of the man. Leaving the upper Gambia River for the unknown lands beyond, he had "a horse for myself (a small, but very hardy and spirited beast, which cost me to the value of £7 10s.), and two asses for my interpreter and servant." His journey was to last two years. But his "baggage was light, consisting chiefly of provisions for two days."

Thus equipped, he rode off into the interior. In the months that followed he suffered fearful troubles and misadventures, but most of these, as he wrote afterwards with a rare generosity, were nobody's fault but his own. He moved across African state borders without meeting formalities or paying dues. He persisted in pushing on when friendly rulers advised him to turn back. His medical training helped to save him, but so did his sense of fun. Africans liked him. The feeling was mutual.

Passing through the state of Bondu, one of three Muslim theocracies founded in the 18th Century but of which nothing was then known in Europe, he found himself besieged on one occasion by ten or twelve of the ruler's wives, "most of them young and handsome," who "rallied me with a good deal of gaiety on different subjects, particularly upon the whiteness of my skin, and the prominence of my nose. They insisted that both were artificial. The first, they said, was produced when I was an infant, by dipping me in milk; and they insisted that my nose had been pinched every day till it acquired its present unsightly and unnatural conformity." Park seems to have enjoyed the encounter as much as the ladies.

Farther eastward he was visited by a less polite bevy of women who "came into my hut, and gave me plainly to understand that the object of their visit was to ascertain, by actual inspection, whether the rite of circumcision extended to the Nazarenes (Christians) as well as to the followers of Mahomet.

"I observed to them that it was not customary in my country to give ocular demonstrations in such cases before so many beautiful women; but that if all of them would retire, except the young lady to whom I pointed (selecting the youngest and handsomest), I would satisfy her curiosity. The ladies enjoyed the jest, and went away laughing heartily; and the young damsel herself to whom I had given the preference (though she did not avail herself of the privilege of inspection) seemed no way displeased at the compliment, for she soon afterwards sent me some meal and milk for my supper."

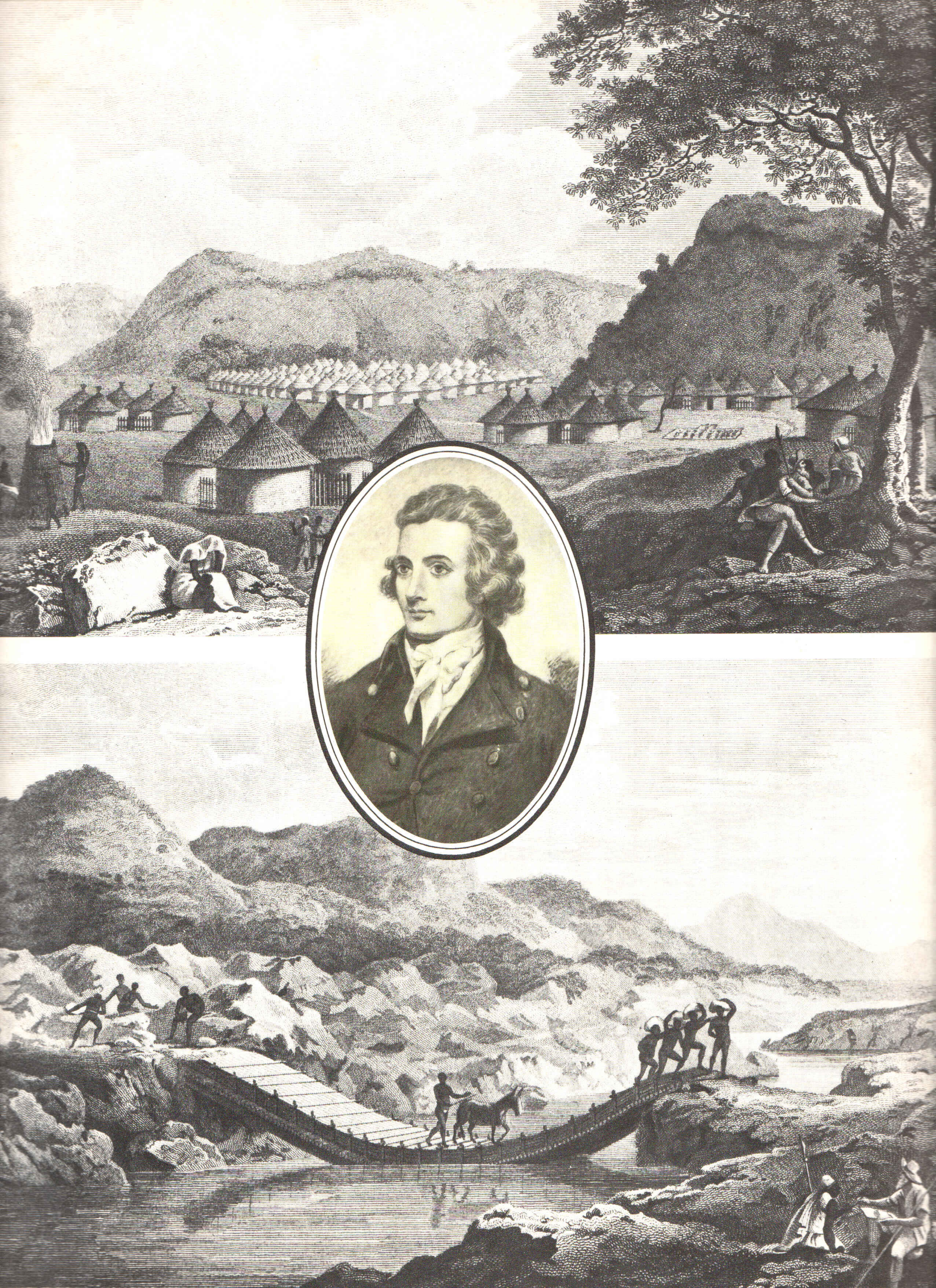
What Park might or might not have done if the damsel had availed herself of the privilege he does not say; in passing, it is interesting to note that not a single man among all the pioneering explorers of Africa ever had a word to say about his sexual adventures, though it seems hardly likely that there were none. In all such respects their books remain impersonally arid, even those written, as Park's was, before the onset of Victorian propriety and prudishness. Dimensions of daily life now taken more or less for granted are missing from their pages.

Yet Park's book is otherwise far from arid. Nearing the Niger, he entered a country long embroiled in dynastic strife and the coups of ambitious generals. Dangers began to gather round him. Only his never-failing courage carried him onward to the north-east. On July 20, 1796, he was at last rewarded, and "saw with infinite pleasure the great object of my mission, the long sought for majestic Niger glittering in the sun . . . as broad as the Thames at Westminster, and flowing slowly *to the eastward*."

He had broken through many daunting obstacles, whether of material or human making, and reached the Niger where it passed beside the capital of a Bambara state called Segu. But if the first great part of his quest was accomplished, there still remained the second. To go on eastward, following the river, it would first of all be necessary to secure the Bambara King's goodwill. The King lived on the other side of the river. Though worn down by hardship and hunger, Park lost no time in trying to cross over. This proved easier decided than done.

"There were three different places of embarkation, and the ferrymen were very diligent and expeditious; but, from the crowd of people, I could not immediately obtain a passage; and sat down upon the bank of the river, to wait for a more favourable opportunity." It must have been a moving moment for him. "The

Mungo Park, shown in the lower right-hand corner, sketches a primitive African toll bridge that was reconstructed after every rainy season of half-hanging, half-floating bamboo strips.



view of this extensive city; the numerous canoes upon the river; the crowded population, and the cultivated state of the surrounding country, formed altogether a prospect of civilization and magnificence, which I little expected to find in the bosom of Africa."

Meanwhile, on the other side of the river, the King had received news of this unannounced and unexplained visitor, and sent orders that Park was to stay where he was until the reasons for his journey could be clarified. "He therefore advised me to lodge at a distant village." Park says that this was "very discouraging," a typical understatement, and the discouragement increased when Park found that nobody would give him shelter. "I was regarded with astonishment and fear, and was obliged to sit all day without victuals in the shade of a tree." Park came sadly to the conclusion that he would have to spend the night up a tree, because of the large number of wild beasts which prowled at sunset and at dawn, and he was about to look for a suitable tree when help came from an unexpected quarter, giving Park still another view of African humanity.

He says that "a women returning from the labours of the field stopped to observe me, and perceiving that I was weary and dejected, inquired into my situation, which I briefly explained to her; whereupon, with looks of great compassion, she took up my saddle and bridle, and told me to follow her. Having conducted me to her hut, she lighted up a lamp, spread a mat on the floor, and told me I might remain there for the night."

She then went out to buy a fish for his supper. "The rites of hospitality being thus performed towards a stranger in distress, my worthy benefactress (pointing to the mat, and telling me I might sleep there without apprehension) called to the female part of her family, who had stood gazing on me all the while in fixed astonishment, to resume their task of spinning cotton."

It was another occasion when Park's knowledge of local languages stood him in good stead. And here again he adds a vivid little picture that suddenly lights up the scene. As he was lying on the mat, the family composed a song about him. "It was sung by one of the young women, the rest joining in the chorus. The air was sweet and plaintive" – and in this respect Park was no novice in judgement, for his youth had echoed with the airs of his own country's folksong – "and the words, literally translated, were these:

Verse
The winds roared, and the rains fell.
The poor white man, faint and weary,
came and sat under our tree.
He has no mother to bring him milk,
No wife to grind his corn.
Chorus
Let us pity the white man:
No mother has he, etc., etc. . . .

It made a picture in strange contrast with the reputation for brutish savagery that Africans already had in Europe and North America, and would continue to have among the people of those continents for most of another two hundred years and more.

Park never did get across the river. The King wished him well, and sent him 5,000 cowries "to enable me to purchase provisions in the course of my journey" to the east, but refused to admit him to Segu. The King's fears, clearly enough, lay in likely reactions from the local trading community who would certainly interpret Park's arrival as some kind of future threat to their commercial monopoly. Why otherwise should a white man penetrate their country if it were not to open the road to his fellow countrymen?

This was not to be the first or last occasion when a white explorer would run into the opposition of an African business community. Park did not blame the King. "He argued probably, as my guide argued: who, when he was told that I had come from a great distance, and through many dangers, to behold the Joliba river (the Niger), naturally inquired, if there were no rivers in my own country, and whether one river was not like another." To the guide it was clear that some other but unadmitted motive must lie behind the making of so exacting a journey.

Helped by the King's cowries, a good currency in those parts, Park went on eastward but was soon obliged to turn back for utter want of guides or food. Penniless by now – or rather cowrieless – he was in dire straits, and his journey back to the Gambia proved long and terrible. When at last he got there, towards the end of 1797, he found himself in a fresh difficulty. Britannia – despite the rousing song – did not at that moment rule the waves; as a matter of fact the French fleet was putting in its own strong claim for naval superiority and the thinly-spread Royal Navy was unable to provide protection for merchant vessels in that part of the world. So Park found no British shipping at the mouth of the Gambia nor hope of any. In the end he was obliged to go home on a North American slaver via the West Indies.

In London, Mungo Park was fêted with some glee. It was ten years since the foundation of the African Association. In that time the Association had fathered nothing but chaos, to show for all the expense and all the earnest talk. Banks proudly showed off his protégé at dinner parties and at his breakfast discussions. Park submitted to the adulation with a sullen resignation. Like many explorers after him, he must have found the transition from the rigours and adventurers of the wilderness to the trivialities of society an irritating one. But he had one great consolation: the publication of his account was an immediate success, due both to its transparent honesty and to its brevity. It became a classic.

Before returning home to Scotland, Park attended a general meeting of the Association, during which Banks presented him with great satisfaction as a kind of prize exhibit: "We have already, by Mr. Park's means, opened a gate into the interior of Africa, into which it is easy for every nation to enter and to extend its commerce. . . . A detachment of 500 chosen troops would soon make that road easy and would build embarkations [boats] upon the Niger – if 200 of these were to embark with field pieces they would be able to overcome the whole forces which Africa could bring against them. The trade which the Moors carry on to the interior is always directed to the towns situated on or near the river – it is said to produce an annual return of about a million sterling – much of it in gold. . . . It is easy to foretell that if this country delays much longer to possess themselves of the treasures laid open to them by the exertions of this Association,

An 1818 cartoon portrays the embarrassment of a British explorer at having to politely refuse the offer of a native girl in marriage.

some rival nation will take possession of the banks of the Niger and assert by arms her right of prior possession."

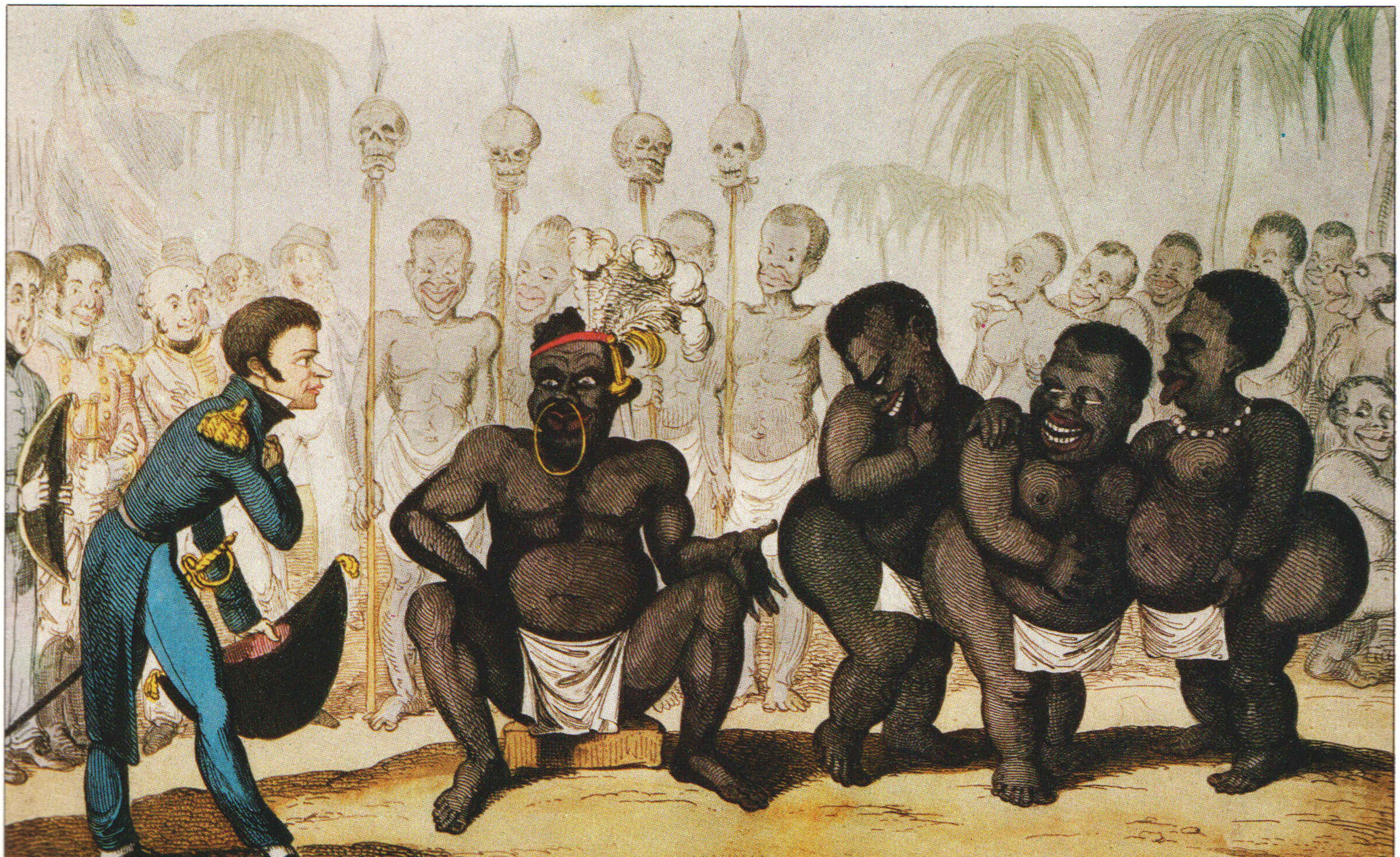
It was agreed that the government should be approached immediately about sending an armed expeditionary force to the Niger. The resolution was carried unanimously. If anyone had still believed that the object of the Association was entirely limited to the quest for knowledge, Banks's speech would have quickly disillusioned them.

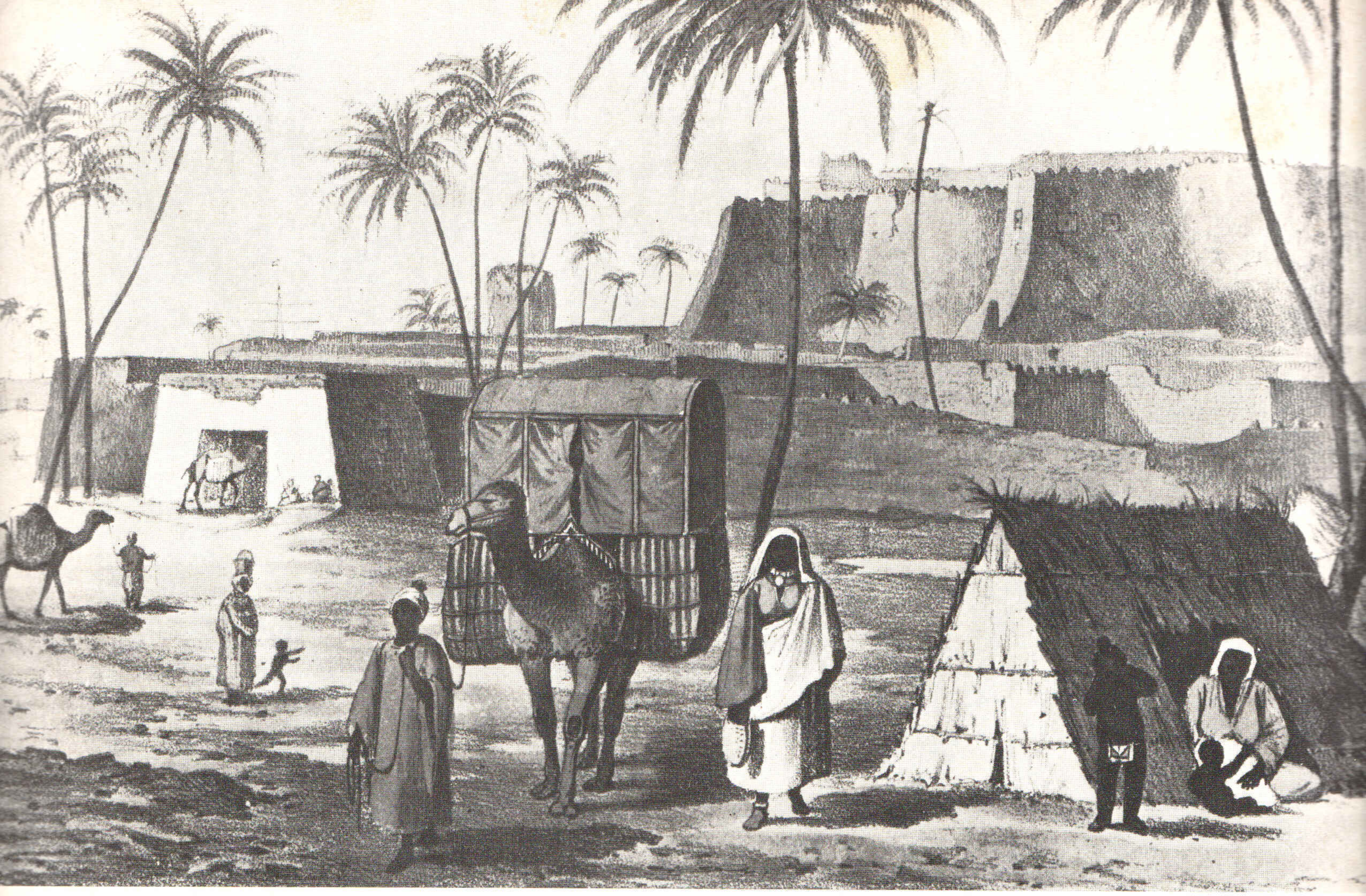
Park then returned to his medical trade, always hankering after Africa. After eight years, with the African Association beginning to play more strongly upon the diapasons of imperial rivalry with France, he was called for again, but this time in very different circumstances.

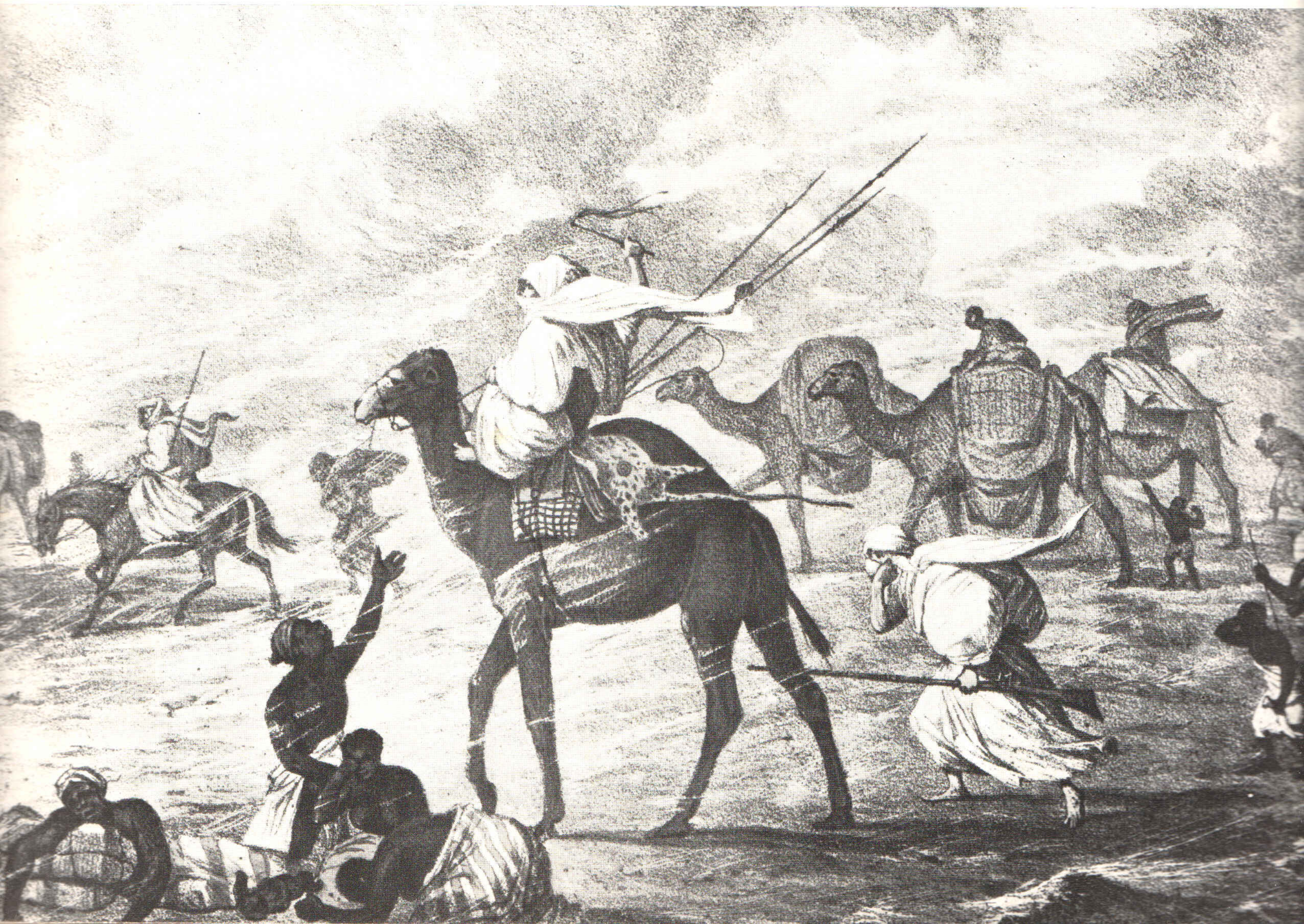
Now it was no longer only a question of exploration, but also of ousting the French from their footholds in the Gambia river. An ambitious expedition was planned with governmental aid, chiefly with the aim of giving Britain primacy on this pathway to the inland country. As first conceived, this expedition was to have an exploring wing of 260 redcoats led by Park, a military wing of 1,000 other redcoats designed to drive out the French, and naval support in the form of four gunboats, a hospital ship, and some smaller vessels. When it came to the point, a hard-pressed government could not find the money to buy all the equipment and pay all the men originally deemed necessary, but a comparatively formidable expedition was none the less set under way.

Park had 43 European companions, most of them soldiers, together with some carpenters and other artisans who were to build river boats for a voyage down the Niger to its unknown termination. Everything went wrong. Most of Park's companions died of fever long before the Niger was reached. When the remnants of the party at length reached the river they found that hostility was now aroused to a pitch of fury by this second journey for it was seen as a serious attempt to undermine local control by local rulers of inland commerce. Near the end of his tether, Park none the less held on. "I shall set sail to the East," he wrote in a final letter that eventually reached London after his death, "with the fixed resolution to discover the termination of the Niger or perish in the attempt."

Painfully, he began to build a boat. Of four carpenters who had left the Gambia with him, the only one still alive was on his deathbed. Two other European survivors were almost as helpless. With the single remaining redcoat Park put together a 40-foot craft from discarded Niger canoes found rotting on the bank. It took them 18 days. Then Park hoisted the Union Jack, embarked with his four surviving companions, one of whom was no longer in his right mind, and four African servants. Weeks later they came to grief in hostilities which flared near Bussa, now in north-western Nigeria; all of them died except one African who managed to escape. This man's account of the tragedy was recovered by another African and brought to London ⚜







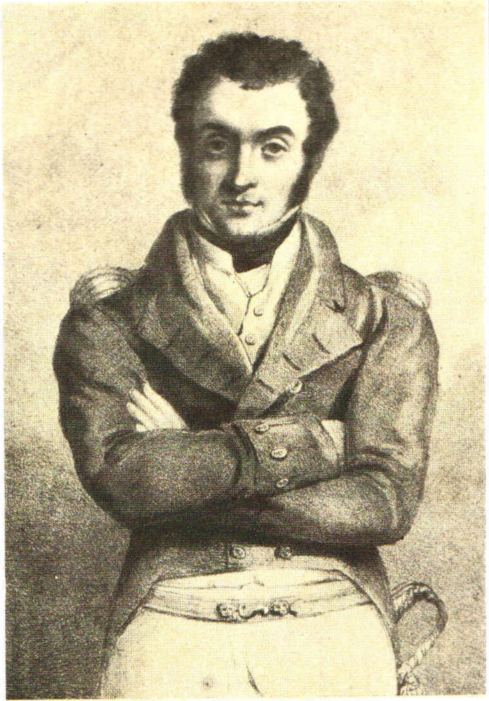
While in Mourzouk, George Lyon sketched this scene of a camel carrying women secluded in *purdah* past the houses and huts beneath the immense walls of an Arab castle.

Two of the Forgotten Men

Among the African explorers were many whose names are now forgotten – courageous men who were unable to reach their goal, men whose discoveries provided no new knowledge, and adventurers who simply failed to return.

Few of these unfortunates left a good record of their travels. But George Francis Lyon, who penetrated Fezzan – now Libya – in 1818, did. Captain Lyon's entry into the field of exploration was almost accidental. On a visit to Malta, he met a "Mr. Ritchie – a gentleman of great science and ability," who was waiting on the island for a companion to join him in an expedition to Africa. The companion never arrived and Lyon eagerly offered his services.

The expedition was one of the first to be sponsored by the British government to settle the vexed question of the source of the Niger. The two explorers left Tripoli in September, 1818. In his *Narrative of Travels in North Africa*, Lyon describes the Arab dress in which they travelled, including a *sidrea*, "a waistcoat fitted tight to the body . . . pulled on in the same manner as the Guernsay frock used by seamen," a *zibbom*, a similar garment with embroidered sleeves, and a number of long flowing caftans.


George Francis Lyon

Blistering heat, stinging sand-storms and shortage of food made their journey through the desert to the town of Mourzouk an arduous one. Soon after their arrival, weakened by the journey, both explorers fell ill, Ritchie dangerously so. Within a few weeks Ritchie was dead and Lyon decided to give up the quest for the Niger. Instead, he remained in Fezzan and compiled many reports of the stories he heard of the Niger, of the Kingdom of Bornu and of regional customs. He even recorded details of the beads, then in fashion, and of the exchange rates: needles were a popular commodity "four of which," he wrote, "will purchase a fine fowl."

The extensive medical kit that Lyon carried created a demand for his services as a physician and in this role he compiled a table of prevalent diseases and local treatments. Liver complaints and enlargement of the spleen were both "frequently fatal," – not surprisingly since both were fought by burning the area with a hot iron. Blindness was treated by "burning the temples and putting pieces of onion between the eye-lids." The "fever and ague called hemma" was "cured" by a dose of "charms" in water. Venereal diseases he noted, were countered by purges of colocynth, a kind of bitter gourd, and washes of soda, to which Lyon adds the curt comment: "Effectual."

Lyon's own medicines were highly popular, and he was pestered by local inhabitants who came to him claiming to feel "ill all over" just for the pleasure of receiving some of his little pills, though "many of the women required a great deal of explanation as to how anything taken in the stomach could relieve a head-ache." A persistent request was from women who wanted medicine to make them have children; when he said he had nothing to give them, they did not believe him, thinking he preferred to keep the secret for himself. One old man of 80, with a back bent double with age, came to him for a rejuvenating liniment to "strengthen his back which he said, was becoming very inconvenient to him."

Lyon returned to Tripoli in March, 1820. His explorations had added nothing to current knowledge of the Niger, though he was firmly convinced from his conversation with African travellers that the Niger and the Nile were one. As an explorer he was a failure, but the geographical gossip which Lyon brought back did at least keep the Niger controversy alive by stirring the armchair geographers at home to further speculation about a problem which was to be solved only ten years later by the Lander brothers.

The search to unlock the mysteries of the Niger was not the only magnet to draw explorers to Africa. The city of Timbuktu had an overpowering – and often fatal – attraction for many, among them Gordon Laing, a schoolmaster turned soldier, one of the little-known explorers who never returned.

Laing's grandly named "Timbuktu Mission" arrived at Tripoli in 1825. There the British consul, Hanmer Warrington, alarmed at the explorer's wan and sickly appearance, commented ominously: "He is both gentlemanly and clever, and certainly appears most zealous in the cause he has undertaken, although I fear the delicate state of his health will not carry him through his arduous task." Laing, however, was determined to be the first European to reach Timbuktu alone, and refused to take a doctor with him. Pausing in Tripoli long enough to fall in love with, woo and marry Mr. Warrington's daughter, he plunged into the desert. "I shall do more than ever has been done before," he wrote to the Consul, "and shall show myself to be . . . a man of enterprise and genius."

Laing's journey was delayed by money wrangles, sickness and the deceit of his guides. Plodding wearily on his lonely way, his desire to reach Timbuktu remained undiminished by the delays he encountered. A year and a month after leaving Tripoli, Laing entered Timbuktu, and became the first European to have crossed the 2,650 miles of the Sahara sand from north to south. He had accomplished a really incredible feat, but the mud-built Timbuktu he had struggled so far to see was far indeed from the gold-paved Timbuktu of his dreams, and only days after reaching his goal Laing was murdered. He had suffered and endured more than perhaps any other explorer, yet because his discoveries were not major ones, he failed in his main aim, which was "to rescue my name from oblivion."

Lyon's sketches included one of a terrible sand-storm. Gordon Laing, too, often had to endure storms like this in his epic journey southward across the Sahara Desert.

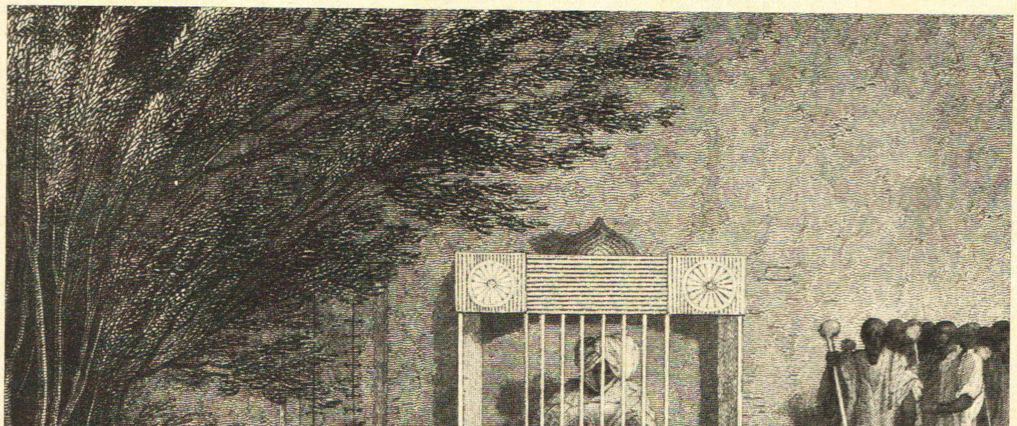
TO THE "SINK OF AFRICA"

The ancient African kingdom of Bornu on Lake Chad was the goal of a British government expedition in 1822 to test the theory that the lake was the source of the Niger. Three carefully selected explorers were chosen: Dixon Denham, a major and veteran of Waterloo, Hugh Clapperton, a brawny naval officer and Walter Oudney, a doctor.

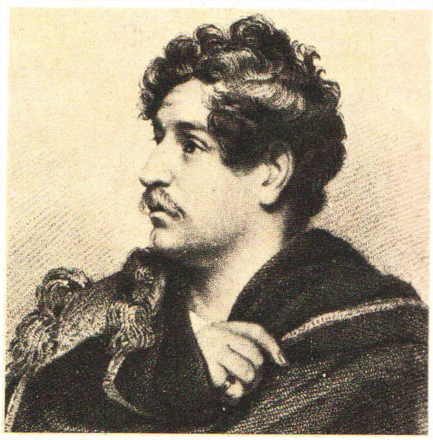
"We were the first English travelers," wrote Denham, "who had determined to travel in our real characters as Britons and Christians and to wear our English dress: the buttons on our waist-coats caused the greatest astonishment."

Within days of their departure from Tripoli in November, they had all gone down with fever, but they doggedly persevered along the caravan routes marked "by the countless skeletons of slaves." At one place "were lying more than 100 skeletons . . . the Arabs laughed heartily at my expression of horror."

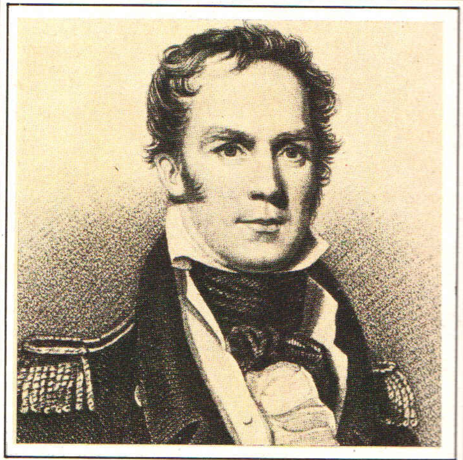
After three months of fever and scorching winds, they glimpsed Lake Chad – the first Europeans to have done so – and soon afterwards they were in Bornu. The small, weary band was welcomed by the Sheik Al-Kanemi, the power behind the ineffective Sultan. While Clapperton and Oudney pushed on westwards Denham remained in Bornu, writing and making many sketches, some of which are shown here. He proved that Lake Chad was not the "vast sink of Africa" that many believed and he even initiated trade talks with the Sheik, who wrote to George IV that "if a few persons (small capitalists) would come, there will be no harm."



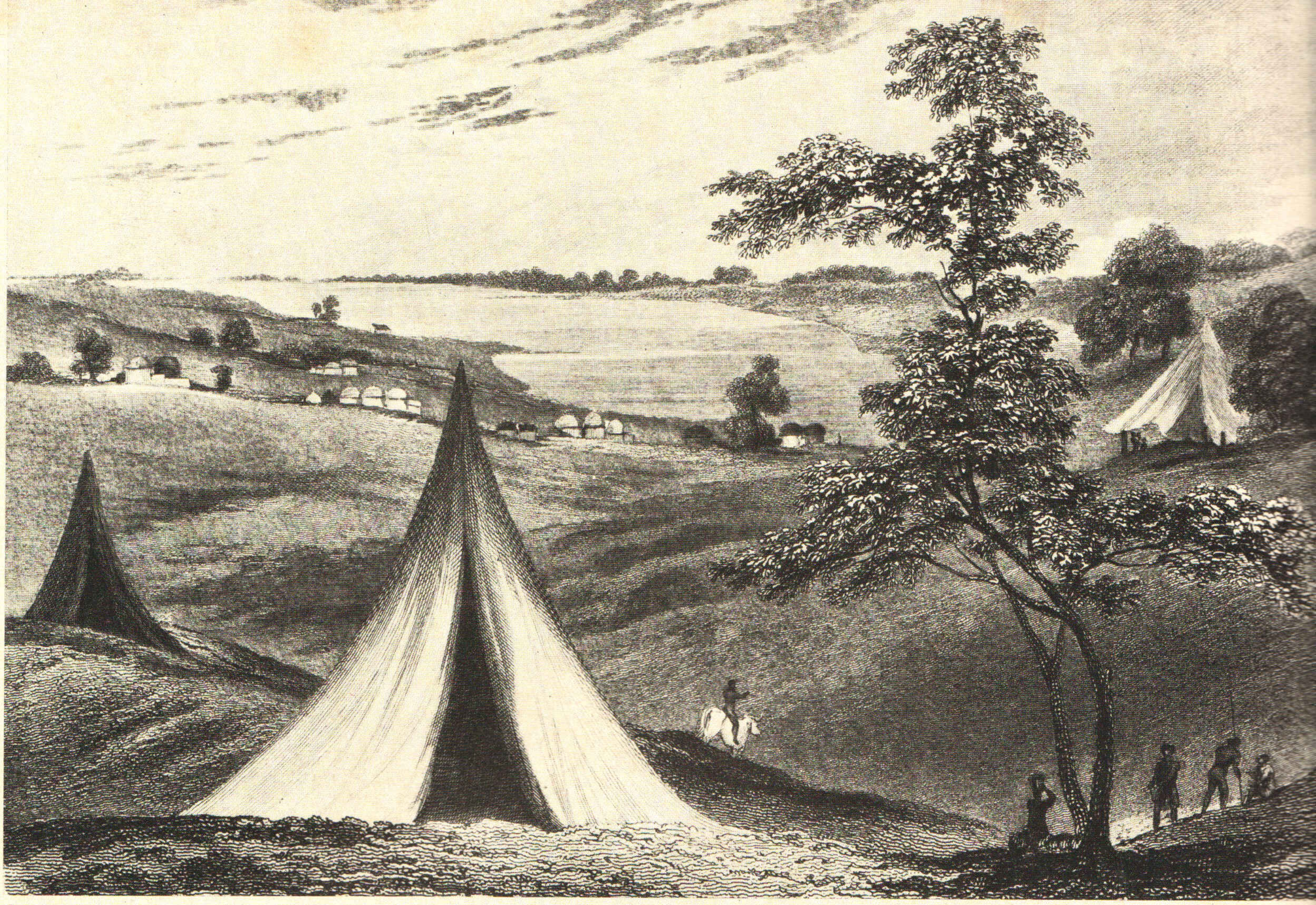
The puppet Sultan of Bornu received Denham and Clapperton seated "in a sort of cage of cane or wood" to stress his exclusiveness amidst the courtly ritual.



Dixon Denham, reputed at home as a womanizer and a good soldier, showed unexpected talents on his African explorations as chronicler and artist.

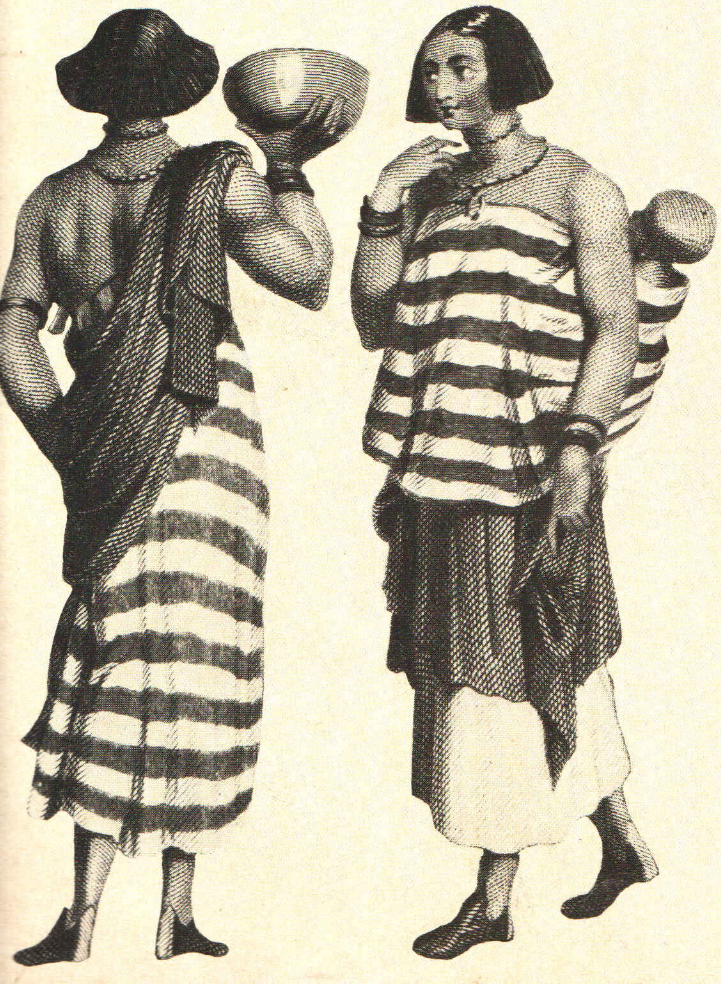


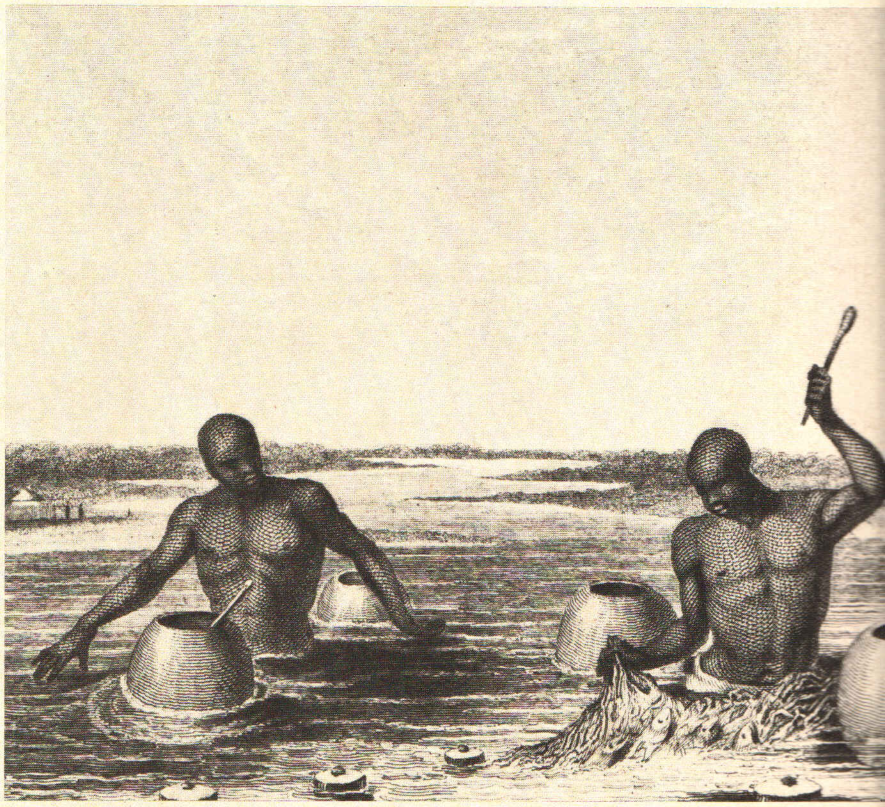
Hugh Clapperton used perseverance and charm to win the confidence of the influential and powerful Sultan of Sokoto, who ruled the territory to the west of neighbouring Bornu.



The explorers camped at Lake Chad, which they had at first mistakenly believed to be the "great object of their search," the source of the Niger.

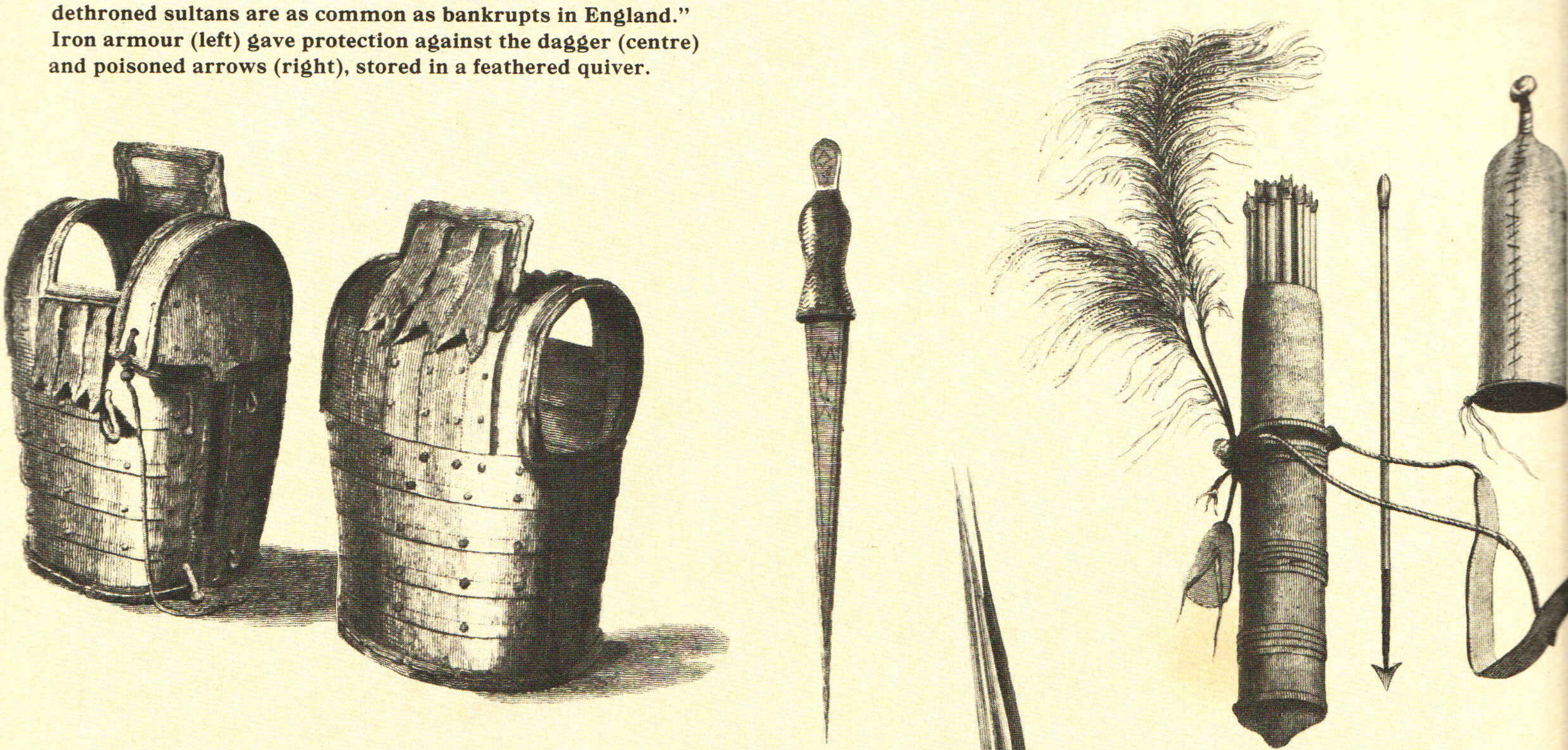
The women of the Shouaa Arab tribe, from which many of Bornu's top officials were chosen, struck the British as gypsy-like in their colouring and their appearance.





Fishermen straddle bamboo poles, which are balanced between gourds to support nets. As the men float downstream, they stun the trapped fish and store them inside the gourds.

Tools of war (below) were vital in sub-Saharan Africa "where dethroned sultans are as common as bankrupts in England." Iron armour (left) gave protection against the dagger (centre) and poisoned arrows (right), stored in a feathered quiver.



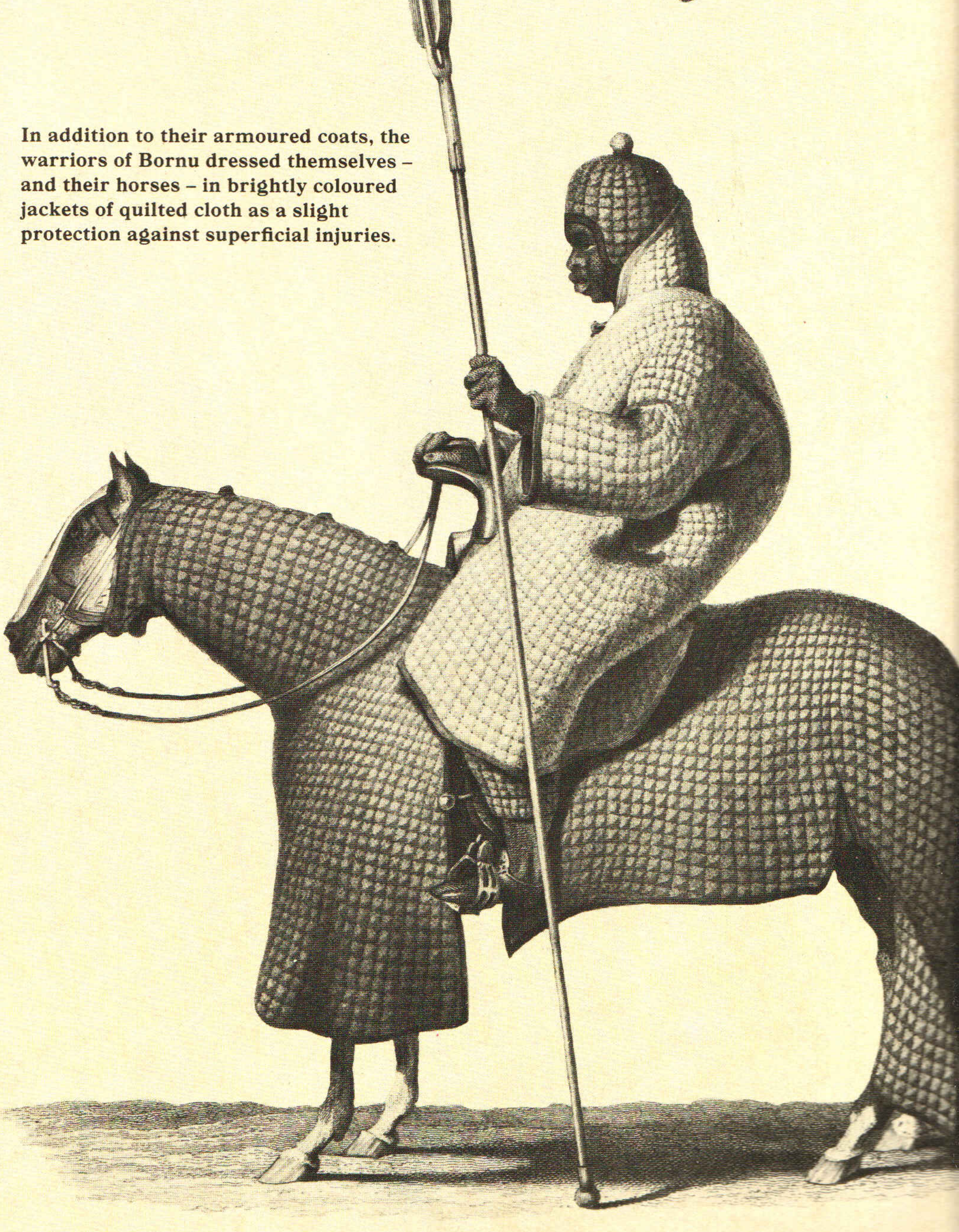
Soldiers of the Sultan

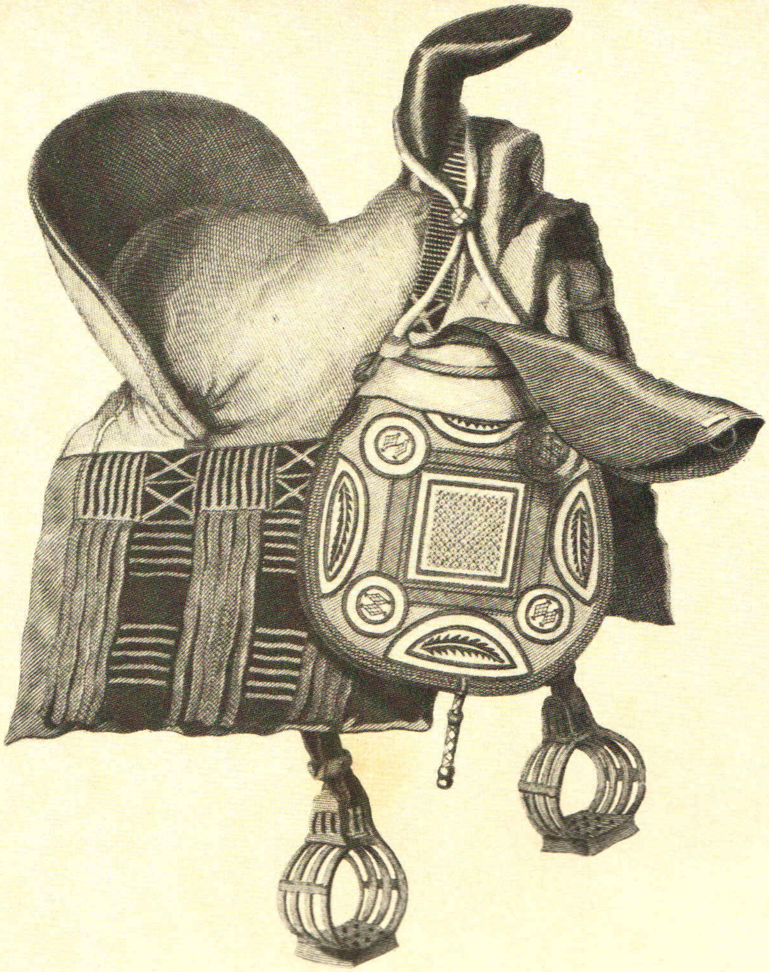
The colourful pageantry of African military power was demonstrated to Denham when he accompanied a slave-raiding expedition to the Mandara highlands, south of Lake Chad. "The Sultan of Mandara," wrote Denham, "was followed by his six favourite eunuchs and 30 of his sons, all being finely dressed." His troops "all wore their red scarfs or bournouses over their steel jackets." But despite their finery, the troops were routed by their intended victims and Denham, stripped naked and badly wounded, barely escaped with his life.

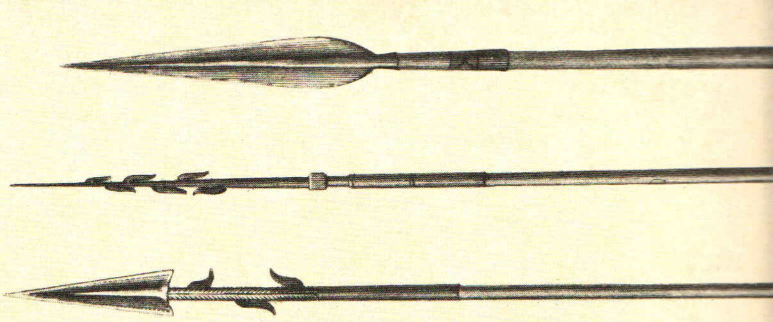
As compensation for his ill-fortune, Sheik Al-Kanemi later took Denham on an expedition to subdue the neighbouring Musgus who had refused to pay tribute. Although this cavalcade was far more impressive than the first expedition, Denham found the Africans, with their heads "hung round with charms, their protruding stomachs, and wadded doublets, ridiculous in the extreme."

To Denham's regret, the Musgus capitulated without a fight. Soon afterwards he returned to England with Clapperton – Oudney having died on the journey to Sokoto – so fired with enthusiasm for Africa that three years later he became Governor of Sierra Leone, where he immediately succumbed to fever.

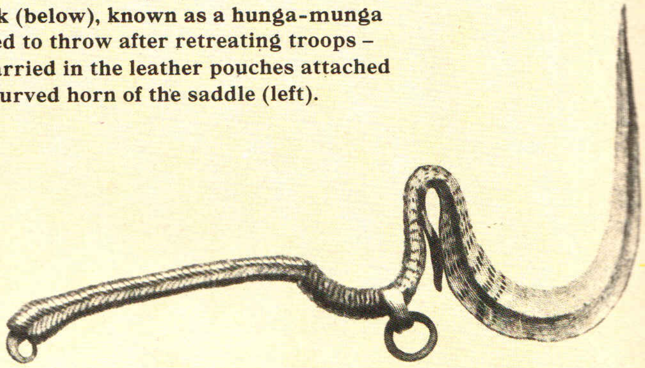
In addition to their armoured coats, the warriors of Bornu dressed themselves – and their horses – in brightly coloured jackets of quilted cloth as a slight protection against superficial injuries.







The warriors of the Chad area depended on spears, lances and viciously barbed javelins (above). Smaller weapons – like the billhook (below), known as a hunga-munga and used to throw after retreating troops – were carried in the leather pouches attached to the curved horn of the saddle (left).



On a slave-raiding expedition, Denham's native companions are greeted with a shower of poisoned arrows from behind a strong palisade that guarded the victims' village.

II. Unwitting Pioneers of Empire

The questions remained open: where did the Niger end? Banks and his successors turned their attention back to the trans-Saharan route they had chosen at the beginning of their enterprise. For this approach, the part the North African coastal city of Tripoli (where Britain had established a consulate in 1780) played the part filled on the west coast by the Gambian estuary.

Several new parties sent that way ended in by now familiar disaster. But in 1822 there came the great northern breakthrough. Major Dixon Denham, Dr. Walter Oudney, and Captain Hugh Clapperton crossed the Sahara from Tripoli to Lake Chad with a success comparable to that of Park's first journey. Then they separated: Denham went on southward to the Shari River beyond Lake Chad, and explored as well the powerful kingdom of Bornu (in what is now northwestern Nigeria); Clapperton went eastward to the rich Hausa cities of Kano and Sokoto; only Oudney died.

So it was that Denham and Clapperton brought back to England the first modern reports of strong and wealthy states to the south of the desert. Now at last the men at home who had long preached the mission of British trade with inland Africa felt themselves fully justified. The night of ignorance was still fairly black, but dawn seemed on the way. There beyond the desert lay kingdoms and cities with obvious commercial possibilities, if only sound communications could be established back and forth. These states, moreover, had impressive rulers who appeared amenable to argument. Clapperton, well received by Sultan Bello of Sokoto, had been deeply impressed by this "noble-looking man, forty-four years old, portly in person, with a short curling beard, a small mouth, a fine forehead, a Grecian nose and large black eyes."

A half-pay naval officer of cheerful disposition but little education, Clapperton had found Bello disconcertingly erudite. "He asked me a great many questions about Europe, and our religious distinctions. He was acquainted with the names of some of the more ancient sects, and asked whether we were Nestorians or Socinians." Clapperton was ill prepared to say. "To extricate myself from the embarrassment occasioned by this question, I bluntly replied we were called Protestants. 'What are Protestants?' says he." Clapperton answered according to the teachings of the Scottish Kirk – his background was much the same as Mungo Park's – but Bello "continued to ask several other theological questions, until I was obliged to confess myself not sufficiently versed in religious subtleties."

Fortunately, he was far better provided than Park had been. Ten days later he presented his gifts. These included a red silk umbrella, 12 yards of red damask, 12 yards of sky-blue silk, 20 yards of cambric, "a fowling piece, brass mountings, single barrel," but also, happily for the kind of man that Bello was, some books. Among these were parts of the Bible in Arabic, rather oddly a *History of the Tartars under Tamerlane*, and "the Koran in Arabic; *Euclid's Elements* in ditto."

The explorer, received by Bello in the wake of these gifts, found him "sitting in the inner apartment of his house, with the Arabic copy of *Euclid* before him. He said that his family had a copy of *Euclid* brought by one of their relations, who had procured it in Mecca; that it (had been) destroyed when part of his house burnt down last year; and he observed, that he could not but feel very much obliged to the King of England for sending him so valuable a present." It was a new and encouraging kind of light in the darkness.

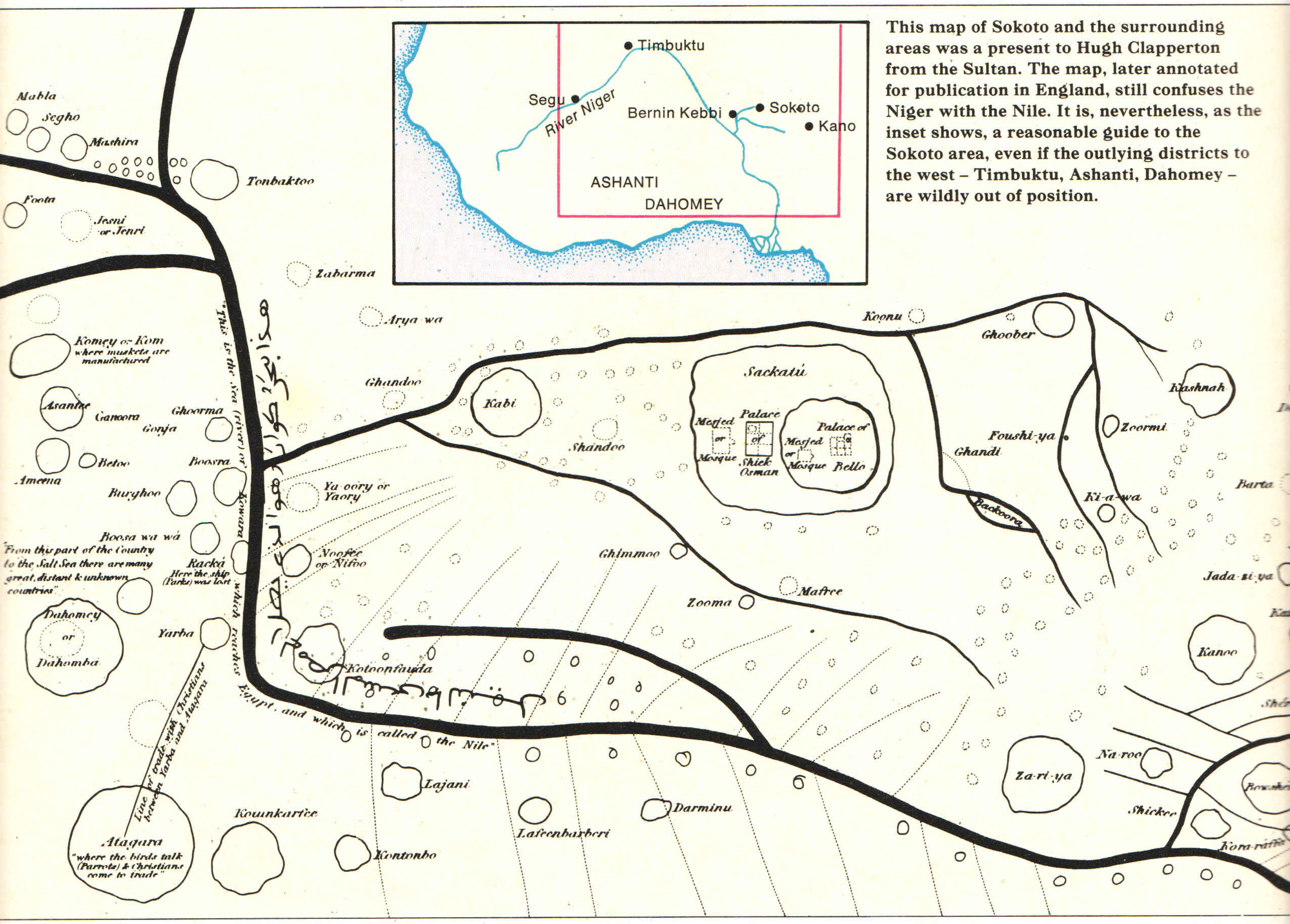
All this was welcomed in London as gratifying evidence of stability in the inland country where wealth was waiting to be tapped. Besides, Clapperton came back with more than information. He brought from Sultan Bello a letter to George IV that offered friendship. What he required, Bello wrote, was a safe and sure source of guns and ammunition; in exchange, he would welcome a British consul, would open the way to his kingdom from the west coast, and, as it appeared, would also prohibit the coastal export of slaves.

On the last two points the Sultan was offering far more than he could possibly deliver, but this the British had yet to realize. Eager to exploit a promising relationship, they sent Clapperton back to Africa in 1825, the year of his return to England with Denham. But this time his starting-point was the coast of Dahomey, whence he was to make his way to the interior. In his party were two doctors and a Captain Pearce, who was to be installed as Britain's consul in Bello's kingdom. Pushing inland, Clapperton soon lost all three companions, the consul and one of the doctors dying of fever and the second doctor in circumstances never to be explained. Clapperton himself got through to Bello's capital of Sokoto only to fall sick and die soon after.

On the basis of past experience, Clapperton's death should have closed the books on this expedition and added its name to the roll of African disasters. But Clapperton had a young servant with him, a Cornishman named Richard Lander, just past his 21st birthday and a cheerful easy-going chap "as broad as he was long." Lander's patience and resilience got him back to the coast and ultimately back home where he turned Clapperton's journal over to the publisher. Lander was received in England without honour. However, he did receive a pension of £80 a year, but this was granted only because the money had been set aside for another member of Clapperton's expedition; since the poor fellow had died, it seemed fair to give it to young Lander.

Back in Cornwall, Lander found an ill-paid job in the customs; a year later, now with a wife and child, he was earning £50 a year as a weighing-porter. Even with his pension it was not enough to make ends meet. He began to think that he had better have another go at Africa. He asked a friend of his, a senior civil servant at the Admiralty, to put in a word for him at the Colonial Office.

The Colonial Office was far from enthusiastic. Bello had proved a sad disappointment, but the officials were prepared to agree that someone should be sent, if only to answer the still outstanding question about where the Niger reached the sea. Anyone who went, however, would have to go for next to nothing. Lander's friend at the Admiralty reassured them about the young man, "no one in my opinion," he urged, "would make their way so well, and with a bundle of beads and bafts (cheap cottons) and other trinkets, we could land him some-


Timbuktu
Segu
River Niger
Bernin Kebbi
Sokoto
Kano
ASHANTI
DAHOMEY
Mabla
Segho
Mashira
Tonbaktoo
Foota
Jesni or Jenri
Zabarma
Arya wa
Komey or Kom where muskets are manufactured
Ghandoo
Asantee
Ganoora
Ghoorma
Gonja
Betoo
Ameena
Boosra
Burghoo
Boosa wa wa
From this part of the Country to the Salt Sea there are many great, distant & unknown countries
Racka Here the ship (Parks) was lost
Dahomey or Dahomba
Yarba
Line of trade with Christians between Yarba and Atagara
Atagara "where the birds talk (Parrots) & Christians come to trade"
Kounkartee
Kontonbo
Lajani
Lafeenbarberi
Darminu
"This is the Sea (river) or Kowara which touches Egypt, and which is called the Nile"
Kotoonfauda
Ya oory or Yaory
Noofee or Nifoo
Kabi
Shandoo
Ghimmoo
Zooma
Mafree
Sackatú
Mesjed or Mosque
Palace of Shiek Osman
Palace of Bello
Mesjed or Mosque
Koonu
Ghoober
Kashnah
Foushi-ya
Ghandi
Zoormi
Backoora
Ki-a-wa
Barta
Jada-zi-ya
Kanoo
Na-roo
Za-ri-ya
Shickee
Kora-raffe

This map of Sokoto and the surrounding areas was a present to Hugh Clapperton from the Sultan. The map, later annotated for publication in England, still confuses the Niger with the Nile. It is, nevertheless, as the inset shows, a reasonable guide to the Sokoto area, even if the outlying districts to the west – Timbuktu, Ashanti, Dahomey – are wildly out of position.

where about Bonny (in the Bight of Biafra) and let him find his way." It would cost no more than a trifle.

Tempted by this happy prospect of getting something for near to nothing, the Colonial Office called Lander in and asked him what he wanted. Lander proved suitably modest. He asked that the government should give his wife £100 to support her while he was away, and to promise him another £100 upon his return; otherwise he wanted only their permission to take his young brother John, and John was willing to go for nothing at all. This was more than fraternal affection on John's part: a budding writer who fancied his talents at travelogue, John thought that a visit to the unknown lands of inland Africa would be just the thing. He would write a book about it, and make his name.

The brothers sailed from Portsmouth in January, 1830, and were landed on the coast at Badagry near what is now the frontier of Dahomey with Nigeria. Their orders, reminiscent of those given to Park long before, were to march inland until they struck the Niger and then "to follow its course, if possible to its termination, wherever that may be." They carried out these orders with a total lack of fuss, bother or pretension, and within 17 months were back again in England with the certainty that the Niger flowed into the Bight of Biafra.

The subsequent success of John's book, written with a mannered gentility which had none of the sap and vigour of Park's journal or the blunt earthiness of Clapperton's square-toed prose, was not very great. But the feat itself was widely understood at its true value, and the influential *Edinburgh Review* said that it was "perhaps the most important geographical discovery of the present age."

At least from Britannia's standpoint, the *Edinburgh Review*'s judgement was not exaggerated, although the government, as frugal as ever, gave Richard Lander no more than his stipulated £100 and John Lander not a penny. But the Lander brothers were luckier than most, the London publisher John Murray bought the journal of their expedition for a thousand guineas (perhaps £15,000 or more in present-day terms) and so assured them of a "decent Competence."

The key provided by the Landers to the truth about the Niger happened to fit a door upon whose threshold British trading interests were already firmly established, and where the French were scarcely present. This door to the interior was the great Niger delta system along the coast of the Bights of Biafra and Benin, a coast studded with thriving merchant towns – Bonny, Brass and the like – that British traders had long regarded as their own special preserve. Now it was clear that the delta could open the way by river to the lands discovered by Clapperton and others. The impossibly difficult Saharan route could be abandoned.

Eager to encourage profitable "legitimate trade" and thus wean African merchants away from slaving, influential philanthropists added their arguments to those of merchants and officials. The Niger Delta should become the chief focus of British effort.

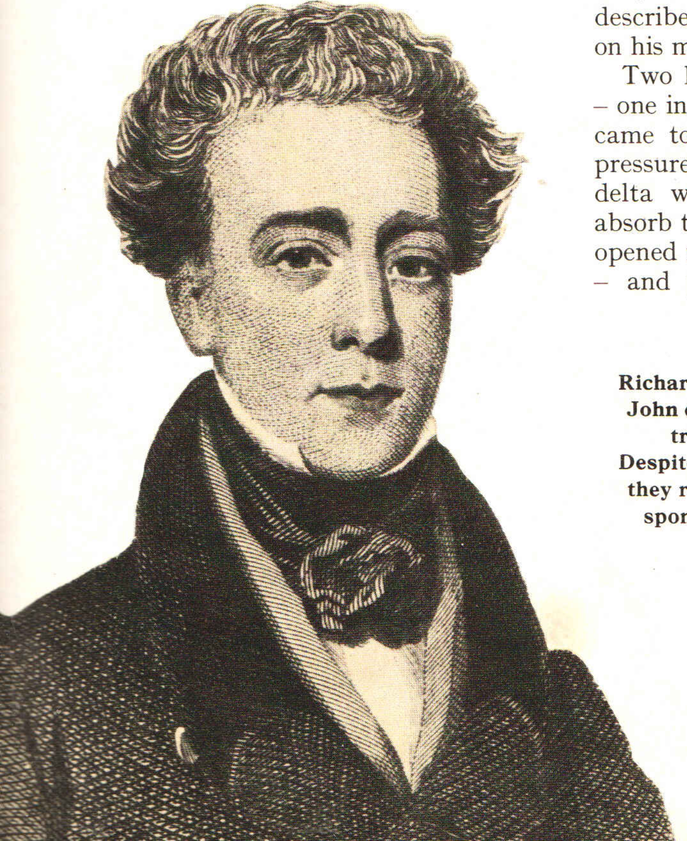
But now, for the first time, African opposition to European inland journeys began to make itself felt in a systematic way. African traders on or near the coast had no objection to European monopoly of the sea-borne carrying trade. But they showed a very powerful resentment when Europeans offered competition on land – where Africans had their own monopoly. Explorers and missionaries were welcome enough; they did no harm, and possibly might do some good. But traders were another matter. And since it was now patently obvious that traders were going to follow explorers, the African states whose commerce was threatened began to make exploring work both difficult and hazardous. They turned out their troops, called up their war canoes, fortified their trading towns, bought cannon as well as muskets, and closed the inland trails. Clashes followed.

Richard Lander, broader of beam than ever and still as optimistic, lost his life in one of these. In 1832 he went back to the west coast for a third time, but now as a leader of a trading expedition promoted by a newly-formed African Inland Commercial Company whose backers included powerful merchants such as MacGregor Laird of Liverpool. Lander and his companions were to go up the Niger in two steamships and establish a trading post in the far interior. Lander duly took his iron-clad ship as far north as Raba on the southern borders of Hausaland, and was welcomed by a potentate only too happy to be able to deal directly with European suppliers, thus cutting out the coastal middlemen. Not unnaturally, the coastal middlemen felt less warmly towards the enterprise. They decided they had better act, and act tough, before it was too late. In 1834 they attacked Lander and some of his men who were moving in again from the Niger delta in small boats. Game to the last, though badly wounded, Lander was described by an eye-witness as "cheering on his men" before he drowned.

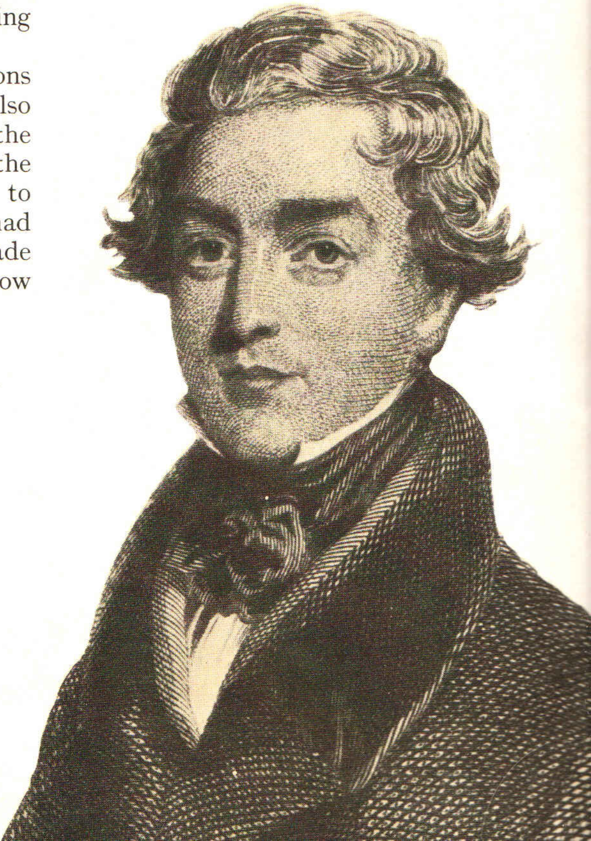
Two large reconnaissance expeditions – one in 1831–2, the other in 1841 – also came to the same tragic end. Yet the pressures for inland discovery from the delta were strong enough by now to absorb these shocks. If the explorers had opened new prospects for overseas trade – and powerful men in Britain now seemed to have the sanction almost of Holy Writ – theologians and traders could and would win official support for their efforts.

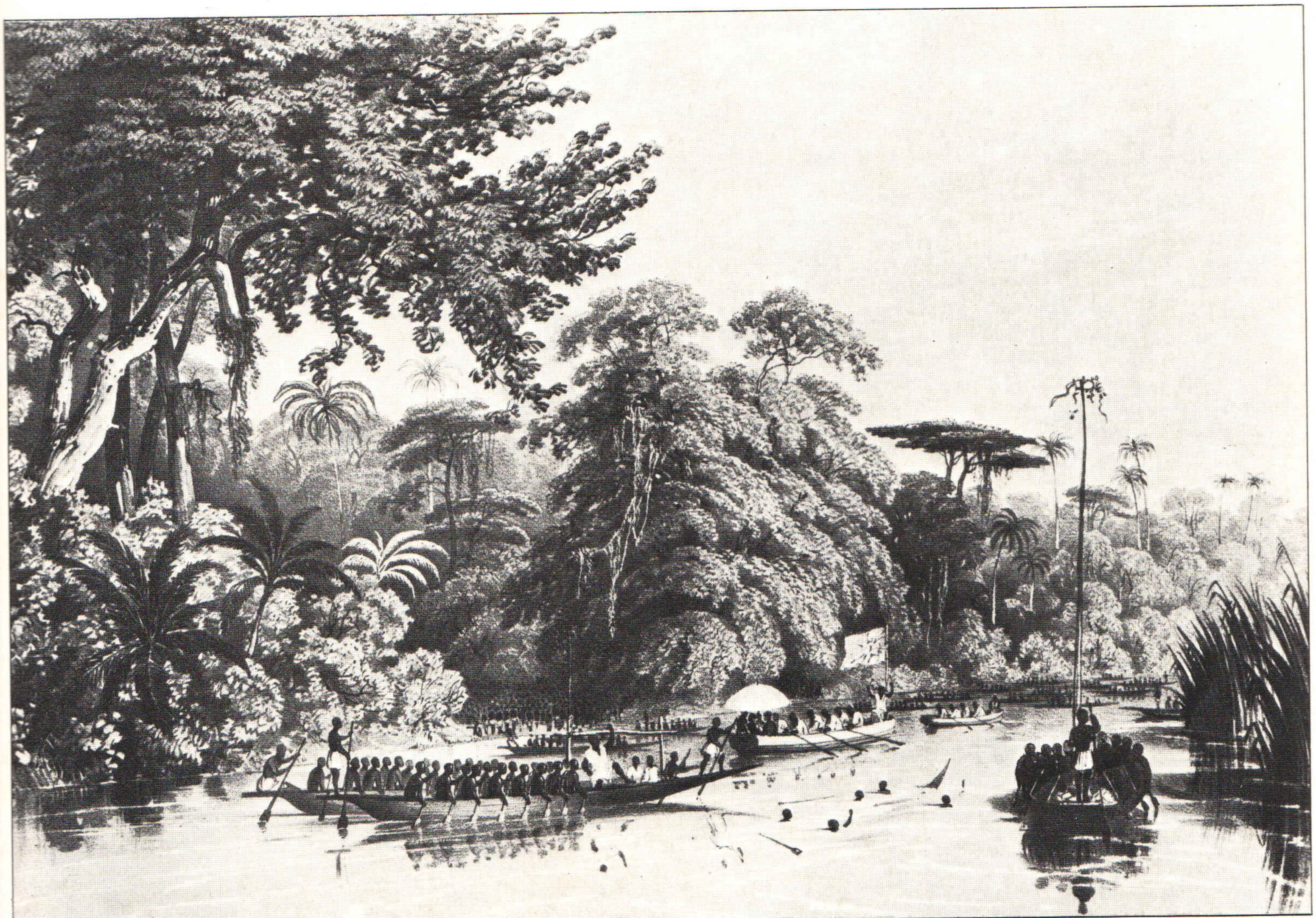
Merchants and missionaries pounded on the doors of the Foreign and Colonial Offices, and ministers, unable to withstand them, felt obliged to dip into the Treasury's pocket. And the Treasury could justify its spending by pointing to impressive trade and humanitarian statistics. The anti-slaving effort in the delta had greatly reduced the slave trade as shrewd African entrepreneurs moved into the booming palm-oil business. England, in the throes of smoky industrialization, was demanding this ingredient, vital in the manufacture of the better quality soap that factory-soiled Britain sorely needed. In 1834 these exports totalled 13,954 tons; by 1848 they stood at 25,000, or more than half the whole West African production of palm-oil. Commerce was doing its job; Christianity would quickly follow.

More than Christianity followed. In 1849 the Foreign Office, under Palmerston, yielded to merchant and missionary pressure and appointed a west-coast trader named John Beecroft as Her Britannic Majesty's first consul for the Bights of Benin and Biafra; in practice, his jurisdiction extended across the whole seaboard of modern Nigeria and eastern Dahomey. A new epoch opened. From then on, the process set in motion by the explorers became one of continual British encroachment on the mainland.



Richard Lander (right) with his brother John ended the Niger quest in 1830 by tracing the river to its mouth. Despite the importance of the discovery they received scant reward from their sponsor, the frugal Colonial Office.





Flying the Union Jack, a British expedition on the newly charted Niger is greeted so enthusiastically by the natives that one canoe has capsized.

One other great obstacle remained to be hurdled before the full fruits of exploration could be garnered: this was the continuingly high and even crippling death-rate of Europeans from disease. Not for nothing was the west coast, let alone the interior, known as the white man's grave; and the delta had long since proved itself the most capacious sector of that daunting tomb. Its reputation had become legendary, and was deserved:

Beware and take care
of the Bight of Benin:
For one that comes out
There are forty go in.

But in 1854 there came another major breakthrough. Dr. William Balfour Baikie took a large party of Europeans up the Niger and then overland to the southern Hausa states whose northerly neighbours Clapperton had reached 30 years earlier. Not one of these Europeans died. Quinine proved the answer. Others had long suspected its saving virtue: British naval crews, cruising for weeks and months on anti-slaving patrols in West African waters, had sometimes used quinine, though more in desperate hope that it might do some good than from any firmly based belief. But Baikie asserted that "quinine not only cures (African fever) but that it actually prevents (it)." The overstatement did not greatly matter. And though yellow fever continued to take its toll, malaria was sufficiently defeated; the death-rate began to fall.

Meanwhile, explorers returned to investigation through the northern gateway. Starting from Tripoli and heading across the Sahara, successive missions continued to fill in the blank spots on the maps of central Africa. Of those who went that way after Denham and Clapperton, none was as successful as another young German scientist, Heinrich Barth, whose expedition of the 1850s, undertaken in British service, proved of a historical and geographical value whose full importance has been realized only in our own time.

Barth was arguably the greatest of all the 19th-Century explorers of Africa. He

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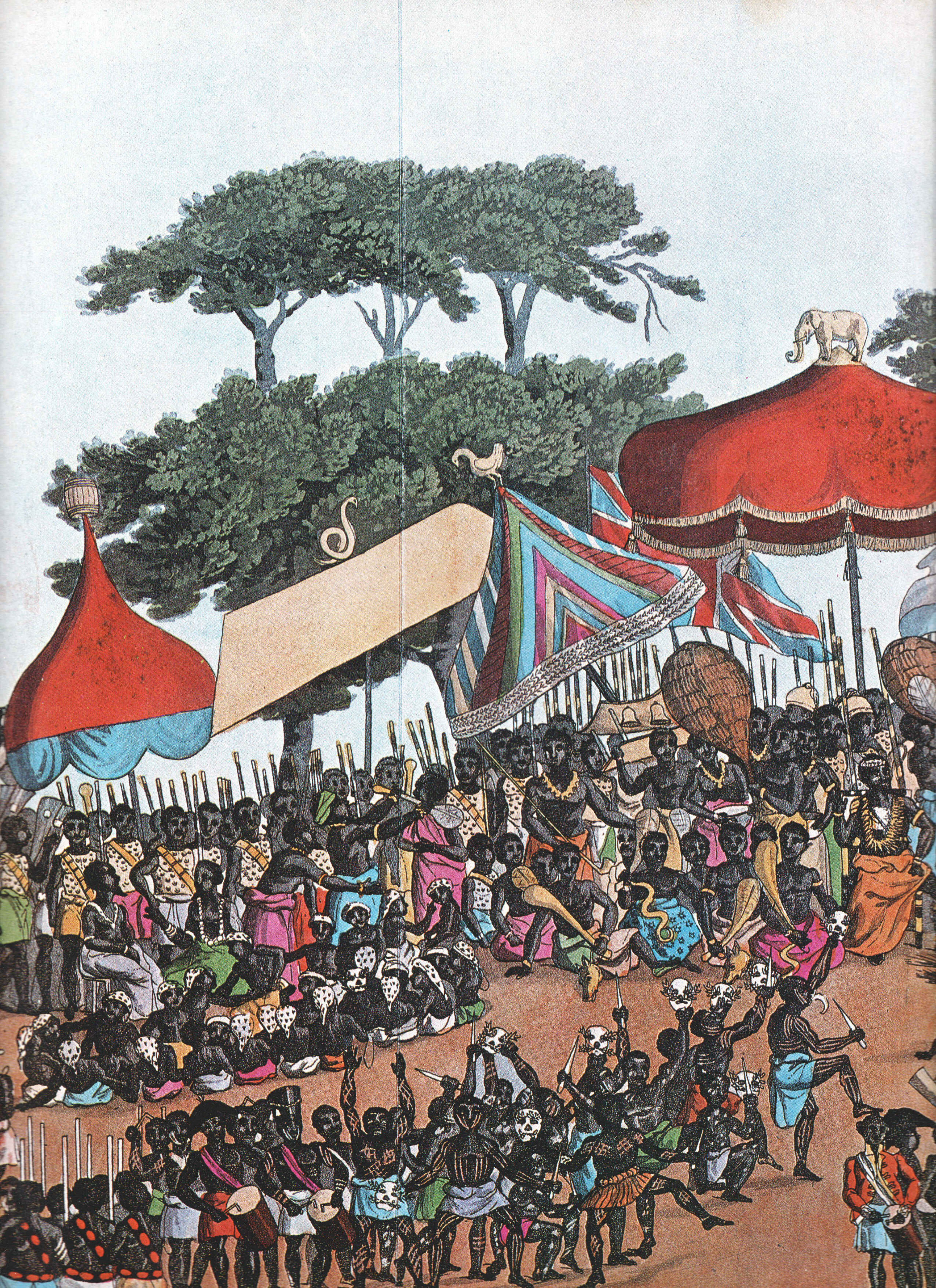
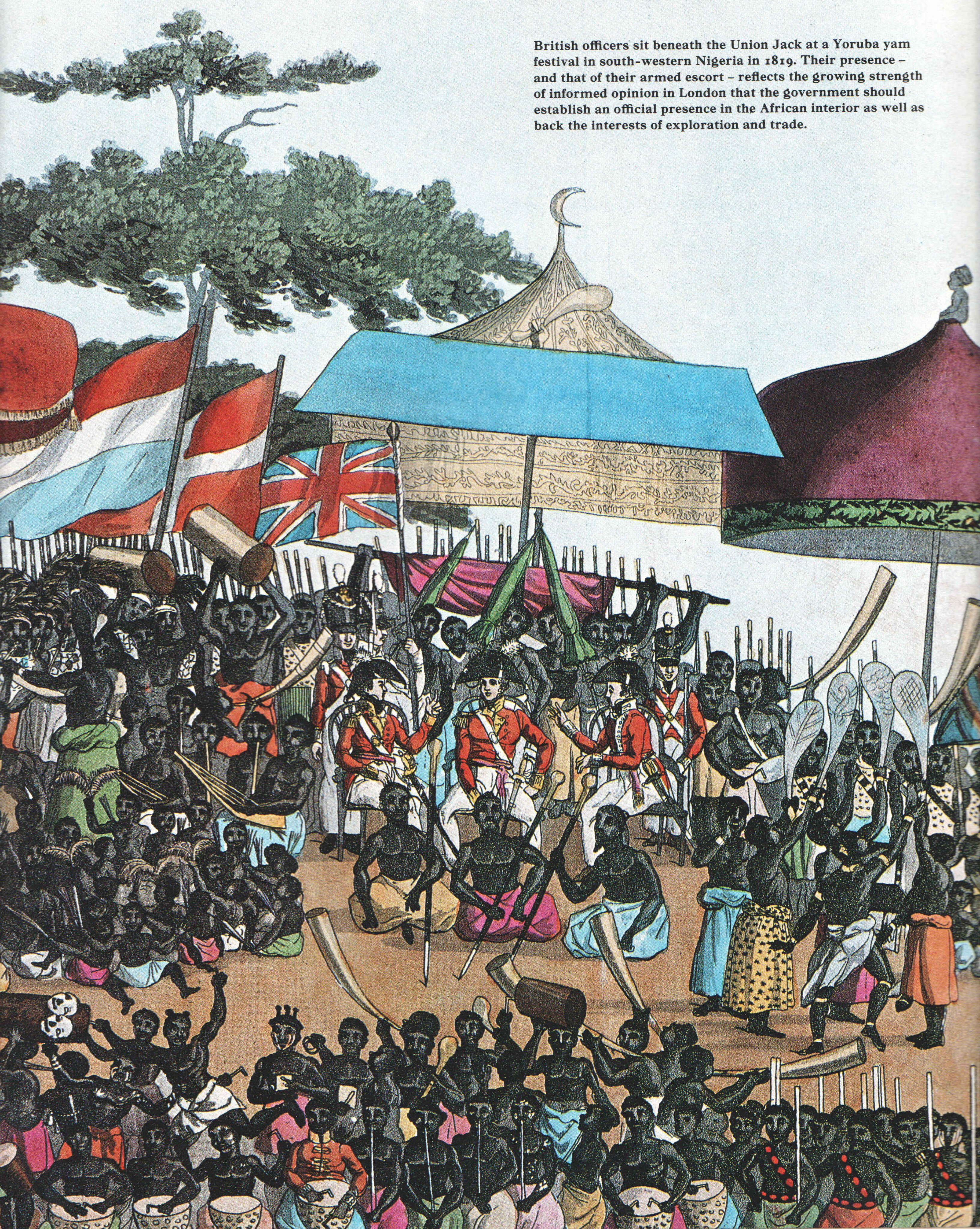




British officers sit beneath the Union Jack at a Yoruba yam festival in south-western Nigeria in 1819. Their presence – and that of their armed escort – reflects the growing strength of informed opinion in London that the government should establish an official presence in the African interior as well as back the interests of exploration and trade.

shared the courage and cool judgement of the best of the amateurs and adventurers. Unlike them, however, he had taken himself through arduous years of scholarly preparation and travel in North Africa. By the time that he left for the Sudan in 1849 at the age of 28, he possessed an intellectual and practical experience that none of the others could have claimed. And to round it off he enjoyed good luck. Not only did he persist; he persisted with success. He even managed to net a decent fee – £1,250 – for his journal, a feat that almost ranks with his remarkable achievements as an explorer and scholar.

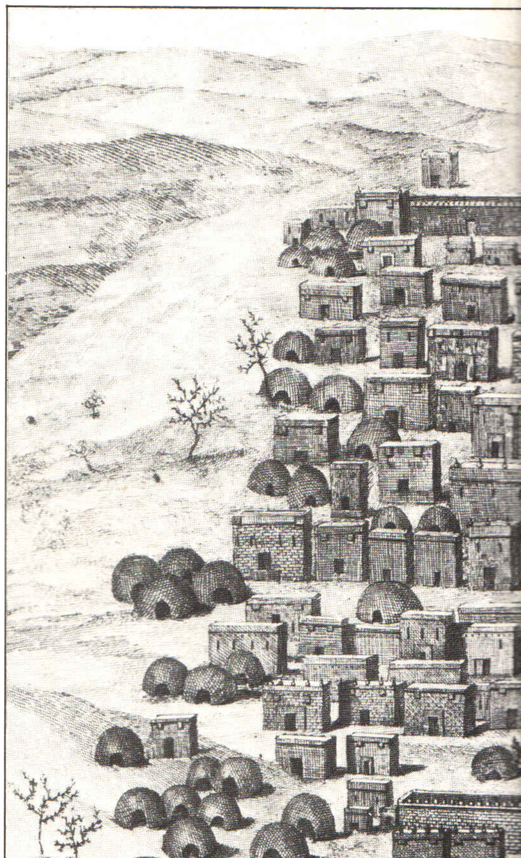
Meticulous, ever practical, astonishingly self-contained, this single-minded man spent five years in the western Sudan; by 1855, when he returned to England, he knew more about its regions and peoples than any other European would learn for another 30 or 40 years. In the sole matter of history for example, it was Barth who first saw a copy of the *Tarikh al-Sudan*, "The Chronicle of the Sudan," and recognized it for what it was – a major sourcebook of inland West African history, written in Timbuktu around 1650; this document still lies at the base of most of what is known about the distant history of those regions.

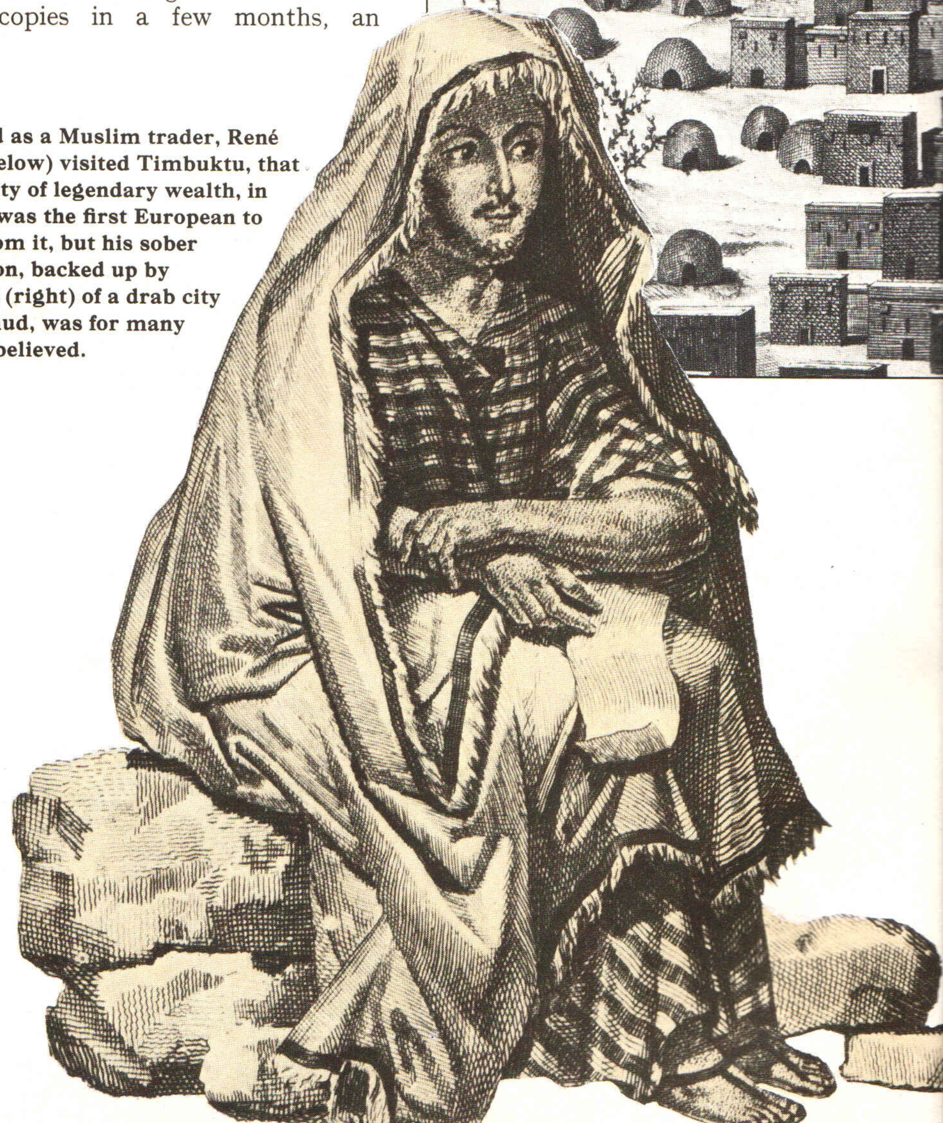
Though he wrote a generally charmless prose, and suffered with his fellow explorers from the stilted self-censoring restrictions of his day, Barth's qualities shine through his long and memorable journal. Whatever he saw, he saw clearly and widely and with a tolerant affection, being in this respect a latterday Mungo Park. Coming from a northern Europe where urban industrial slums were now proliferating and creating a new servitude for those who had to live in them, he found the western Sudan and northern Nigeria a pleasant change.

"If we consider," he wrote of the hand-manufacture of cotton cloth in the great city of Kano, "that this industry is not carried on here as in Europe, in immense establishments degrading man to the meanest condition of life, but that it gives employment and support to families without compelling them to sacrifice their domestic habits, we must presume that Kano ought to be one of the happiest countries in the world; and so it is so long as its governor, too often lazy and indolent, is able to defend its inhabitants from the cupidity of their neighbours, which of course is stimulated by the very wealth of this country."

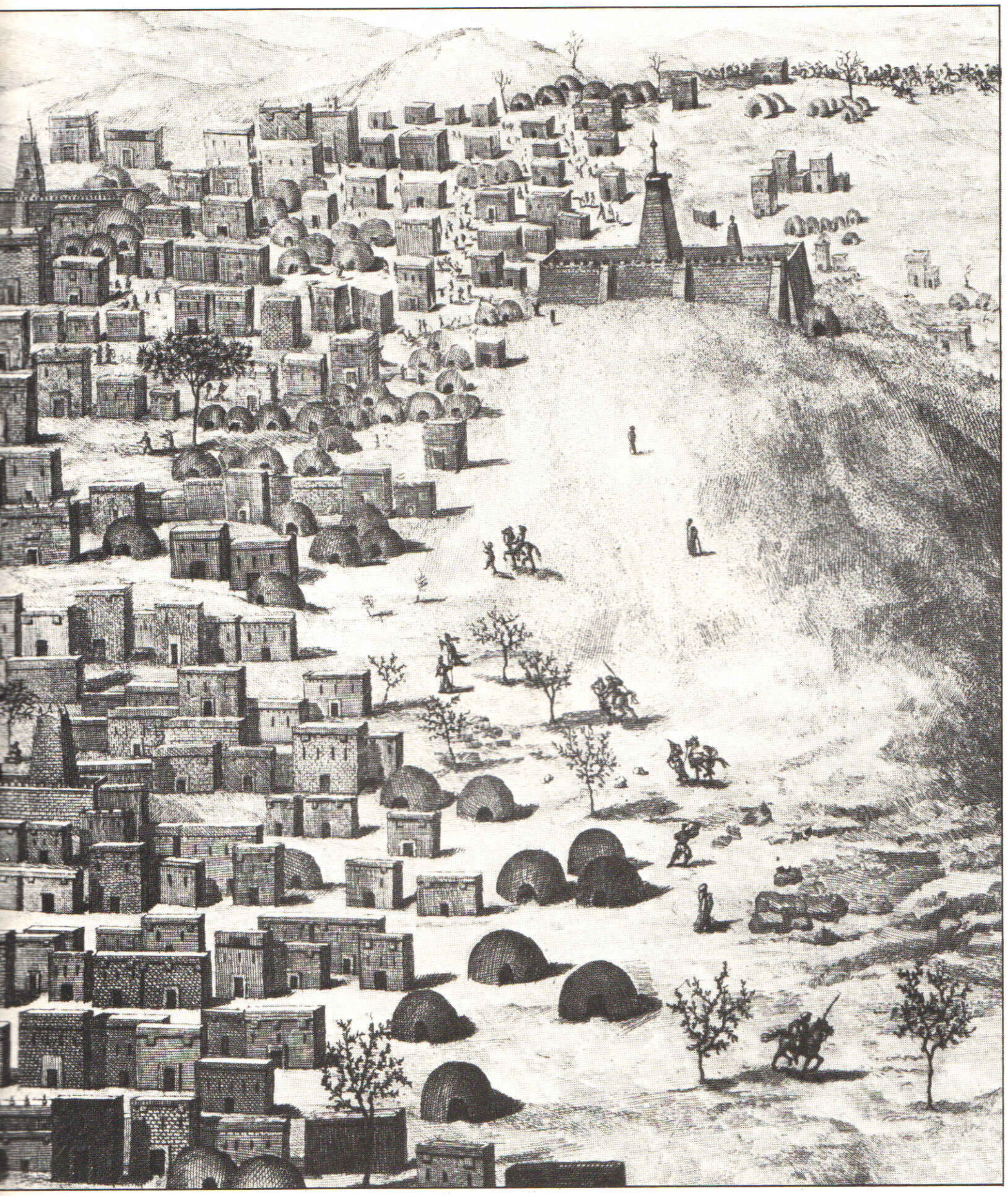
Unhappily for Barth, however, this was not the kind of view that could fit the general Victorian picture of "savage Africa." If Kano was all that happy a place, what could be the task of Christian charity? If trade was all that prosperous, what could be the merit of still more trade? Besides, there was the rather distressing fact that Barth was a German; worse still, a patriotic German who insisted on the point. Words were exchanged, insults suspected, tempers allowed to flare. Though published in 1857–8 with the aid of a generous British government subsidy, Barth's five-volume work about his travels proved a flop.

There is an interesting comparison here with the runaway success achieved at the same time by another traveller's book, David Livingstone's *Missionary Travels and Researches* in central-southern Africa. Livingstone's book sold 22,000 copies in a few months, an





Disguised as a Muslim trader, René Caillié (below) visited Timbuktu, that ancient city of legendary wealth, in 1828. He was the first European to return from it, but his sober description, backed up by drawings (right) of a drab city built of mud, was for many years disbelieved.



enormous publishing success for those days; Barth's, on the contrary, sold fewer than 2,000 copies of its first three volumes, while its second two, though containing a detailed and dramatic eye-witness account of "mysterious Timbuktu," could not find even 1,000 buyers. Perhaps it was not surprising. For where the effect of Livingstone's tale about the harried lands and peoples of southern Africa was to pluck the heart strings of sentimental Victorians and encourage paternalism towards "poor black savages," Barth's picture of proud kingdoms and prosperous cities could perform no such flattering service. If anything, Barth was found to be rather irritating. Here was Africa nicely settled in Britannia's mind as a region where good might now be done to a suitably grateful horde of natural servants, and along came this distressingly assertive German with a prospect of Africa and Africans utterly at variance with any such agreeable intention. Is this being a little unkind to the Victorians? The fact remains that Livingstone's name became a household word, while Barth's was soon forgotten.

Park, Clapperton, Lander, Barth: these were the men, with one or two more, who had climbed the peaks of exploring achievement by the 1850s. But there were others, of course, who reached the higher slopes. There was young René Caillié who crossed the whole of western Africa during the 1820s, and did it with nobody's help but his own. There was the gallant Gordon Laing who reached Timbuktu long before Barth, but never returned. There were Barth's companions Richardson and Overweg, both of whom likewise left their bones in Africa.

In the 1840s great East African journeys of discovery were made by two German missionaries, Johann Krapf and Johann Rebmann. And a little earlier a Portuguese expedition had succeeded in a memorable journey to the central Congolese grasslands, visiting there a powerful monarch who reigned over most of what is now the province of Katanga. Captain Antonio Gamitto, who took over command of this expedition when its leader died of fever, wrote a lively book about his experiences that remains among the best of its kind, not least because of Gamitto's persistent sense of humour in adversity.

Describing his entry to the King's capital, Gamitto recalls that "my uniform is a tunic of blue nankeen and white breeches; as a sash I have scarcely cords and tassels about my waist. On my head I have an otterskin cap, and from my side hangs a fine sword, whose metal sheath the climate has turned the colour of the local inhabitants. Dressed in this array and mounted on a donkey, I made solemn entry into what is perhaps the greatest town of Central Africa."

There he was received with much ceremony in a vast concourse of people and "some five or six thousand" warriors. The monarch, he found, was seated on a stool covered with a wide green cloth placed in turn on many leopard skins and one "enormous lion skin, offering a greater elegance and state than any other (Central African King) that I have seen. He is well built and tall, and has a robustness and agility which promise a long life; his looks are agreeable and majestic, and his style is splendid in its fashion."

Gamitto's journey was part of a Portuguese effort to make good their links across middle Africa between the coast of Angola and Mozambique. Later on, during

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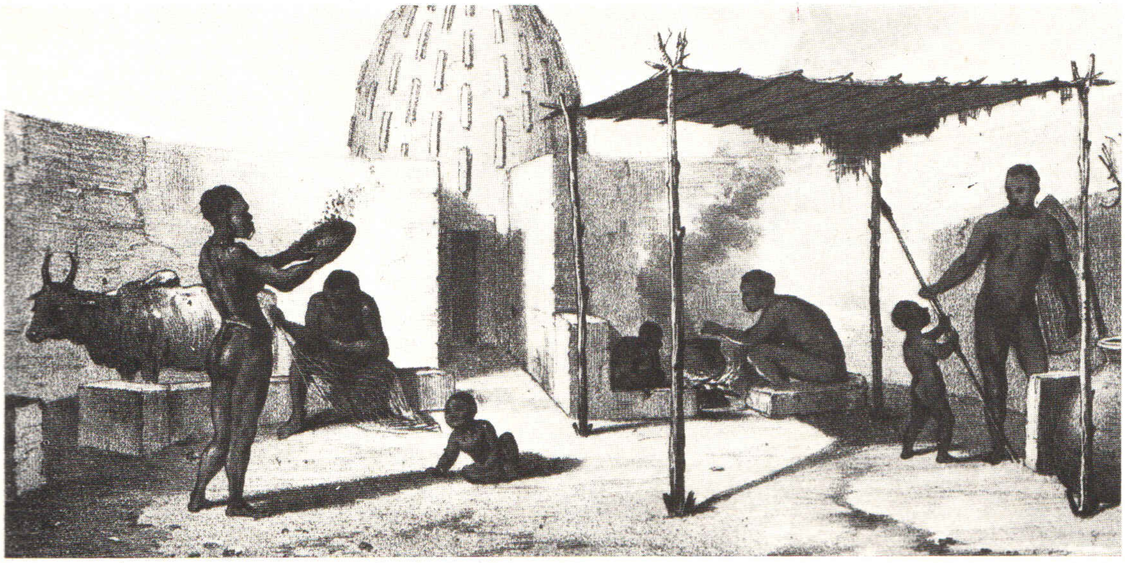
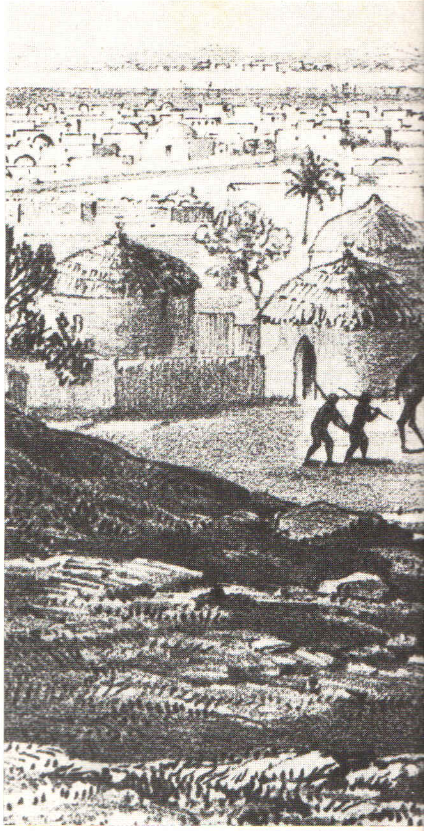
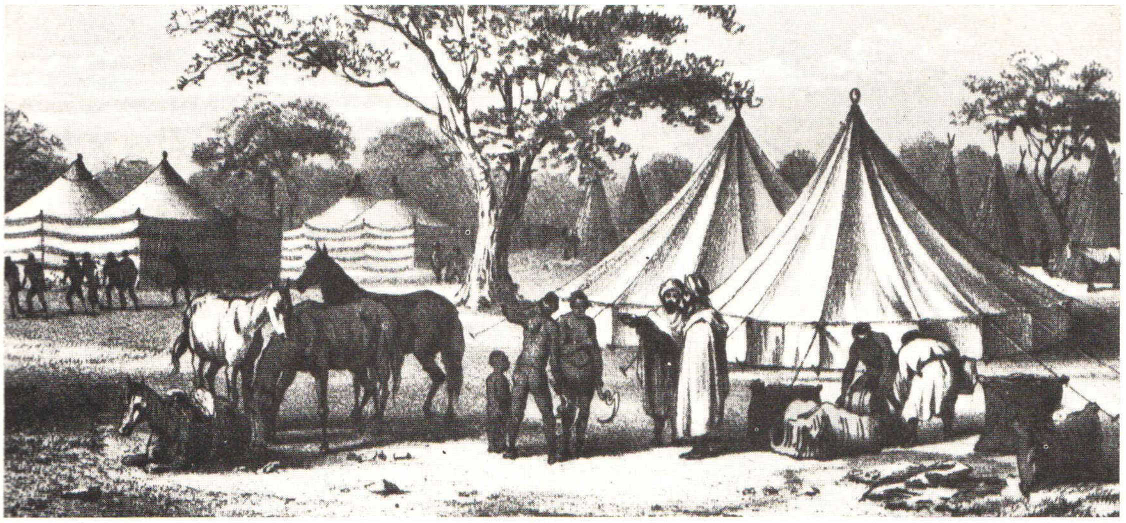


A Musgus home near Chad stands open to the elements except for a reed canopy. The kitchen and stable are divided off from the living area, while the conical granary at the rear has been adapted as a bedroom.



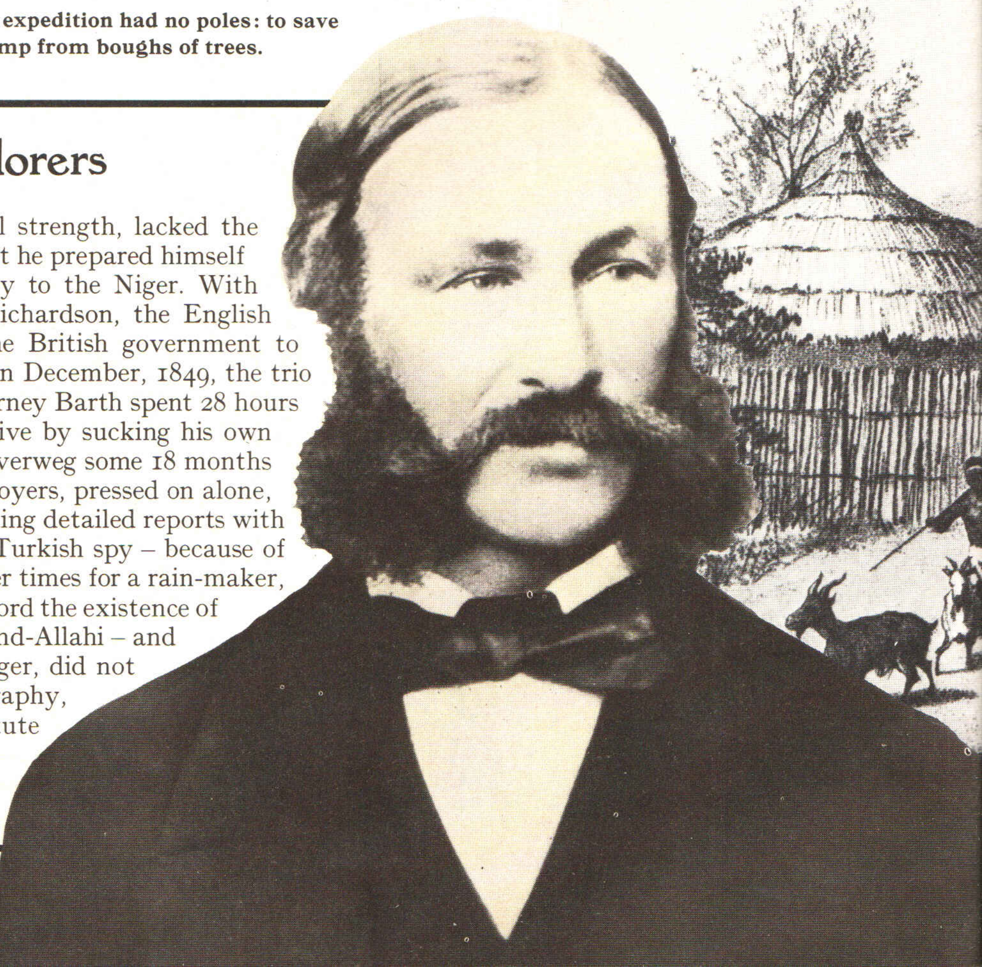
The dull flat-roofed mud huts of Kano

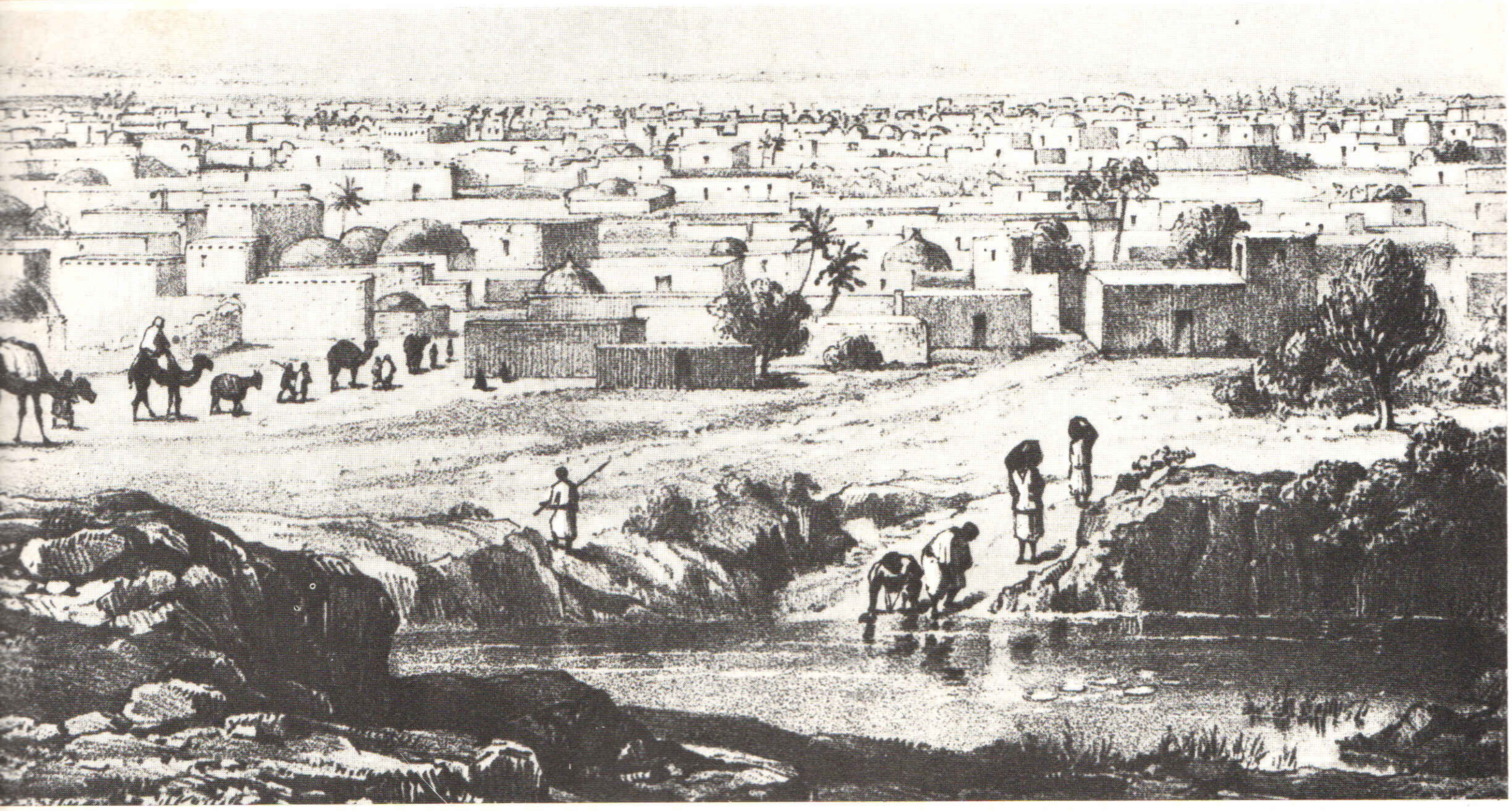


Barth carefully noted that the tents of this slave-running expedition had no poles: to save weight and space the frameworks were constructed at camp from boughs of trees.

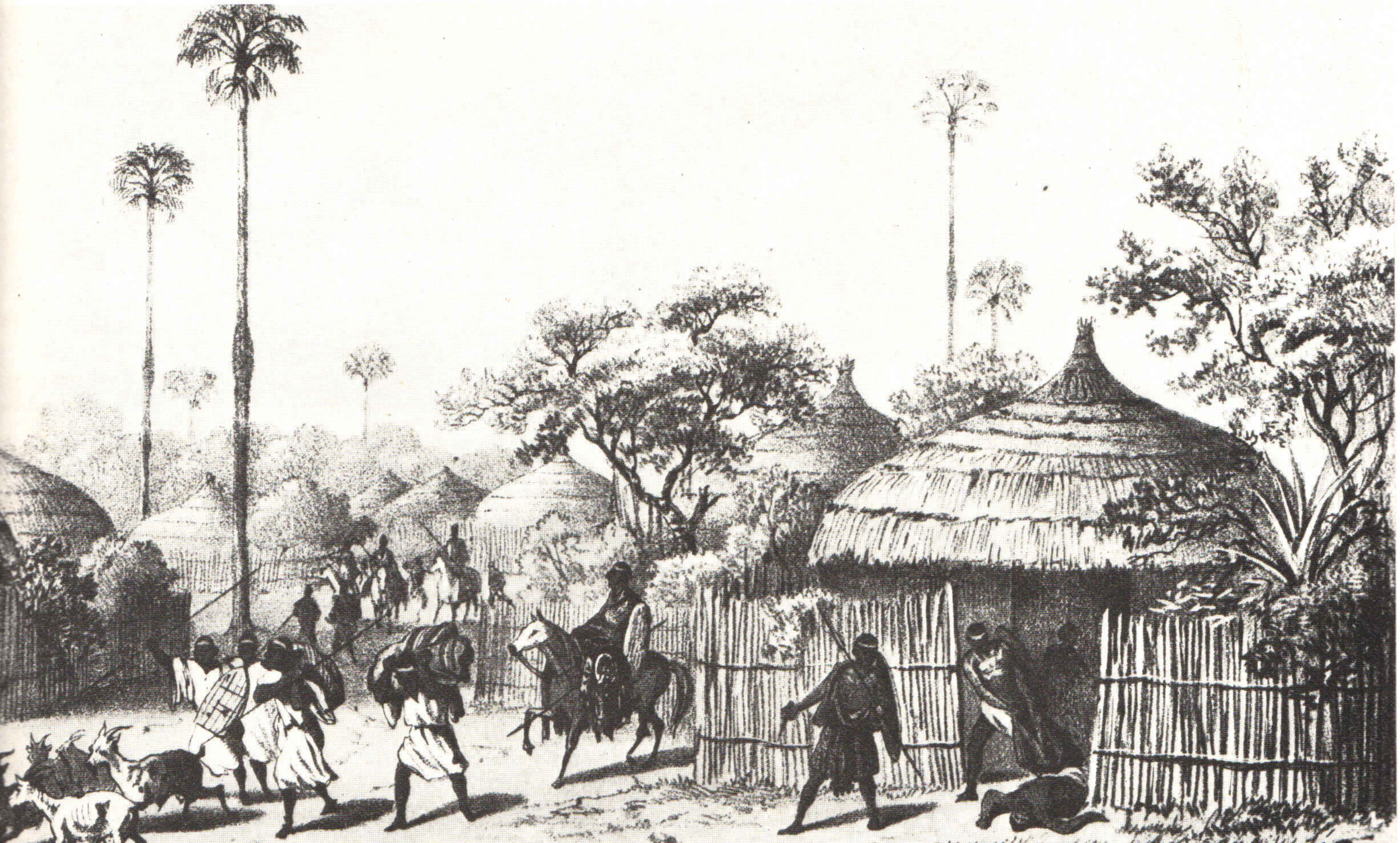
The First of the Modern Explorers

Heinrich Barth, a German of enormous physical strength, lacked the flamboyant optimism of the early adventurers, but he prepared himself with rigid self-discipline for his exacting journey to the Niger. With another German, Adolf Overweg, and James Richardson, the English leader of the expedition, Barth was sent by the British government to investigate the internal African slave trade, and in December, 1849, the trio left Tripoli for Mourzouk. At one point on the journey Barth spent 28 hours in the desert without water – keeping himself alive by sucking his own blood. Richardson died close to Lake Chad and Overweg some 18 months later. Barth, with unwavering loyalty to his employers, pressed on alone, interviewing chiefs, discussing treaties and compiling detailed reports with meticulous attention to detail. Once taken for a Turkish spy – because of his habit of writing everything down – and at other times for a rain-maker, a charm-writer and an angel, he was the first to record the existence of two highly developed empires – Gwandu and Hamd-Allahi – and he showed that the Benue, a tributary of the Niger, did not flow out of Lake Chad. His reports on the geography, history and peoples of the regions he visited constitute the most authoritative documents on 19th-Century north-central Africa, though his ponderous style denied him the fame he deserved.





initially disappointed Barth's concept of a "great centre of commerce," but he responded with enthusiasm to the liveliness of the people.



A village is looted and its inhabitants seized, a scene of "wanton destruction of happiness" sketched by Barth to document the African slave trade.

the rush for colonies, the Portuguese would reasonably argue that they had long preceded Britain in these middle African lands, and so, according to the rules of the imperial carve-up, should be awarded their possession. But this was to be one occasion when Lisbon's always lively appetite for colonial glory would go unsatisfied. The appetite of others proved better reinforced with teeth with which to take hold and possess.

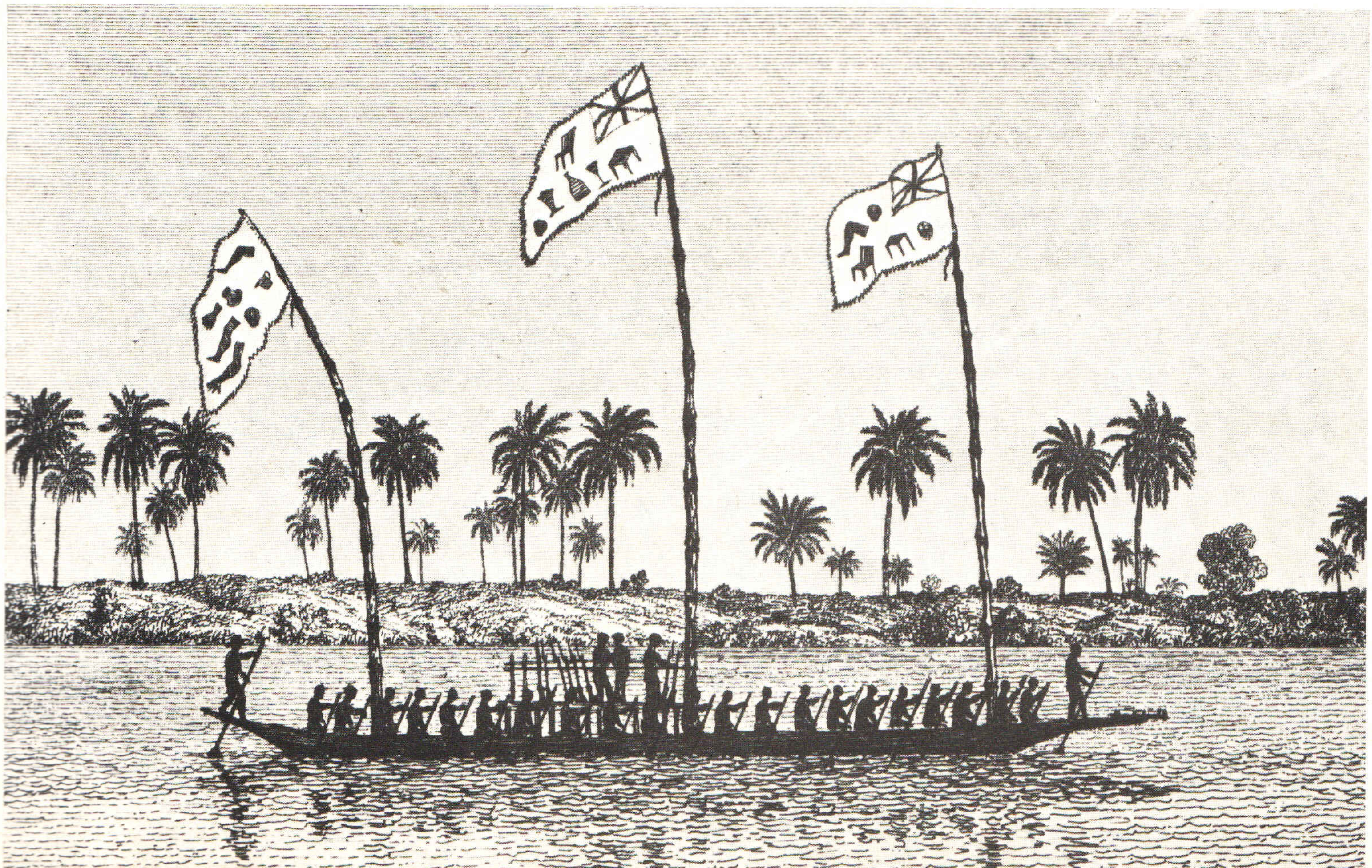
By the 1850s, the times were changing fast. At least the outline of imperialist ambition was beginning to take shape in thoughts about Africa. Much closer to the surface of men's minds in London – and Paris – was all that network of pressures that led onward to ideas of empire. The men who had explored western and even central Africa had done it in the name of scientific inquiry and very often possible trading advantage. Those who now began to penetrate eastern Africa, seeking the truth about the origins of the Nile and the countries through which it flowed down into Egypt, came from a Britain already concerned with territorial expansion into the African continent.

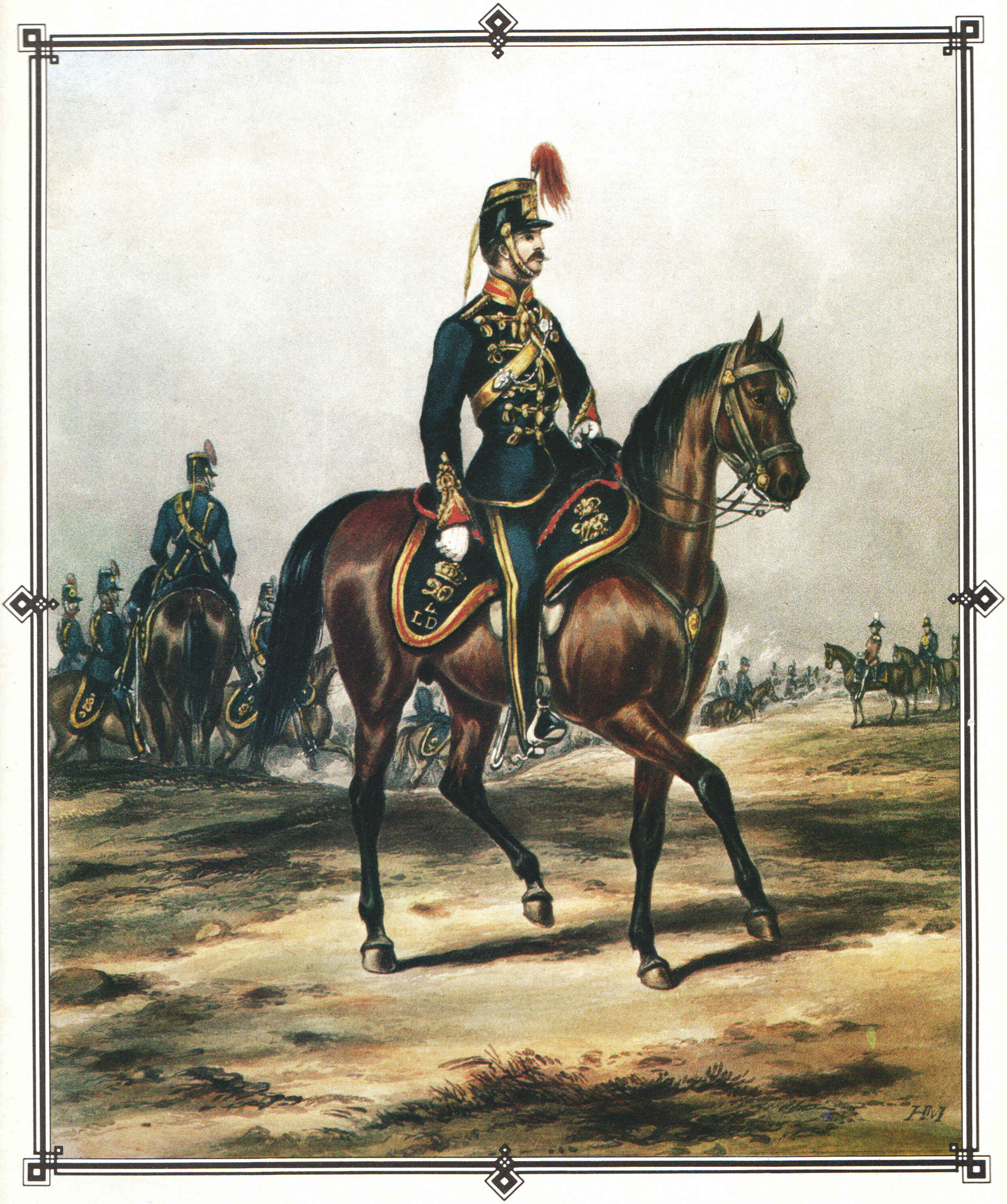
And as the times changed, so did human attitudes. As one kind of darkness lifted, another intensified. Mental arteries thickened with the conviction of Victorian superiority. Back at the outset of the century, Park had seen no differences between Africans and Europeans "in the genuine sympathies and characteristic feelings of our common nature." Barth in the 1850s would have echoed that, but even by that date Barth had become an exception. For the men who clarified the geography of East Africa during the second great period of exploration during the 1850s and 1860s – Richard Burton, John Hanning Speke, Samuel Baker and their like – there could be no question of any "common nature" between Africans and Europeans. For Burton, father of more intellectual fallacies than any of the topographical truths he helped to establish, the mental development of the African ceased when he reached adulthood: "thenceforth he grows backwards, instead of forwards."

For Baker, discoverer of the lands and peoples of the Upper Nile ("the blameless Ethiopians" of the ancient Greek epics) the African mind was "as stagnant as the morass which forms its puny world," and, as he assured the Ethnographical Society of London, there was absolutely no reason to fear that science would show Africans and Europeans as deriving from the same origin. With all this the notion of the white man's civilizing "duty" became a commonplace. Britain in its age of power – from the mid-19th Century – became racist, though of course with the very best of intentions, and would so remain for almost 100 years until the imperial power was spent.

It was scarcely the fault of the explorers, for while it is true that exploration opened the way to invasion, the line of march was nothing if not slow and devious, and very few of the early explorers had any thought of pioneering for an empire. What happened, as hindsight now explains, was that the explorers drew the traders behind them, and the traders hauled along the governments, and the governments, thrust on by a public opinion increasingly inflamed by notions of national grandeur, were at last induced to reach out for the fruits of exploration. And so in the years that followed the 1860s, during a dawn that many Africans were to find singularly grey, and that none of the explorers had foreseen when bearing back their little lamps, the darkness that hid Africa from Europe's eyes was at least divided

Primitive Union Jacks, incongruously combined with a bizarre array of limbs, bottles and chair legs, were a sign that by the 1830s – when these vessels were spotted by the Lander brothers – the British had made a lasting impression on the natives of the West African coast.





Officer, 4th Queen's Own Light Dragoons, 1858

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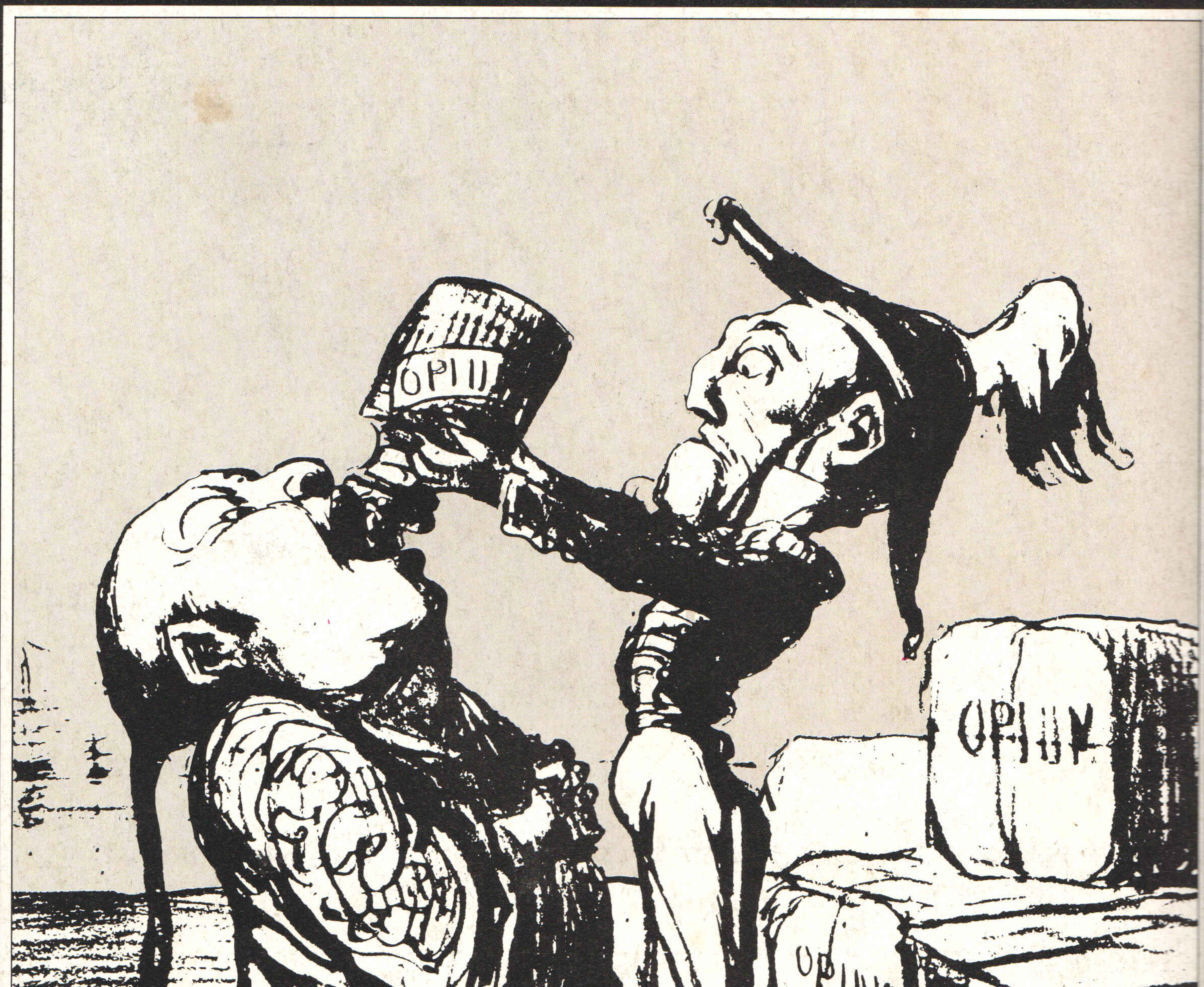
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THE OPIUM WAR
CHINA CORRUPTED BY FORCE