
KEYWORDS: Precolonial, diaspora, Liberians, exploration/travel.

The editors of this engaging volume hereby serve notice to authors of standard African history texts. This book features African-American explorers into the interior of Liberia during the nineteenth century. Maps of unexplored African-American regions are included. Maps are also included. These maps show travels in the Liberian interior; similar maps of individual interior travels repeat themselves again in diaries found in Chapters 3-6.

The editors devoted much effort to locating the American-Liberians' diaries and sundry for inclusion in the book. Chapter 7 provides ethnolinguistic data and discussions of indigenous knowledge and technologies, and the ubiquitous slavery, and makes place-name corrections to the interior travel accounts themselves. Endnotes are annotated with an excellent bibliography for further research at the Smithsonian Institution.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN EXPLORERS IN WEST AFRICA

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Grabs on various aspects of German colonialism have been published. Most of these present the fruits of empiricist ‘tool’. New approaches in international research on colonialism were reflected sporadically at best; ambitious theoretical outlines were hardly ventured. More recently some literary scholars and anthropologists, mainly from the United States, have made new attempts which can largely be subsumed under the heading of ‘postcolonial studies’. Often on the basis of a relatively small set of contemporary texts, these scholars attempt to dissect the ‘colonial discourse’ in imperial Germany. Though most of this work ignores much of the empirical data available and shows a tendency to self-indulgent theorizing as well as a certain ignorance of the more violent realities of colonial rule, it opens up exciting questions, for example on race and gender. Now some younger historians in Germany, too, have taken up these ideas, looking at the short-term as well as long-term effects of the colonial experience on German metropolitan culture and politics.

The study by Nina Berman, a professor of German at the University of Nebraska, represents both the advantages and disadvantages of the new approaches to Germany’s colonial past. Her book focuses on Germans ‘who went to Africa with “good intentions” but whose interference in local affairs often had disastrous consequences for Africans’ (p. 1). These individuals include Max Eyth, an engineer, who worked in Egypt in the 1860s; then Albert Schweitzer, the famous ‘jungle doctor’, who spent a considerable part of his life as a medical doctor in Lambarene in French Equatorial Africa. After the Second World War, the already elderly Schweitzer was celebrated by many Europeans, especially in Germany, as an incarnation of the good Samaritan. Moreover, Lambarene became a mythical site, a place where German cultural superiority survived during the ‘dark years’.

Berman is certainly right in claiming that the protagonists of her story failed to appreciate the particularities of the colonial experience on German culture and politics. According to Berman, the persons featuring in her book could be labelled as ‘secular missionaries’, promoting what they regarded as modern European civilization in African contexts. She sees out the often considerable discrepancy between the way these Germans viewed their role in Africa and the material repercussions of their presence. Schweitzer, especially, is harshly criticized for his narrow construction of African life and for his elitist cultural outlook.

Berman is certainly right in claiming that the protagonists of her story failed to take account of the complexities of the historical and contemporary contexts of the African societies with which they were dealing. However, this does not come as a huge surprise. Moreover, the analytical framework seems fairly conventional and the author is not very careful to say the least, in establishing the historical contexts of the various settings. For instance, Berman’s accounts of East Africa in the early 1970s (where Ernst Udet’s film was shot) and of Somali history are quite superficial.

Thus Impossible Missions provides some interesting details and insights, but lacks careful contextualization as well as coherence.

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