

LETTERS ON WEST AFRICA

Letters on West Africa and the Slave Trade. Paul Erdmann Isert's 'Journey to Guinea and the Caribbean Islands in Columbia' (translator and editor Selena Axelrod Winsnes). *Fontes Historiae Africanæ, Series Varia VII*. Oxford: Oxford University Press for The British Academy 1992, pp. x and 278. \$63.

Paul Erdmann Isert, a Brandenburger by birth, was appointed Chief Surgeon to the Danish settlements in West Africa when in his late twenties. He arrived on the Gold Coast in November, 1783. He left in October 1786, apparently angered by being refused permission to travel inland at the invitation of the Asante king, Osei Kwame, one of whose sisters had availed herself of his medical skills. 'Perhaps a lucky star will once more appear to me and bring me back here', he wrote in his tenth letter from the Gold Coast, 'but when?' He did in fact return in November 1788, with his bride of seven months. But the star was not a lucky one for the Iserts. Paul died on 21 January 1789, and his wife on 25 February. Their daughter, born on 17 February, survived her mother by only three weeks.

Isert is remembered principally for his book, *Reise nach Guinea und den Caribäischen Inseln in Columbia*, which was published in Copenhagen in 1788. It is cast in the form of twelve letters, written between 10 November 1783 and 10 July 1787. The first six have to do with affairs in the area of the Volta estuary, and include a highly informative account of the Danish-sponsored attack on the Anlo by a combined force of Ga, Ada, Akuapem and others. The seventh letter reports Isert's visit to Whydah; the eighth is concerned principally with the Ga in whose territory the Danes had their headquarters, Christiansborg; the ninth describes the circumstances of the European transients on the Gold Coast; and the tenth has an account of Akuapem, which the author visited, together with brief notes on the Akwamu, Krobo, Fante, Akyem and Asante. The eleventh and twelfth letters relate Isert's experiences on board the slaver that

took him to the Caribbean, en route for Denmark in late 1786, and offer observations on the islands of St. Croix, St. Eustacius, St. Thomas, St. John, Guadeloupe and Martinique.

The *Reise nach Guinea* was first translated into Danish in 1789, Dutch in 1790 and French in 1793. An English version has now been produced by Selena Axelrod Winsnes. The task was not an easy one. Isert wrote in appallingly bad German, despite this being his mother tongue. Winsnes has nevertheless produced a very readable translation and one that is, so far as I can judge, faithful to the sense of the original. She contributes a useful introduction to the text which, *inter alia*, reveals something of the contradictions in Isert's life. Wedded to a Rousseauesque view of the 'noble savage', Isert nevertheless found himself involved in that most degrading of activities, the trans-Atlantic slave trade. More of the nature of the man is revealed, perhaps, in the series of appendices which Winsnes has compiled for us than in the *Reise nach Guinea* itself. Especially tantalizing, and poignant, is the comment in the obituary penned by the Danish Governor, J.A. Kiøge (Appendix 4): 'How many have ridiculed and mocked you? But I—and perhaps I alone—mourn for you deeply and painfully. Your intention was honourable, and your courage was perhaps greater than your strength.' Isert was somewhat of a dreamer, but one whose ambitions perhaps exceeded his abilities.

This translation of *Reise nach Guinea* is, then, greatly to be welcomed. Some comment must, however, be made on the notes to the text. The approach is comparative. Winsnes refers the reader to both primary and secondary sources of information on matters to which Isert alludes. These are frequently very useful. Sometimes, however, the reader is credited with an immense amount of time to follow up topics that, surely, the editor should address. One example will perhaps suffice to make the point. Isert offers information on the Volta river: that Mlefi island lay about 12 miles from the sea, that the Akwamu capital was about as far again, and that the river, no more than 50 German miles in length, formed near there from shallow streams unnavigable even by canoe (p. 79). Winsnes is doubtless correct in noting that the mile in question is one of 7.5 kilometres but even so Isert was greatly

in error. Mlefi lies about 30 English miles upstream, Akwamu about 75, and the course of the river is over 700 miles. Instead of telling us this, Winsnes provides a bibliography of six items, ranging in date from 1819 to 1970, wherewith to make up our own minds about the accuracy or otherwise of Isert's information! This is a tiresome quirk.

I noted few misprints in the book, though on p. 43 'Master of Heaven and Earth' is obviously a 'title' rather than a 'little'. There are, however, some signs of carelessness in the notes; for example, 'Spragge 1969' (p. 35) appears correctly in the bibliography as 'Sprigge 1969', and the reviewer may be forgiven for noting the references, 'Wilks 1975' (p. 162) and 'Wilks 1977' (p. 171), neither of which items appears in the bibliography. But carelessness is not all that is involved. For example, Isert's comment to the effect that the European presence on the Gold Coast dates from 1452 (p. 114) is rightly queried, but is the 'first official Portuguese expedition' to the Costa da Mina really to be dated to 1482? Again, Isert's comment that Oto Brafo was 'paramount chief of the Akras' (p. 45) is not corrected in the footnote to it; he was, in fact, head of the Otublohum ward. And again, was Isert's 'Obly' really a corruption of 'Ofori' (p. 71)? 'Obiri' is perfectly respectable in the context, and Isert had a rather good ear. And so forth...

Such criticisms aside, Winsnes has made a very welcome and useful addition to the growing corpus of translations of early texts having to do with the Guinea Coast. This is also a handsomely produced volume, even to its binding, and so it should be at the price!

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