

RECENT BOOKS

HUGH CLAPPERTON'S SAHARA JOURNAL

Difficult & Dangerous Roads. Hugh Clapperton's Travels in Sahara and the Fezzan (1822-25), ed. by Jamie Bruce-Lockhart and John Wright. London: Sickle Moon Books, in association with the Society for Libyan Studies 2000. xiv, 365 pp. ISBN 1-900209-06-3. Paper £9.99.

The expedition by Dixon Denham, Hugh Clapperton and Walter Oudney in 1822-25 was the first European group to travel across the Sahara from Tripoli to Bornu and Hausaland and return to tell the tale. The account of this was told in their official *Narrative of Travels and Discoveries*, which has become a standard work of central Sudanic history, last in the edition by E.J. Bovill in 1966.¹ The work under review is an additional story of the same expedition, through the edition of the travel diary that one of the three, Hugh Clapperton, wrote of the passage across the desert.

It is based on a manuscript that was kept with the original publisher of the *Narrative*, John Murray, until 1945, when it was brought to South Africa and has resided there since. It thus complements the journals of Clapperton's travels in Bornu and Sokoto 1823-4, which are at the PRO in London.

As such, it contains a fair amount of additional material to the published account, and presents it in a more direct and rough form. Thus, in the published version, Denham—who was keen to appear as the leader of the group—played down

1 D. Denham, H. Clapperton and W. Oudney, *Narrative of Travels and Discoveries in Northern and Central Africa in the Years 1822, 1823 and 1824*, 2nd edn, London 1828, reprint London 1966.

or ignored the travels that the two others had made in the Fezzan while he returned to Tripoli and England to arrange for the journey across the desert. The book makes no bones about the rivalry between Denham and Clapperton, who in a letter to the Admiralty in London said that Denham's departure, sudden as it had been, 'will be no loss to the Mission and a saving to his country for Major Denham could not read his sextant, knew not a star in the heavens and could not take the Altitude of the sun'²—Denham being an army man, to Clapperton's navy background.

The trips that Clapperton and Oudney made was east to Zawīla, north to Wādī Gharb, and the longest west to Ghāt. These are thus the major additions to the *Narrative*, and take up the first third of the journal. The remainder follows the expedition from Murzuq through Kawar down to the northern border of Bornu, then briefly the return journey from Agadem up to Murzuq and Tripoli. The year and a half they stayed in Bornu and Hausaland itself are thus not covered here.

In the diary style of the book there are short practical descriptions of the mundane, but also comments and longer observations of what they saw, thus on the Tuareg of Ghāt and the salt of Kawar, evidently made in preparation for the later publications, but often with more detail than was published. The editors have made great efforts to maintain the direct style of the hand-written text, and only with apparently great reluctance corrected errors in the writing when absolutely necessary. Generally the author's idiosyncratic spelling is left as it is, some sentences remain hanging in the air as they are in the ms. Thus, on occasion one has to look carefully to notice that one logical sentence has come to an end and another has begun, with a slightly wider space as the only graphical marker of the transition. However, the reader soon becomes accustomed to this, and it does add to the immediacy that is the attraction of such journals. On the

2 *Difficult & Dangerous Roads*, 309.

whole, the book makes a very good read for those interested in the area at all.

The editors have provided the book with a long introduction on the history of the region and period, drawn largely, it appears, on the unpublished 1998 Ph.D. thesis, 'Nothing else but slaves: Britain and the central Saharan slave trade in the nineteenth century' by one of the editors, John Wright. Thus, the emphasis here is perhaps more on the slave issue than in the journal itself. However, Clapperton gives shocking glimpses of the cost of the trade, both near the difficult pass through the Tummo mountains—where the carcasses of dead slaves and animals that had not made it lay so thick that it was impossible to find a place free of them to pitch their tents—and in Kawar, where dead slaves were left half-buried in the ground free for the vultures to feast on, to his horror.

The text is also thoroughly annotated by the editors, with details of the text editing, explanations of terms as well as contextual asides the relevance of which may not in every case be obvious. A few of the comments may be debatable. Thus, commenting on Clapperton's reference to 'the feast el Asser' (p. 167): 'The *Id al-Assura*, which celebrates the death of Hassan and Hussain ... at the battle of Karbala in 680 A.D. The *Id* fell on 27th August' [in 1822]. Apart from the historical infelicity, the °Ashūra was on 26 September that year, the editors clearly confusing it with the °Īd al-kabīr a month earlier.

On p. 145, it seems more likely that the reference to the sultan of Morocco actually refers to him, and not to the shaykh of the Kunta, the event may possibly be the war of succession after the death of Sultan Yazīd in 1792 between his three brothers.

Concerning the region of greatest interest to the present reviewer, the Kawar oasis, this book does not change our present understanding of the situation in the 1820s (based already on the description in the *Narrative*) but does confirm that the description we have of the salt trade later in

the century was valid already at this period.

The most direct observation of interest is that, as the Tuareg salt caravan was on its way, all the males and young females ‘ran away’. This links to the description of ‘silent trade’, which is often considered a myth, and the description certainly does not match what we know from later in the century, where relations were cordial and networks between salt producers and Tuareg traders well established. Indeed, that is also the general impression Clapperton imparts. The actions would thus seem to have been the result of a particular fear of conflict on that occasion, rather than a long-term pattern. In 1822, the conflicts between various Tuareg groups that the Sokoto *jihād* had set off, were still unresolved, and the Kawar traders would have been wary to know if it was their ‘protectors’ or the enemies of these that were on the way.³

Clapperton also provides us with the name of the sultan of Kawar in 1822 and 1825, Dūnama. This is a Kanuri name (and not the older title *dhū ’l-Amāna*, as the editors suggest), but it is not clear whether he is here talking of the Kanuri sultan of Bilma town, or his superior the Teda sultan of Kawar—to Clapperton, these were both ‘Tibboo’. Dūnama is used later in the century among Bilma *mais*. According to existing historiography, the Bilma sultan Tiarri Ḥasan ruled 1815-55,⁴ but it cannot be excluded that his reign, the first we have any date or name for, has been extended too far into the past. We do have names for several pre-1850 Teda sultans, but no dates; none were called Dūnama.

The interest of this is that Clapperton first discusses him in the context of Bilma, but later notes him pursuing

3 It could also be a reflection of commercial rivalry between the dominant Tuareg traders and the local Teda who played a minor role in the trade and who felt that the Tuareg undercut their prices; the remarks noted by Denham would rather seem to indicate this; *Narrative of Travels*, i, 153-4.

4 Knut S. Vikør, *The Oasis of Salt: The History of Sahara, a Saharan Centre of Salt Production*, Bergen 1999, 228.

his interests further north in the Teda-dominated parts of the oasis. If it was the Kanuri *mai* of Bilma that Clapperton met, it would indicate a certain parity of strength between the Kanuri and Teda population groups; or rather, that strength of personality outweighed formal/ethnic structures. But we cannot establish this, as we cannot exclude that this name could also have been used by a Teda ruler.

In all then, this edition of the Clapperton diary provides a readable and important addition to our knowledge about the first successful European venture into and across the Sahara, and of the lands they traversed.

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