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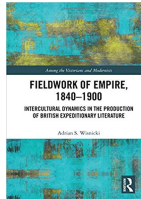
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FIELDWORK OF EMPIRE, 1840-1900: INTERCULTURAL DYNAMICS IN THE PRODUCTION OF BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY LITERATURE



By **Adrian Wisnicki**
(Routledge, 2019), xviii +205 pp.
Reviewed by **Laura Franey** on 2020-02-01.

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This book offers precisely the kind of dense, complex, intercultural reading of Victorian travelers, their journeys, and their literary and cartographic productions that scholars of travel writing on Africa have envisioned since the boom in such criticism began in the late 1980s and early 1990s. For both ideological and practical reasons, scholars of that era focused almost exclusively on the polished narratives produced by travelers after their return from the continent. Probing reports by figures such as John Hanning Speke, Richard Burton, David Livingstone, Francis Galton, Mary Kingsley, May French-Sheldon, scholars teased out the racial, political, economic and religious significance of the way these travelers portrayed the landscapes, politics, people, deities, and animals of Africa. Often conveyed by these studies, even if just minimally traceable, was the desire, but not often the means, to understand better how indigenous African expertise and experience amplified the sum of European and U.S. knowledge.

To offer this kind of nuanced scholarship, Wisnicki has mined archives for new or overlooked information and perspectives, sometimes in unexpected places. In so doing, he shows why we need to re-imagine what historical and literary-historical investigation into nineteenth-century Africa and into discourse about Africa should be. Wisnicki contests the conventional notion of the Victorian traveler as heroically self-sufficient, a man or woman producing new geographical and social knowledge out of his or her singular and solitary genius for mathematical calculations and keen participant observation. New knowledge of any place, Wisnicki reminds us, springs from a deep well of memory and interaction between outsiders and indigenous inhabitants.

This point has not been wholly overlooked by previous scholars. In 1987, for instance, one noted historian of exploration declared that "[a] very large proportion of what the explorers learned and recorded in their diaries was the result of interviews with the Arab and Swahili traders, the African chiefs and kings, the ivory hunters and others. This is true even of the purely geographical information" (Roy Bridges, qtd. 94, n. 2). In giving full credit to these indigenous sources, Wisnicki complicates Western claims to superiority in geographical discovery. Just as recent studies of Native American narratives about the western portion of North America have made us realize what these narratives can teach us, Wisnicki painstakingly recounts interactions between travelers such as John Hanning Speke and East African traders in enslaved people, men who had forged and cemented trade routes long before the arrival of Speke and his fellow explorers such as Richard Burton and James Grant. To understand the history of Africa more fully, then, Wisnicki seeks as much information as he can from indigenous sources--even when they are refracted through Western accounts.

This fresh and multifaceted approach seems especially well-honed in Chapter 2, which highlights the mapmaking of the East African Expedition helmed by Speke and Burton in 1856-1859. Though the scandal and controversy that marked the expedition and its aftermath are well-known, Wisnicki finds that the expedition's cartography erased the considerable contributions of non-Europeans. According to Wisnicki, the written and spoken words that Speke, Burton, and so many others shared with learned societies and the public "overwr[ote] and [. . .] erase[d] competing or recalcitrant non-western cultural and material realities while still developing in reaction to and out of those realities" (42). To buttress this claim, Wisnicki examines both the travels of Muhammad Ali, Pasha of Egypt from 1839 to 1842, and the maps produced by two German explorers, Johann Rebmann and Johann Krapf. By gleaning minute details from the labels and footnotes in maps, and even from minor publications by British explorers, Wisnicki strips away layers of map-making. He shows, for instance, that Speke's most important cartographic details came not from his own measurements and discoveries but instead from "layers of oral testimony" by Africans (58).

Turning from Speke's cartography to the travels of Samuel White Baker in northeastern Africa, Wisnicki tracks him specifically into areas of what are now South Sudan and northwest Uganda. Baker travelled with Egyptian financial support, since Isma'īl, who ruled Egypt under Turkish oversight, aimed to suppress the slave trade just as Baker did. (Isma'īl also wanted to extend his power southward through annexation.) By comparing Baker's published narratives with his unpublished diaries, now held by the Royal Geographical Society, Wisnicki documents his encounters more fully than previous historians or literary scholars have done, and thus probes the true complexity of Baker's interactions with indigenous leaders in northeastern Africa as well as with Turkish colonial officials. Baker's drive to be a geographical pioneer by exploring the upper reaches of the Blue Nile and White Nile systems, Wisnicki shows, strengthened Turkish administrative control in the area, and in spite of Baker's stated opposition to the slave trade, his exploring probably aided its ongoing

success. Wisnicki also gives evidence of Baker's key historical erasures, such as his excision of Bunyoro's trading eminence before European involvement in the area. Wisnicki highlights the agency of indigenous individuals whom Baker had essentially written out of the story, such as the Bunyoro king, Kamrasi. As the chapter details, Kamrasi strategically aligned himself with particular actors, including Baker, in attempts to build up his own empire.

Unlike Chapters 2 and 3, both of which foreground a particular European-led expedition, Chapter 4 foregrounds a specific African locale, Nyangwe, situated on the Lualaba River in Congo, as well as the people of the area, the Wagenya. Here Wisnicki combs "field diaries, letters, scientific lectures . . . , maps, and popular travel narratives" to "embed" the European discourse on Nyangwe in the fuller context of African politics, culture, and social relations (103). Chapter 1, too, differs importantly from the other chapters, but mostly in method rather than in subject. It serves as a "bridge," Wisnicki says, between traditional travel writing scholarship, which focuses on the rhetoric of the traveler, and the more radical techniques of his later chapters, which challenge the monologic drive of the European travelers' texts (21). Reconsidering usual understandings of Livingstone's *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa*, Wiskecki argues that the book serves a political function by "occupy[ing] a complex interstitial position between the discourses of conversionism and trusteeism" (27).

The remarkable depth and breadth of Wisnicki's research, as well as the clarity and excellence of his prose, have already been recognized, since four of the monograph's five chapters have been published before in field-leading journals such as *Victorian Studies* and *Studies in Travel Writing*. Exemplifying Wisnicki's richly intertextual and generally materialist approach, each of the first four chapters works well, perhaps not surprisingly, as a self-contained discussion of a particular moment in travel history. But the chapters do not clearly co-operate to offer a cogent argument about the significance of indigenous experiences, histories, and texts in the story of imperialism (of various types, including Egyptian and British) in Africa. Granted, Wisnicki does not claim that the value of his book lies in an overarching argument or claim; instead, he terms "the book's analysis . . . illustrative, not comprehensive" (xv). Yet the connections between the chapters feel strained, especially in the transition from the fourth to the fifth, where Wisnicki abruptly shifts from nonfiction to fiction, from travel-related documents to one of the most discussed novels of imperialism, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Having likewise published a monograph on nonfiction African travelogues that includes one chapter on fictional narratives by Conrad, Olive Schreiner, and H. Rider Haggard, I understand why the chapter on Conrad was included. But Wisnicki's discussion of conspiracy in *Heart of Darkness* has little in common with the topics of the other chapters, and he does little to show why another reading of this novel can advance goals similar to those pursued in the rest of the volume. *Heart of Darkness* has prompted so much excellent scholarship, including studies of what was known in England at the turn of the twentieth century about the horrifying treatment of people in the Congo by agents of the Leopoldian state, that it is hard to say anything new about the context of this novel. I am not inclined to agree with Wisnicki's claim that the "relationship [of *Heart of Darkness*] to intercultural dynamics in the Congo Free State" has been "previously overlooked" (141).

Nevertheless, Wisnicki is one of the foremost practitioners of digital humanities scholarship in the area of travel writing studies. He has done admirable--and widely recognized--work to make digital versions of much of Livingstone's work publicly available, and he has pioneered the use of spectral imaging techniques to uncover hidden layers of Livingstone's private writings. Yet by comparison with the digital medium in which Wisnicki often works, one of the disadvantages of print is the difficulty of producing high-quality images to accompany the text. While the many reproductions of maps are welcome, some of the images reproduced in the book are of poor quality or seem not to add much of value to the text. For example, Chapter 3 reproduces two pages from Baker's travel diary, but the writing is so difficult to read and the drawing of the Nile so small that Wisnicki's written description of the pages is more helpful to his reader than the pages themselves. The Epilogue similarly features an intriguing but also somewhat mystifying "processed spectral image of a page from David Livingstone's 1870 Field Diary" (155). This kind of digital imaging, Wisnicki says, allows a closer look at physical texts so as to yield useful information about their production. The spectral image, he writes, "highlight[s] the page's topography, including the manuscript damage that most likely occurred while the manuscript was in the possession of Livingstone's African porters" (155). I can't help wondering, however, what this visible evidence of damage adds to our understanding of Livingstone's travels, his writings, or the role of indigenous knowledge in the production of Livingstone's ideas and work.

On the whole, Wisnicki's project responds well to a call made decades ago by Mary Louise Pratt, who urged scholars to consider the places of European travelers' physical and linguistic interactions as "contact zones" rather than as locations for the simple imposition of the travelers' authority standing in for metropolitan authority (*Imperial Eyes*, 7). Wisnicki's use of a plethora of indigenous and European sources allows him to articulate the "spatial and temporal copresence of subjects" in the spaces, both literal and figural, of travel writing (Pratt 7). He does not shy away from the complex details that a scholar encounters while studying how the production of knowledge and of relations of power happens through "interactions [and] interlocking understandings and practices" (Pratt 7).

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