

# Captivated by Africa's Geography: James MacQueen, Thomas Fowell Buxton and the abolition of slavery

**Dr David Lambert**, *Reader in Historical Geography at Royal Holloway, University of London*, tells the story of an unlikely alliance in British efforts to stem the sources of the slave trade in Africa, and describes how geographical knowledge – derived from displaced slaves themselves – contributed to abolitionist endeavours.

Two hundred years ago, Parliament abolished the British slave trade. Thirty years later in 1837, the abolitionist leader, Thomas Fowell Buxton, surveyed the progress that had been made subsequently against the slave trade in general. He was far from happy and began to develop an ambitious scheme to attack the source of the trade in Africa itself. To assist him in this task, Buxton sought the help of James MacQueen, a well-known geographer of Africa. This was a remarkable and surprising collaboration for both men – not least because of the reason why MacQueen had been first captivated by the geography of that continent. His was a story that started and ended with slavery.

Although 1807 was a significant year, in that it saw the Parliamentary abolition of the British slave trade, it was only a beginning. Slavery itself continued in the British Empire for more than a quarter of a century until it was abolished between 1834 and 1838. Moreover, although the United States of

America would abolish its own slave trade in 1808, other European nations (apart from Denmark) continued their involvement in the Atlantic slave trade. Urged on by abolitionist campaigners, the British government signed bilateral treaties with Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands whereby each agreed to end its trade (though, in the case of Portugal, only north of the Equator) and grant the right of stop-and-search for suspected slaving ships that carried their national flag. In effect, this meant that the Royal Navy, the most powerful naval force at the time, took up responsibility for suppressing much of the Atlantic slave trade and a squadron of its ships operated along the coast of Africa.

In 1837, Thomas Fowell Buxton assessed this anti-slave trade strategy of diplomatic treaty and naval patrol. Buxton had taken over from William Wilberforce in 1823 as the leader of the British abolitionist movement and had spearheaded the successful Parliamentary campaign to emancipate the slaves in the British colonies. Reviewing what Britain had

achieved in terms of the wider, foreign slave trade, however, Buxton was not satisfied. The twin strategy had proved both costly and of limited impact. Instead, Buxton hit upon the idea of attacking the sources of the Atlantic slave trade in Africa itself, in part by encouraging alternative, 'legitimate' forms of commerce. Buxton's plan was for an expedition to travel from the Gulf of Guinea, up the River Niger, into the interior of Africa, where anti-slave-trade treaties would be signed with local African rulers, model free-labour plantations established and trade initiated. Such an ambitious scheme as this Niger Expedition would need government support and Buxton began to formulate his case.

Buxton's plan had been anticipated almost two decades earlier by a geographer named James MacQueen. As he prepared his proposals for the expedition to central Africa, Buxton drew heavily on MacQueen's writing and even went so far as to approach him to ask for help. During the summer of 1838, the two men worked closely together. MacQueen



Left: *Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, first Baronet (1786–1845)*, by Benjamin Robert Haydon, 1840. National Portrait Gallery, London

Right: *The Niger Expedition ...off Holyhead... Aug–Oct 1841. HMS Albert, also shows Sudan and Wilberforce.* © National Maritime Museum, London





*Sugar Cane Harvest, Antigua, West Indies. From Ten Views in the Island of Antigua by William Clark (London, 1823). Courtesy of the John Carter Library at Brown University*

supplied information on the political and physical geography of Africa, provided maps, drafted the treaties that were to be signed and offered general feed-back and advice to Buxton. MacQueen also took his place alongside the grandees of British abolitionism when he joined the committee of the African Civilization Society, the organisation founded by Buxton to spearhead the Niger Expedition. What is most remarkable about this collaboration is that for almost two decades the two men had been implacable enemies, on opposite sides of the great debate about slavery – with Buxton leading the abolitionist campaign and MacQueen one of his most outspoken opponents. Even more astounding is the fact that although MacQueen was well-known as an expert on African geography and was later elected a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society (in 1845), he never actually visited Africa during his entire life. So who was MacQueen and why did he know so much about a place he had never seen?

James MacQueen had been born in Crawford, Lanarkshire, in Scotland in 1778. As a young man he travelled across the Atlantic Ocean to the West Indian island of Grenada, which was then a British colony. There he worked as an overseer on a sugar plantation. He was responsible for the day-to-day management of the estate, including ordering, inspecting, disciplining and punishing the three hundred or so slaves who worked in the fields and elsewhere in the production of sugar.

Like many other young British men at the time, MacQueen's period in the Caribbean established his livelihood. After he returned to Scotland and moved to Glasgow in the first decade of the nineteenth century, he maintained commercial links to the region and worked as an importer of rum. During his time in Glasgow, he also became involved in the campaign to oppose the abolition of West Indian slavery. He was appointed editor of the *Glasgow Courier* and used this newspaper to promote the interests of the West Indian colonists and Glaswegian merchants who traded with them. He also came to the attention of the national pro-slavery campaign centred on the London-based West India Committee. MacQueen spent more and more time in London, working closely with merchants and West Indian plantation owners to produce a series of books and pamphlets designed to counter the efforts of Thomas Fowell Buxton and the other abolitionists. He was a vigorous and trenchant writer, whose scathing descriptions of 'Buxtonian philanthropy' as 'rashness and folly' that would bring 'catastrophe' to the West Indies delighted those opposed to the abolitionist campaign in Britain and beyond.<sup>1</sup> As a result, a number of West Indian colonial legislatures, which were dominated by plantation owners, awarded him money for his unremitting defence of slavery.

What might have motivated MacQueen to become such a prominent opponent of the abolitionists? In terms of his own attitude to

slavery, MacQueen was typical of many early nineteenth-century anti-abolitionists in that he claimed to oppose it *in principle* ('We are no advocates for slavery – let it be abolished in the spirit of Christianity, which is justice', he wrote<sup>2</sup>), but remained forthright in condemning the abolitionist campaign. Certainly, he had a personal stake in the maintenance of West Indian slavery. More than this, though, MacQueen was a forthright, if misguided, patriot who believed that slavery was vital for the success of the West Indies and that these colonies were, in turn, the most important part of Britain's empire. The significance that MacQueen attached to the West Indian colonies also explains his apparent about face and rapprochement with Buxton. Once the parliamentary Act was passed in 1833 to emancipate the slaves in the West Indies, MacQueen was concerned that this would hand a competitive advantage to plantation owners *outside* the British Empire who were still able to use slave labour. Therefore, if the British colonies were not to suffer, steps had to be taken to reduce the supply of slaves to Britain's rivals. To this extent, MacQueen agreed wholeheartedly with Buxton's assessment that the twin-track diplomatic and naval strategy had failed and that other measures were needed to suppress the foreign slave trade by attacking the African sources. At the same time, MacQueen saw great commercial possibilities in that continent and believed that if Britain did not take advantage of these, then other countries, notably France, certainly would.

Despite the fact that these two former adversaries came to agree on the need to take the anti-slave-trade fight to the heart of Africa itself, MacQueen's position within Buxton's great undertaking was never secure. He faced bitter opposition from other abolitionists who – unlike Buxton – never forgave MacQueen for the vitriolic attacks he had made on them previously. Yet, Buxton's belief in MacQueen's importance was unshakeable and he deemed his help essential. If the story of the collaboration between these former adversaries is surprising, then even more remarkable is the reason *why* MacQueen's

knowledge of Africa turned out to be so important for Buxton. To understand this, we have to return to his early days in Grenada.

MacQueen's time in Grenada marked not only the beginning of his involvement with Caribbean slavery and the associated trade in slave-produced exports, but also his interest in the geography of Africa. One night on the estate for which he was the overseer, MacQueen sat reading to a friend the account, by the famous explorer and fellow Scot, Mungo Park, of his *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* (1799).<sup>3</sup> This was one of the most popular and widely-read accounts of Africa at the time and had been published not long after MacQueen had first come to work on the island. It described Park's journey, sponsored by the Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa, from the River Gambia through present-day Senegal and Mali in search of the upper course of the River Niger. Whilst reading Park's account aloud, MacQueen noticed that a young male African slave in the room, whose duty may have been to wait on MacQueen, was listening intently to him. He

seemed particularly interested in those parts of the account concerning the River Niger or what Park, in the language of the Mande-speaking peoples from West Africa, called the 'Joliba'. It transpired that the slave was what Europeans termed a 'Mandingo' who had lived his early life in that part of Africa and knew much about the course of the River Niger and the surrounding geography.

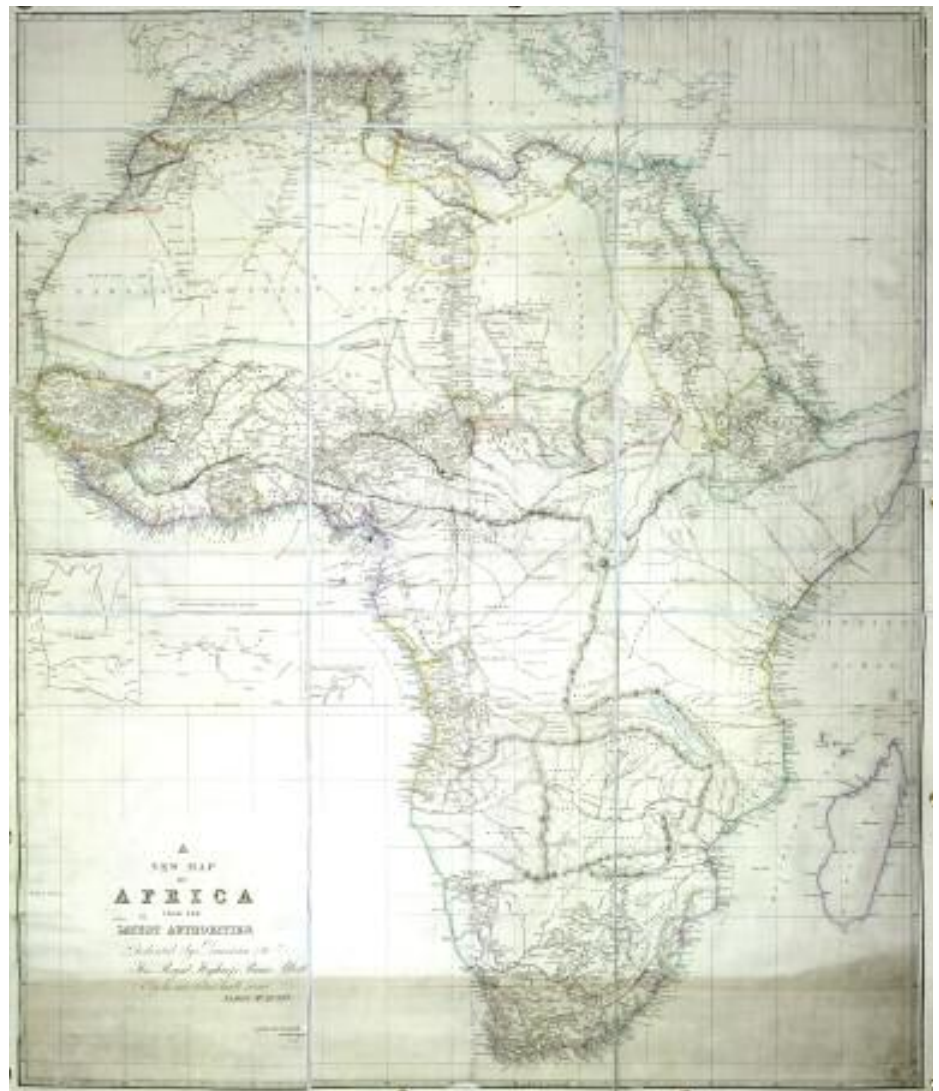
MacQueen was intrigued and fascinated by this opportunity to acquire a first-hand account of Africa's geographical features. He began to collect as much information as he could from the young male slave and the other 'Mandingo' slaves on the estate. How *they* might have felt about serving as sources of information for MacQueen is impossible to know as there are no records. It may have been a very difficult and painful process.

After all, MacQueen was asking questions of them about a region in which they had been born before being taken on slave ships across the Atlantic and forced to work as slaves in Grenada. So what was for MacQueen a captivating opportunity to acquire information about African geography was for the slaves a reminder about a lost home and their own captivity.

This did not seem to worry MacQueen and he proceeded with his geographical enquiries. He also spoke to slaves and slave-owners on other estates and, after returning to Scotland, to merchants who traded on the coast of Africa. Moreover, MacQueen sought out as many written descriptions of the geography of Africa as he could, from those by Classical Greek, Roman and Arabic scholars, to more recent accounts by European travellers and

Right: James MacQueen, *A New Map of Africa*, 1841. British Library shelf mark MAPS 63510 (14). © The British Library. All rights reserved

Below: *Mandingo Man Clothing Style*, 1780s. From Rene Claude Geoffroy de Villeneuve, *L'Afrique, ou histoire, moeurs, usages et coutumes des africains, le Senegal* (Paris, 1814), vol 3. Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Virginia Library





explorers. He brought these various sources together in his first book on Africa, which was entitled *A Geographical and Commercial View of Northern Central Africa* and published in 1821.<sup>4</sup> The book's most remarkable claim was about the River Niger. At the time, Europeans knew relatively little about this river, especially its lower course and termination. Rather, there were a host of competing theories – such as that it flowed into Lake Chad, disappeared in the Sahara Desert or even that it joined up with the River Nile far to the east. Yet, MacQueen insisted that the River Niger actually turned back on itself and entered the Atlantic Ocean at the Bights of Benin and Biafra in present-day Nigeria. It was not until an expedition led by Richard and John Lander in 1830 that the course of the River Niger was observed by Europeans at first hand. In what was a remarkable piece of 'armchair' geography, it turned out that MacQueen's theory was broadly correct.<sup>5</sup>

Moving forward to 1837, as Buxton began to prepare his case for an expedition up the River Niger, it was MacQueen's *Geographical and Commercial View of Northern Central Africa* (1821) to which the abolitionist leader first turned. This prompted Buxton to contact MacQueen directly and seek his help. Although Buxton knew all about MacQueen's past involvement with slavery, it is unclear whether he was aware of the original source of MacQueen's geographical knowledge of Africa. In the end, the Niger expedition, according to Buxton at least, was a failure, as is well known by historical scholars. Yet MacQueen's involvement in its planning is little known and even less so the original captive source of his knowledge. Thus, the unlikely collaboration between these two men gives a fascinating glimpse not only of how geographical knowledge played a role in the effort to end slavery, but also how slaves themselves could be the very source of geographical knowledge.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Glasgow Courier*, 30 September and 11 October 1823.
- <sup>2</sup> *Glasgow Courier*, 20 May 1823.
- <sup>3</sup> Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa: Performed Under the Direction and Patronage of the African Association, in the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797* (London: printed for W. Bulmer, 1799).
- <sup>4</sup> James MacQueen, *A Geographical and Commercial View of Northern Central Africa: Containing a Particular Account of the Course and Termination of the Great River Niger in the Atlantic Ocean* (Edinburgh: printed for W. Blackwood, 1821).
- <sup>5</sup> Charles Withers, 'Mapping the Niger, 1798–1832: Trust, testimony and "ocular demonstration" in the late enlightenment', *Imago Mundi*, 56 (2004).