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...
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 abolition-ism 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. 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), 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). 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...
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. 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.\(^3\)

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.

Notes
\(^1\) Glasgow Courier, 30 September and 11 October 1823.
\(^2\) Glasgow Courier, 20 May 1825.

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**Ibadan 1960**

Running splash of rust and gold – flung and scattered among several hills like broken china in the sun.\(^1\)

The poet’s image is of Ibadan, the rust and gold splashed, as Rome was, against seven hills. These hills within which the city of Ibadan is set are, however, the rolling deep green hills of still remaining tropical rainforest which, fading to a gunmetal, smoky blue surround the city. The city anthem, the oriki praise poem, highlights both the space of the city and the prevailing culture of the place:

Ibadan Ilu ori oke
Ilu Ibuken Oluwa
K’Oluwa se o ni ‘bukun
Fun onile at’alejo

Ibadan of the hilly structure
Blessed city
May god make you a

Blessing unto indigenes
And settlers alike

The city of Ibadan, located 78 miles inland from Lagos in Yoruba-speaking southern Nigeria, is a city of hills; it has multiple highpoints, each of which forms a centre around which different districts form their distinct characters, but the centre of the city falls from the tallest of the hills, tumbling down the hillside in a seemingly chaotic jumble of rusting corrugated iron roofs and crumbling mud buildings, tumbling from the building that presides over the town – Mapo Hall. This is the great architectural declaration of British colonial rule built in 1929, and designed as meeting place for the disputatious nobility of Ibadan, and as a visual statement that somehow it would be able to impose its version of order upon the city. And yet it is an order the city knows as alien and imposed; and in front of Mapo, overlooking Ojohia market as it cascades downhill, market wares seemingly sprawling out in all directions, is a statue of Shango, Yoruba deity of thunder and tutelary deity of the Oyo, the founding genitors of the city.

Mapo Hall provides the defining motif for another visual characterisation of the city, that of an *Adire* starch-resist indigo-dyed cloth that is known as *Ibadan dun* (Ibadan is sweet). The motif of Mapo would have been entirely appropriate, a reference to wealth and status, on cloth that told the wearer and the viewer that not only Ibadan was sweet, but that life too was sweet, and that life in Ibadan was the sweetest life one could have, as living in Ibadan meant living in the wealthiest and most modern city in all of the Yoruba-speaking regions. *Ibadan dun* indeed. Ibadan has always been a modern city or perhaps more accurately, a city of modernity.

Ibadan was founded in the mid-nineteenth century. The history has been well published, and the most recent account by Ruth Watson is an excellent analysis of the history of the