FORGOTTEN EXPEDITION INTO GUINEA, WEST AFRICA, 1815–17: AN EDITOR’S COMMENTS

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I

Late in 1818 Major William Gray (Royal African Corps) and Staff Surgeon (Captain) Duncan Dochard (RAC) launched a mission of discovery along the Gambia River, intending to determine the source of the Niger River and follow its course to the point that it flowed into an inland sea or emptied into an ocean. That expedition consisted of no fewer than 62 military personnel, 31 formally appointed civilians, and likely an equal number of unofficial Africans who had taken advantage from a large and well-armed entourage for security along the path. That expedition, which lasted for more than two years, was moderately successful, but it failed in its larger objectives. It returned to the coast eventually without even reaching Timbuktu. Its leaders produced a monograph, published in 1825, that confirmed many observations made earlier by Mungo Park.¹

The Gray/Dochard expedition, while admirable in its efforts and intent, was not the first, however, to make this particular attempt. Indeed, planning for this expeditionary cycle began in London during the summer of 1815, and was part of a larger government-sponsored plan to trace the course of the Niger, clarify the circumstances of the death of Mungo Park, and perhaps return his remains and personal property to the coast. The expedition’s planners also hoped to resolve suggestions that the Niger might drain into an inland lake, might evaporate in the desert, or might join with the Nile, Congo, or another river before reaching Africa’s coast. No less important was a concern in 1815 that the end of warfare on the European continent would bring a resurgence of French commercial and imperial interests.


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Some in London believed fervently that this was a time for Britain to establish its sovereignty and economic interests along Africa’s coast, bring an end to slave trading, and introduce “civilization” and Christianity to Africa’s western interior.²

In 1815 planners in the Colonial Office, the Quarter-Master-General’s Department (War Office), and the Admiralty proposed the raising of two expeditionary forces—one to be organized and commanded entirely by the Admiralty (with close cooperation of the African Association) that would explore and chart the lower reaches of the Congo River and record scientific discoveries; and another created by the Army to advance inland from some point on Africa’s western coast and focus on the course of the Niger River. The Congo expeditionary force would assist the Niger group should the latter appear in the Congo—indeed a discovery of significant proportion would be achieved if that were to occur. The Congo part of the grand proposal took place as intended—at least to the extent that it happened somewhat on schedule. It resulted, however, as a dismal failure, with nearly all European officers and scientists succumbing to illnesses/fevers fatally during the expedition’s early months. Surviving diaries and journals written by its participants, however, resulted in at least three monograph publications.³

The Army-led portion of the dual-focused plan progressed, but not nearly at the same pace as that led by the Admiralty. In contrast to the Congo component, where nearly the entire complement of personnel and supplies could be obtained in Britain, the Army portion would need to recruit from African sources, and its leaders would need to obtain as much information as possible about paths, economies, peoples, and circumstances of the African coast and interior before even selecting a specific place from which to make its departure into the interior. At least six possible locations were considered as launching sites: Saint-Louis and along the Senegal River, Fattatenda on the Gambia River, Bulama Island near the mouth of the Rio Grande, Kakundy (Boké) in the upper Rio Nunez, the Moria path along the Guinea/Sierra

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² Much of introductory material leading to the 1815-17 expedition of discovery is contained in the introduction to The Forgotten Peddie/Campbell Expedition into Fuuta Jalloo, West Africa, 1815-17, ed. Bruce L. Mouser (Madison, 2007), 5-28.
³ See William Brown, Account of the Correspondence between Mr. Park and Mr. Maxwell, Respecting the Identity of the Congo and the Niger (Edinburgh, 1820); John Burckhardt, Travels in Nubia (London, 1819), 475-81; James Hingston Tuckey, Narrative of an Expedition to Explore the River Zaire, Usually Called the Congo in South Africa, in 1816 (London, 1818); John Cranch, Zoologiste de l’expédition du Congo (1816), ed. Théodore Monod (London, 1970). Christen Smith’s journal is printed as a separate part in Tuckey’s Narrative.
Leone Corridor, and Port Loko near the British settlement at Freetown in Sierra Leone.⁴

Arriving at Saint-Louis in November 1815, Major John Peddie (temporarily assigned to British Royal African Corps) landed with instructions about what to attempt, but with significant authority to consider options and to make decisions and choices after due consideration and consultation on the coast. Peddie’s adjutant and second in command was Captain Thomas Campbell, an engineer attached to the Royal Staff Corps, Quarter-Master-General’s Department at Whitehall. Neither officer had served in Africa previously—apparently not a requirement considered essential in London. Peddie was given a charge to collect information about West Africa, recruit personnel from among British soldiers of the Royal African Corps (RAC), and secure provisions for his upcoming expedition. For a time, Peddie focused on the probability of proceeding along the Senegal River, but that preference turned increasingly untenable when it became certain that warfare between Africans in the upper river would complicate his progress, if not negate it entirely. Peddie sent Campbell to Freetown to consider options further south, and Campbell also made scouting visits to St. Mary’s Island (Banjul) at the mouth of the Gambia and to Kakundy in the upper Nunez. Not until mid-1816 was a decision made to launch via the Nunez path, crossing Fuuta Jaloo and the Fula empire before reaching the Niger, where ships would be built and his troops would advance upon Timbuktu.

Peddie arrived at Kakundy, Rio Nunez, aboard four transports in early December 1816, bringing with him a military complement of 74 personnel and a similar number of officially-sanctioned civilians collected from Freetown, Saint-Louis, and Goree. Records indicate that at least 181 horses, mules, donkeys, bullocks, and camels also were brought to Kakundy.⁵ Peddie’s plan was to advance quickly across Fuuta Jaloo and reach the Niger before the beginning of the rainy season that would commence in this section of coast by the middle of May. Unfortunately, Peddie’s troop almost immediately fell victim to fever (likely malaria), and Peddie and one of his officers died within a month of arriving in the Nunez and before the expedition left the coast, leaving Captain Campbell to fulfil his instructions.⁶

Peddie’s vision of rapid advance across Fuuta Jaloo before the arrival of rains was totally impractical, and unfortunately Campbell inherited and shared that illusion. From January 1817 to the end of May, Campbell and his troop moved incrementally forward, but were confronted by difficulties

⁴Much of this discussion concerning sites stemmed from minutes attached to PRO, CO2/1, Stevenson to Sullivan, 10 March 1804.
⁵Mouser, Forgotten Peddie/Campbell Expedition, 78.
⁶PRO, CO267/45/15, MacCarthy to Bathurst, 20 March 1817.
at nearly every stage. In five months’ time, he had advanced less than 500 kilometers from the coast—nearly a thousand kilometers short of the point targeted as a mandatory resting place during the upcoming rainy season. Half of his officers were dead, and all but one of the remainder had been carried sick to the coast.

Campbell had made significant errors, partly of his own choosing and partly a consequence of insufficient information made available to him. He expected to purchase supplies/provisions along the path, only to find that the area was suffering from prolonged drought and that the Fula were then preparing for a war against the state of Kaabu that justifiably would consume surpluses when and where those were available. He also was crossing a territory that was then the launching area for war between African adversaries, and his (and his troops’) presence there interfered with national policy and was viewed by the Fula as a challenge to local authority—and perhaps interference in it. Previously obtained permissions to cross Fuuta Jalloo were rescinded by his Fula hosts, and promises of bearers went unsatisfied, largely a result of Fula imperial policy and something that Campbell could not have contemplated. Disease plagued Campbell’s troop and many died or were forced to scrounge for their own provisions. Disillusioned and ill, Campbell and his troop retreated to the coast, and he died there on 12 June 1817.7

For a brief period, British officials gave consideration to a second expeditionary attempt through the Moria path, and one of the few surviving officers of the Peddie/Campbell expedition was sent into that region to obtain local permissions to use the path. But that choice was eventually dismissed, and the Gambia River/Fattatenda path was chosen—with Major John Gray and Staff Surgeon Dochard selected to lead the latter. Of these, only Dochard had been a member of the failed Peddie/Campbell expedition, and his account of the earlier enterprise was described in the first two chapters of Gray’s and Dochard’s volume, with the remainder of the work containing collective treatment of the Gray/Dochard expedition.

II

Until recently, the full record of the failed Peddie/Campbell expedition remained locked in a single unpublished and unedited handwritten volume of the Colonial Office, CO2/5, Public Record Office. There apparently had been no attempt to bring it to publication—indeed, few modern researchers appeared to have read it or were even aware of it. It received only passing

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7CO267/45/36, MacCarthy to Bathurst, 18 July 1817.
mention in numerous works written about British exploration of West Africa. That volume (CO2/5) consists of four parts: a collection of records kept by Major Peddie; a journal written by Captain Campbell covering the period of 20 November 1816 until 3 May 1817; several very brief and cryptic attempts to write a journal (in French) by Adolphe Kummer (naturalist) and numerous line-drawings of places, plants, and animals; and 21 memoranda collected from African observers who reported on paths, African personages in the interior, and values of trade goods.9

The record of the Peddie/Campbell expedition is unique in several ways. While published journals by travelers have tended to emphasize the successes of a single person or small number of people, and have addressed the trials and tribulations/frustrations that confronted the authors in the course of their expeditions, the record of this expedition (albeit a failed one) differs in the sense that it includes the names and attributes of more than 50 participants, from the highest in rank to the lowest in ranks. The documents collected by Major Peddie (Part I) include detailed lists of personnel recruited, and describe them according to race and ethnic identity, height, languages spoken, and special skills. Surpluses of goods intended for trade and gifts upcountry, but sold in Senegal when the Senegal River route was rejected, are enumerated by prices and by names of scores of purchasers within the Saint Louis/Gorée markets. Contractual agreements with guides and standard and/or extra payments to specific military and civilian personnel are provided. Peddie’s record also contains correspondence between himself and his superiors in London, and descriptions of animals that were taken to Kakundy—including their “conditions.” Here also are the records of the expedition’s medical officer, who provided a sick list and history of patients from the time they entered the list until they left it. The doctor’s record also provides a description of diseases and treatments given for specified fevers and ailments.9

Thomas Campbell’s journal of 20 November 1816 to 3 May 1817 (Part II) is of a very different sort. Campbell’s diction was exemplary, clearly suggesting the writing of a well-educated person. Fortunately for the student of Africa, Campbell tended to be long-winded, and apparently impressed with his own facility to describe his feelings and observations. He produced nearly daily summaries and elaborate descriptions of events, persons, and places encountered along the path. Assuming that these were his own words, it is clear that Campbell spent significant amounts of time in producing them. His entry for 23 February 1817, for example, runs to nearly 4,000

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9 The title for CO2/5, in the official record was: “Expedition to Discover the Course of the Niger River, 1815-1817”.
9 Listed as “Major Peddie: Nov. 1815 til his death 1 Jany. 1817,” manuscript pages 7-115.
words, an accomplishment that certainly would have required considerable
time and effort—his incoherency during his retreat to the coast and death
soon thereafter likely suggest that these were his original words and appear
without editing or elaboration.

While it is certain that Campbell chose his words carefully, it is not alto­
tgether obvious, however, that he intended this version to be his final state­
ment. He was introspective and often bitingly self-critical—perhaps to
remind himself later of frustrations or misunderstandings that troubled his
progress. His descriptions of those he admired and despised are extraordi­
nary. Perhaps equally clear in his writing is evidence of a profound chasm
of thinking that divided Europeans and Africans during this particular expe­
dition and an undertow of religious and imperial mistrust that existed pri­
marily among the Fula through whose territory Campbell intended to pass.
In his journal, Campbell emerges as a bit naive and intemperate, yet certain
of his own superiority to those about him. Perhaps Campbell thought that
his journal would serve as the template for a longer and detailed description
of his adventure. Whatever his objective, the record demonstrates both his
strengths and his weaknesses and his misunderstanding of circumstances
that bedeviled his progress.10

Among the '21 memoranda' are 18 that appear to be verbatim transcrip­
tions of reports from African traders, travelers, or guides about prices of
goods in the interior, exchange values in bars and cowries, descriptions of
paths and towns located along them, tributary relationship of towns to
empires, persons of importance in the interior who would hinder or expedite
commerce, and information about the whereabouts of Mungo Park and the
courses of rivers.11 These reports are often contradictory—one to another—
but together provide an interesting portrait of interior commerce and the
intricacies of conducting commercial and political business with Africans in
the early nineteenth century.

III

When I first encountered this document in 1964, I recognized its uniqueness
as a nearly-complete record of an expedition, but I knew that to bring it to
publishable status would require more time and effort than I was at that time
(research for the dissertation) able to commit. In addition I grasped that it
was the record of a failed expedition and that the commentary was both long

10 Listed as "Journal of a Mission into the interior of Africa commencing Feby. 1817,"
manuscript pages 117-489.
11 Listed as "No. 1 a 21, 21 Memorandums relating to Africa - Tombuctoo &c. collected
by the late Capt. Campbell," manuscript pages 491-533.
and ponderous. Indeed, there seemed to be little new ‘discovery’ information contained that would interest general readers of exploration adventures or those of specific African interest outside the small region of the African coast and immediate interior covered by the expedition itself. The reasons why it had escaped publication were prominently clear, and few if any, apparently, were interested in British misadventures. The physical record itself was even then in poor shape, perhaps an indication that numerous readers had perused its pages—obviously many had found it interesting enough to read it. To maximize my efforts while in Britain, I ordered the record microfilmed and focused instead on correspondence more relevant to my dissertation topic.

Over several following decades, I returned to the record frequently, and transcribed sections relevant to my research interests. Only when those transcribed pieces multiplied and when only a small part remained did the record’s full importance become clear. It was also apparent that the ideal course for annotation and publication might involve a collective effort by several individuals with special expertise, but the difficulty of recruiting such persons and coordinating efforts in a pre-internet and pre-email age seemed onerous at that time. Such a coordinated project might have been feasible had I been working in proximity to others conducting similar research, but that was not the case. It might also be useful to note that I was at the same time working with several other unpublished records—journals written by Brian O’Beirne, Alexander Smith, and Richard Bright; James Watt’s journal of his expedition to Timbo in 1794; and Samuel Gamble’s journal of a slaving voyage for 1793-94—all requiring careful transcription to extract information useful to my immediate research interests. All these records had lain unpublished for nearly two centuries, and I saw no one declaring an interest in bringing them to publishable form. By the time the internet and email age became imperatives for researchers, a major part of my work on all of these projects was either completed or well advanced, and I was entering a period of retirement and was looking for venues for several unpublished monographs from the eighteenth/nineteenth centuries.

Every author or editor that I know would like to ‘take back’ some of what they have written and integrate new techniques or opportunities that come ‘online’ or are the consequence of new publications or something unknown at the time. In this instance, however, the process of transcription occurred piecemeal over a twenty-year span, and involved at least four visits to relevant archives and libraries in Britain for data relating to this and other projects. There is also the reality, however, that there comes a time to bring a project to completion, regardless of what is yet possible. While research is always a ‘work in progress,’ there is nevertheless a time to quit.
Regrets are guaranteed, and perhaps one should not want it any other way. Ideally, one should circulate one’s writing to colleagues for reactions and suggestions, but the reality on that score is that everyone I know is busy, and few are able to commit time and effort for more than a cursory review for errors.

At any rate, having brought my account and annotation of the Peddie/Campbell expedition to completion, there are aspects and approaches that I might have pursued. From the outset, I faced the question that perhaps I should make a choice from the record, rather than present the whole of it. Once I had transcribed nearly all of it, however, it seemed a waste to provide only a section or sections—others indeed might find my collection as incorrect or assume that what I had selected to be the complete record. I chose, nevertheless, to omit two parts. One involved three feeble attempts (in French) by Adolphe Kummer to write a journal, but for some reason Kummer abandoned that effort soon after arriving in the Rio Nunez. Kummer also had been instructed to collect fauna and insects and provide descriptions—these I also omitted because they were written cryptically (and in French) in scientific terms that were clearly beyond my expertise to decipher or explore. A second omitted section was found at the end of the record and contained letters written by applicants to government offices for bonuses claimed for having participated in the expedition. Most of these were written by surviving spouses or inheritors.

My regrets also are several. While Kummer’s botanical descriptions are likely of significant value, the task of identifying a collaborator in that field, of delivering to him a copy of the original manuscript, and of coordinating his efforts with respect to the larger project seemed daunting. Still, that addition would have been worthwhile. A second regret has to do with drawings that appeared in the original manuscript. Although I had obtained a microfilm copy of the record and had transcribed mainly from that source, I did revisit the archive on several occasions to confirm issues of accuracy and uncover words and phrases that had been covered in binding mechanisms. I had intended to make copies of drawings from the microfilm copy—a mistake on my part. While drawings in the published version are legible, they nevertheless are not of the best quality, but to obtain the latter would have involved a new visit to the archive or special orders, which currently are very expensive. A third regret involved my decision to limit annotation of the 21 memoranda contained in part III of the volume. These memoranda were written by guides or merchants, and were transcribed originally without much attempt to maintain consistency in spelling or to check for accuracy. Rather than unravel those reports, I chose to leave them as they appeared in the report. Certainly, others will not be satisfied with my effort
or decision. And lastly, I still would have liked to postpone and check at least another time the accuracy of my transcription. But there is a time to quit.

Locating a publishing venue for such an edited volume was also discouraging. One publisher sat on the manuscript for nearly three years, and eventually rejected it primarily because consultants—while they believed it to be important—thought that readers would not appreciate the value of a record of a basically failed expedition. Those readers’ comments were helpful, however, in bringing greater focus to the manuscript and forcing me to search more diligently for annotation materials. One reader—I recall with some amusement—suggested that an American press would not be so selective and that it should not be difficult to find one. Another press—a prestigious one in Africa—was very encouraging, but after nearly two years of negotiations, they turned it down for financial reasons—altogether understandable considering the current desperate state of most African academic institutions. Had I been a young scholar and under institutional pressures to publish in a major venue, I might have sought out other publishers, and surely there are some still interested in publishing such works. But I’m now retired, and bit weary of the trauma of waiting, searching, revising to suit the wishes of perhaps less-than-enthusiastic consultants, and of leading a manuscript to completion.

As a final thought, I cannot but reflect on the counsel of a mentor, Professor Paul E. H. Hair of Liverpool. His advice was to do one’s best and move on. Hair is an inspiration to all that deal with edited and annotated works—his record of publication is profound and significant. Many of his pieces were small, and some seemed to stand without much effort to tie them to other literature in the field. He never tired, however, to the task. He commented once, when I had grumbled that one of my contributions had been rejected by a journal, that recently one of his had been rejected by an American journal for being “unprofessional.” Of course, he said it with a smile. I took that to mean that I should do my best, be brave, and move on.