THEOPHILUS CONNEAU: THE SAGA OF A TALE

Bruce L. Mouser
University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse

I.

Rare has been the book on Africa that has acquired a history and become the subject of study in its own right. One such is the autobiography of Théophilus Conneau, a slave dealer of French and Italian background, who lived on the west coast of Africa during the 1830s and 1840s. Various accounts of Conneau's experiences in Guinea and Liberia have been translated into four languages, and were even incorporated into a successful novel in 1933, on which was based a motion picture. The latest version of Conneau's life story (and the occasion for this paper) was published as recently as 1976.1

Conneau's story first came to press in 1854 through the editorial assistance and skill of Brantz Mayer, a lecturer, author, and journalist of the Baltimore area, known principally for his writings about Latin America.2 Having obtained experience and contacts with publishers by editing manuscripts and letters, Mayer was a valuable asset to a new author in 1853. Recently discovered letters from Conneau to Mayer and Mayer's own account of the relationship between them suggest an interesting beginning for this literary enterprise. Conneau found himself in 1853 in Baltimore where he met James Hall, whom he had known previously in Liberia.3 Hall had been an enthusiastic supporter of the Maryland settlement for freed Blacks at Cape Palmas and had served as that settlement's first governor from 1833 to 1836.4 Concluding that Conneau's story of a repentant slave trader would be of value to the cause of anti-slavery and black emigration from the United States to Africa, Hall suggested that Conneau write his memoirs and introduced him to Mayer. By his own admission, Conneau had been following a string of bad luck and needed a success to rebuild his image. Conneau began writing, drawing information from his diaries to make a lengthy memorandum of more than six hundred manuscript pages. Despite this accomplishment, Conneau thought himself ill-prepared to polish his thoughts and set them down in the

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particular English narrative style customary in the mid-nineteenth century. Mayer, on the other hand, wrote of the conquest of the unknown with slight regard for precise facts but in a style well embellished with the proper moral overtones so popular at that time.\(^5\)

One can but wonder what must have transpired when Mayer and Conneau began their discussions in 1853 about the potential of such a manuscript. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* first published in 1852, had taken the nation by storm and was rushed into several translations the following year.\(^6\) The success of her volume and that of a second, *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published in 1853, had made the subject of slavery, and possibly slave trading, a saleable commodity. Both Conneau and Mayer must have been moderately knowledgeable about prominent issues of the day and aware of the possibilities of another book on the topic of slavery.

Mayer's principal motive for accepting the editorship was perhaps the recognition that little indeed needed to be done to shape the manuscript into publishable form. Mayer's primary interests lay south of the Rio Grande, and he was in 1853 collecting materials for two monographs on aspects of Mexican history. Clearly Africa was not an area of new or enduring interest to Mayer, for he wrote no more about that continent. After reading Conneau's memorandum, Mayer perhaps saw the editorship as a simple and potentially profitable exercise following in the wake of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

For his part, Conneau was not exactly an innocent in this partnership. Born in September of 1804 of an Italian mother and a father who was an officer in the French Army, Conneau came of age in the turmoil of the post-Napoleonic period, quit school in 1816, and joined the flotsam of adventurers which wars of such scale produce.\(^7\) At age fifteen, he embarked as a cabin-boy on board an American merchant vessel and thereafter served on ships of various nations, becoming skilled in the use of English, Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese.\(^8\) Between 1827 and 1833, he worked as a clerk and operated a slave trading factory on the West African coast, in the Rio Pongo.\(^9\) Known as Theodore Canot on the coast, Conneau clashed with British officials at Freetown in 1833, and a year later, French officials at Goree condemned him as a slaver for his activities in the Salum region of Senegal. Sentenced in 1834 to serve five years for trafficking in slaves, Conneau received a commutation of sentence in 1835 but stayed away from the coast for several years.\(^10\)

In 1839 Conneau returned to Africa, where he operated trading concerns at New Cestos and Cape Mount near the American settlements in Liberia.\(^11\) In 1846 Conneau sailed to New York where he reportedly purchased the barque *Chancellor* and returned to the coast, preparing to ship slaves to the Americas.
Squadron vessels of both the British and American fleets, however, watched him carefully for signs of intended slaving and seized the *Chancellor* when it appeared that the crew was equipping the vessel, but when Conneau's case appeared in court the indictment was dismissed on the technicality that he was not the official owner of the *Chancellor*. Conneau shipped to South America soon thereafter. Perhaps it was Conneau whom Commander Andrew Foote of the U.S. Brig *Perry* identified as the Italian supercargo on board the American slaver *Chatsworth*, which was seized off the Angolan coast, condemned, and sent to Baltimore for judgment in September of 1850.

From correspondence between Conneau and Mayer it is clear that a bargain was soon struck. Mayer would spin a tale of adventure in which a thinly veiled Conneau would be the principal and which would contain the life's dream of every red-blooded American boy. Conneau would partake of the good life, resist temptations of the flesh, recognize evil at a glance, travel the requisite African safari, and provide a moralistic warning to slavers and slaveholders alike who refused to recognize the impending demise of those institutions. Conneau, for his part, adopted the name by which he was known on the African coast, that of Theodore Canot. Perhaps he wanted the protection which another name would provide, or he may have sought to protect his brother from the possible embarrassment which might result from the publication of his journal. Even the title, *Captain Canot; or, Twenty Years of an African Slaver*, would follow the identical form used by Stowe two years earlier, an obvious attempt to foist *Captain Canot* on the reading public as its sequel.

With an American publisher secured and with 150 pages edited by Mayer, Conneau left early in 1854 for London and Paris where he began a French translation and where he reached agreements with French and British publishers for European editions. Meanwhile he translated as Mayer sent freshly edited copy to him. It is clear that Conneau and his family connections were as useful to Mayer in Europe as Mayer had been to Conneau in Baltimore. Writers were plentiful in England in mid-century, but a live slave trader and one who was articulate and Franco-Italian, was a rare commodity in the European book market. Nor did Conneau's acquaintances in France and in the court of Napoleon III diminish his acceptability in Europe. According to Conneau's letters to Mayer, his brother arranged for him to meet the new Emperor, and Napoleon was so taken with this slaver-turned-writer that he appointed him to a specially-created post.

Although there are some suggestions of difficulty, the working arrangement between Conneau and Mayer was generally cordial. It seems that three well-established publishers cooperated to conceal Conneau's true identity and to misrepresent the relationship between Mayer and Conneau in this
venture. With Conneau's blessing, Mayer sought to develop a rationale for Conneau's account, one appropriately steeped in moralistic tones as well as revelations about the "nature of the race itself." Mayer seemed convinced that Conneau had observed the African peoples as had no European before and characterized Africa as "aboriginal," "unstirred by progress," "unmodified by reflective civilization," and "full of barbarism." At the same time, he emphasized that Africa was a land of great promise. Liberia would "spread its fibres from the coast to the interior, and, like veins of refreshing blood, pour new currents into the mummy's heart." According to Mayer, Africans were better off in Africa, a thesis also adopted by the Maryland Colonization Association, to which Mayer had presented papers and by several other colonization societies.

II.

Despite the high hopes of author, editor, and publisher, Captain Canot did not become a sequel to Uncle Tom's Cabin. Aside from the explicable 1856 American re-issue and a less understandable 1873 pictorial edition in French, Conneau's account of life on the African coast lay dormant and forgotten for nearly half a century, until Sir Harry Johnston brought attention to the work in his Liberia, for its value as a part of Africana literature. Johnston used the account, often quoting long passages, to demonstrate the vitality of the slave trade in the 1830s, pinpointing the Rio Pongo and the Gallinas River as centers of slaving on the Windward Coast. To Johnston, Conneau was a "thrilling" character, and Johnston indicated surprise that Conneau's story had obtained such "little vogue." Nearly twenty years passed after Johnston's discovery before new editions of Canot were published. These were in much different form than that presented by Mayer. The editor of the first was Malcolm Cowley, who had translated and edited several works before he became interested in Conneau and who later attained stature as a poet and editor. Passing over the civil war and the greater question of the "nature of the race itself", there remained the swashbuckler, the adventurer, the Horatio Alger type of hero who met adversity and won, a type who challenged law and order, especially those laws which regulated moral issues. In his introduction Cowley compared anti-slave trade legislation to that which had established Prohibition. To Cowley, slaving could not have existed had not Africans been interested in it and had not New Yorkers provided the capital and reaped the profits. Was it so unlike the case with rum-running, Cowley wondered? In the Middle Passage "slaves were packed as tightly as cases of Scotch whiskey," and "No cargo, no conviction" resulted in contraband, whether slaves or liquor, tossed overboard.
To Cowley, Conneau was a product of his age. Out of the Napoleonic wars had come a generation of adventurers, "privates in the army of Fortune." Conneau's story consequently took on the aura of an "international episode," almost a return to the condottiere spirit of fourteenth century Italy. Conneau could be and necessarily was "brave, treacherous, obliging" and "wily, suave, ambitious, politic and unforgiving." Whatever Cowley's reason for other comments concerning Mayer and Conneau, one can only speculate. Cowley called Mayer a "non-entity" who opposed the abolition of slavery and especially the amalgamists, preferring to ship freed Blacks back to Africa. Cowley claimed that in 1853 Conneau was a derelict in Baltimore, a far cry from his glorious days with Napoleon III. Reduced to panhandling, he had met Dr. Hall who asked him to write his memoirs. Cowley left the reader with the impression that Conneau, aided by diaries and papers, told all to Mayer, who recorded and edited the ramblings of a defeated and wasted man in return for a full bottle of liquor. In his edition, Cowley claimed to have removed Mayer from the narrative, thereby making the 1928 version a better reflection of Conneau's experiences than the 1854 edition. It is interesting to note that, as with Mayer, Cowley never returned to an African topic.

A year later and unrelated to the publication of the Cowley edition, Arnold W. Lawrence answered Johnston's call for renewed attention to Canot, and another edition was published. Lawrence came closer to the truth than Cowley in his interpretation of events leading to the publication of the 1854 account and was the first to uncover Conneau's successes in the court of Napoleon III. He characterized Conneau as a "picturesque scoundrel," yet generally truthful in his depiction of African society. Lawrence recognized the bombastic language of Mayer and claimed to have removed the more offensive sections in his edition. But Lawrence also mirrored his own time when he observed that slaving ended as Africa "fell under the control of civilized nations." The lesson of Canot concerned not only the evils of slavery, but also the fact that Africa in 1929 still attracted the "forcible, reckless, resourceful egoist" of which Conneau was an exaggerated example.

Perhaps it was inevitable with the coming of the Great Depression that someone would transform Conneau's story into an avenue of escape from its harsh realities. Hervey Allen, who had enjoyed little success in publishing until then, read Conneau and adopted it for a major part of his novel, Anthony Adverse, which became a best seller. The fact that few read Adverse in its entirety (it was over 1200 pages long) did not deter them from heaping praise upon the book and its author. The weaknesses of the book became apparent a few years later when it was translated into the longest motion picture of 1936. It was not a box-office hit, even though it managed to win four academy awards.
With the coming of World War II Africa acquired new importance and accounts such as Conneau's often played roles in the reconstruction of Africa's past. Each record, whether written or oral, in the process of that reconstruction became suspect. Some, like Drake's *Revelations of a Slave Smuggler*, did not survive scrutiny and were set aside in favor of those verified by more than one type of corroborative information. Others, like Joseph Hawkins of New York, who claimed to have visited the African coast in 1794, employed obviously erroneous data and brought the value of their accounts into question, suggesting that perhaps the authors had become confused in time or had not been there in the first place.

Over the years, Conneau's readers have given him mixed reviews. In his *The American Slave Trade*, published in 1900, John R. Spears characterized Conneau as "practically an autobiography." Sir Harry Johnston believed it impossible to determine if Conneau was "all true," but simply by stating his opinion in those terms gave credence to the account. Both Lawrence and Cowley accepted the story as largely accurate and in their editions sought to remove those sections and passages which they believed represented the biases of Brantz Mayer. Since the early 1930s many have accepted Cowley's rendition as more accurate, with perhaps James Pope-Hennessey, in his 1967 *Sins of the Fathers*, the leading proponent of this evaluation. Warren S. Howard, on the other hand, described *Captain Canot* as "supposed memoirs . . . of dubious validity." My own belief is that, except for a three-and-one-half year discrepancy between dates for events described in Conneau and those in British records, the Mayer account of Théophile Conneau's activities in the Rio Pongo area is one of the best descriptions of coastal commerce available to African historians.

Recently there have been rather interesting developments regarding the Conneau/Canot book. In Washington the original Conneau memorandum, the one which Mayer had polished into the 1854 manuscript, as well as a number of letters written by Conneau to Mayer, were found in an old bookshop. Events leading to the publication of this original manuscript in 1976 have become muddled in the telling. According to the pre-publication announcement, the manuscript was edited by Tam Mossman, an employee of the publisher with an introduction by Mabel M. Smythe, Director of the Phelps-Stokes Fund. The announcement by the publisher and the book itself failed, however, to mention Mossman at all, and the reader is left with the impression that Smythe is the editor of the work.

Both announcements claim the inclusion of "many names, details, and anecdotes that the 19th century edition deleted." Perhaps, though, "many" was an inappropriate adjective to use in this case. To be sure, there are more names mentioned, and these additions are important in the verification of Conneau's
account. The additional dates, which even the 1976 editor (Mossman or Smythe) admitted were approximations, are another matter. The one page of the manuscript reproduced at the beginning of the volume demonstrates dramatically those problems and pitfalls which confront an editor of material such as this. In this instance, the editor added the word "September" before the year and the number "79th" after the word "Chapter," and deleted corrections and rewriting where marked out in the manuscript. It is impossible, moreover, to ascertain whether these corrections were in the handwriting of Conneau or Mayer. Later, the editor incorrectly read the word "few" as "low." Such additions, corrections, deletions, and misreadings, all within a single page, should give the reader cause to question the quality of the rest of the manuscript. As for new "details" and "anecdotes," I found few that were important to the account or that brought significant new insights into African societies. Mayer clearly had made extensive changes early in the work, perhaps because the pressures of publishers' deadlines had not yet become evident. With Conneau in Europe busily translating Mayer's edited copy into French, however, Mayer made fewer and fewer changes on his own later on.

As interesting as the memorandum itself is the new introduction written by Smythe, who felt obliged to seek a moral behind Conneau's account, by arguing that the "overriding lesson" of the memorandum was that there was and is in "a human being an enormous capacity for rationalization." Racism became "white racial and cultural superiority" and "when the Captain judges the treatment of slaves, it is not by the standards that western civilization would apply to its own members, but by the conception of what slaves might expect or deserve -- in the judgment of whites, of course." Smythe sprinkled her analysis with such terms as "repellent conduct," "protestations of Christianity," "flaunting of law," "viciousness," and "brutality," failing to place Conneau in his time and has retroactively applied a new morality to the story. She demanded that Conneau be consistent, noting that, while he thought it immoral for women to go about without clothing, he somehow sanctioned nudity on board ship as healthy and necessary. She demanded that Conneau, as a Catholic, oppose suicide among slaves as a mortal sin rather than as an economic loss. For some reason, she expected Conneau to see Africa through something other than "a European filter."

Smythe is torn by the opportunity to introduce this important manuscript. To publish is to put into the hands of prejudiced American males another swashbuckling male chauvinist. There is an "ultimate danger of the Conneau treatise," an "insidious poison," that someone who will read Conneau's commentary might interpret him in favorable, even heroic, terms. Most unacceptable to Smythe is the possibility that Conneau will
come across as a reasonable sort of fellow, fitting into his
time, making slave trading a palatable pastime for enter-
prising Christian entrepreneurs. And there is a rejoinder to
historians who "let us hope . . . will be more analytical"
and who will treat the subject in a proper manner — as defined
by Smythe. Smythe does not quite trust her audience, and
reminds us that it takes a "tough, sophisticated, and disci-
plined mind" to understand Conneau properly. 6

Aside from the interesting case of editors, editions, and
actors through which Captain Canot has passed over the past
120 years, the value of the account as a historical document
has stood the test of time and improved with age. Conneau
undoubtedly possessed unusual abilities to recollect his past.
The fact that his record of events in the Rio Pongo was in
error by over three years reveals, however, something about
the exactness of his rendition. Conneau was a survivor who
believed in keeping discreet records. He was certainly well
enough aware that a diary specifying transactions would
condemn him as a slaver. Consequently, it is doubtful that
he kept a full written account of his experiences on the
African coast, and the precise accuracy of his names, dates,
and exact circumstances of events inevitably leaves much to
be desired. But his appreciation and understanding of the
mechanics of coastal trade, while perhaps self-serving in the
telling, is remarkable in its awareness of the relationship
between the European ship captain, coastal merchant, and long
distance caravan leader and in the importance of middlemen in
this commercial arrangement. Conneau professed to see himself
in the role of a repentant sinner whose experiences in the
slave trade could be excused as the excesses of one possessed
by evil forces. Others had profited from such accounts and he
needed the money. Yet, Conneau was not about to reveal himself
as too late a convert to the cause of the anti-slavery move-
ment. His description of Liberia and life at Cape Mount is
much more defensive against justified accusations of slaving
which followed him southward along the coast than is his
description of activities in the Rio Pongo. Although the 1976
version of Conneau is the fullest and most reliable of the lot,
it is regretable that we will need go through another to correct
the editor's additions, corrections, deletions, and misread-
ings, and posturings.

NOTES

1. Théophilus Conneau, A Slaver's Log Book, or 20 Years' Residence in Africa (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1976), here-
after cited A Slaver's Log Book.


8. Ibid., pp. 252-53.

9. The exact dates of Conneau's residence in the Rio Pongo are unclear. Findlay to Hay, 16 December 1831, CO267/110, PRO, and Findlay to Hay, 6 May 1833, CO267/119, PRO, suggest that Conneau entered the river trade in 1831.


13. Adventures (Cowley), pp. 373-74; Commander Andrew H. Foote, Africa and the American Flag (New York; 1854), pp. 319-23; and Deposition of Charles Hamilton, RG21: Records of the U.S. District Court for Maryland (Baltimore), Admiralty case files, U.S. vs. The Brigantine Chatsworth, U.S. National Archives. Conneau had an older brother, Henri, whose success in France mirrored, in part, his own in Africa. Henri studied medicine and attached his fortune early to that of the Napoleon family, serving as a foreign
secretary to Louis Bonaparte, in exile at Florence. He became a close friend of the young Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte and through the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s remained his advisor. While imprisoned with Louis Napoleon in 1842, Henri received a letter from Théophile who tried to capitalize on Henri's connections to obtain French protection for his factory in Liberia. Henri in turn wrote to Louis Edouard Bouët-Williaumez, Governor of Senegal, requesting that he investigate Théophile's circumstances, but in the end nothing was done. For Henri Conneau and Théophile's attempts to use Henri's position in France, see Frank H. Cheetham, Louis Napoleon and The Genesis of the Second Republic (New York, 1909), pp. 121-22, and R. Pasquier, "A propos de Théodore Canot négrier en Afrique," Revue française d'histoire d'outre mer, 55(1968), pp. 352-54.

14. Deb Lan, "Théodore Canot," 215. Mabel M. Smythe, in her introduction to A Slaver's Log Book, iii. thought the name Canot to be "a clever pseudonym . . . a homonym meaning dinghy in French." The British, French and American references, however, clearly demonstrate that others had, as early as 1831, called him by the name which he later used in his book, that is, Theodore Canot.


19. Captain Canot (Mayer), iv.

20. Ibid., vi.

21. Ibid., v.


25. Ibid., xv.

26. Ibid., xviii-xix.

27. Ibid., xx-xxi.

28. Ibid., xx.

29. Ibid., xxi.
39. See Bruce L. Mouser, "Captain Canot; or, Retrieving Value from the Dubious" (unpublished paper, Fourth Annual Conference on Liberian Studies, 1972).
40. *A Slaver's Log Book*, iii. Between the Lawrence edition and that of 1976, two translations of the original as edited by Mayer were printed. *Abenteuer afrikanischer Sklavenhändler von Kapitän Theodore Canot* (Voorburg, 1942), is most mysterious because, although Conneau would seem ideal to exemplify Nazi racist principles, the book's introduction described the account as little more than an exciting adventure story. Perhaps the Dutch interpreted the understated publication of Conneau as a minor victory against German occupation. See also *Ouro, escravos e marfim, as aventures de Théodore Canot*, related by Robert Mantz. Tr. by Iolanda L. Santos (São Paulo, 1946).
42. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid., vii–viii.
46. Ibid., ix–x.