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Account of the Native Africans in the Neighbourhood of Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone in West Africa is the subject of this 1803 work by English physician Thomas Winterbottom (1766–1859). In the 1790s he spent four years there working for the Sierra Leone Company (established by abolitionists to resettle ex-slaves), and combating diseases such as malaria and scurvy. He displays none of the pejorative views of Africa or its inhabitants that some of his contemporaries expressed, but has a very positive opinion of the country. Winterbottom describes the women as beautiful and graceful, and he dismisses racial differentiations based on skin colour as being absurd. In Volume 1 he draws a many-faceted picture of the climate, history and traditions of Sierra Leone, describing the limited diet of the inhabitants (consisting mainly of rice and palm oil), and seeking to give scientific answers to such questions as why the hair of the inhabitants is mostly of a 'woolly' type.
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Account of the Native Africans in the Neighbourhood of Sierra Leone

To Which is Added, An Account of the Present State of Medicine Among Them

Volume 1

Thomas Winterbottom
of Freetown, on the River Sierra
Port of Freetown on the River Sierra
AN ACCOUNT

OF THE NATIVE AFRICANS

IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD OF SIERRA LEONE;

TO WHICH IS ADDED,

AN ACCOUNT

OF THE PRESENT STATE OF MEDICINE AMONG THEM.

BY

THOMAS WINTERBOTTOM, M. D.

PHYSICIAN TO THE COLONY OF SIERRA LEONE.

VOL. I.

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PREFACE.

The Author does not presume to offer any apology for laying the following work before the tribunal of the Public: but, before their sentence upon it be pronounced, he wishes to observe, that it is offered merely as a rude sketch of the domestic economy, and medical knowledge, of the inhabitants of the windward coast of Africa; or rather, as a collection of gleanings which have either escaped the notice of more successful reapers in that extensive field, or which have been passed over as of little importance. If this work should be found to add little to our present knowledge of Africa, the Author hopes that it may at least tend to remove some prejudices respecting its inhabitants, whose customs have, in various instances, been misrepresented.

The work is divided into two parts, the
latter of which, first engaged the Author's attention; to this was subjoined a brief account of the manners and customs of the people whose diseases had been noticed. But this account having increased so much by successive additions, as greatly to exceed the limits originally marked out for it, and the medical part being thought likely to prove uninteresting to many who might be desirous of perusing the rest of the work, it seemed adviseable to alter the arrangement, and print each part in separate volumes, in order that the general reader might be at liberty to purchase the one, without being obliged to purchase the other also.

The Vocabularies placed at the end of the work, will probably appear to many to be too extensive and cumbrous; but the Author hopes they may prove useful to Europeans who visit that part of the African coast to which his account relates, by facilitating the acquisition of a more accurate knowledge of the native languages, a point of indispensable necessity to those who desire exact information.
The difficulty of procuring satisfactory intelligence from the natives of Africa, respecting themselves or their country, is known only to those who have made the experiment; they frequently lead Europeans into error by answering questions in the affirmative, merely to avoid trouble and escape importunity. The questions themselves sometimes awaken the jealousy of those to whom they are addressed; feeling no desire to institute similar inquiries, they are apt to suspect that the curiosity of Europeans has some sinister end in view. It requires also much time, and a fund of patience, to propose the necessary queries; to vary them in such a manner as to enable the natives to comprehend their precise import; and to compare the testimonies of different individuals in order to avoid the risk of misconception. Even interpreters are not to be implicitly relied on, as they are apt to give to answers that colour which they perceive will be most agreeable to their employer.
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PREFACE.

The author begs leave to return his sincere acknowledgments to his excellent friend, Z. Macaulay, Esq. formerly Governor of Sierra Leone, for much valuable information, and likewise for the Map of the Coast which accompanies this work.
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No. The Boundaries of the Feka & Mendingo Countries are laid down according to the best information which could be procured from Mr. West and from several intelligent men. The Northern Boundary of Feka is supposed to extend about 20 or 30 Miles beyond the limits of this Map.

The Boundaries of the Seneca of Romas in the South, and of the Timmenoes and Sherko Balmos on the Estot are not sufficiently known to be traced with any accuracy. The Timmenoes however are supposed to extend 90 or 100 Miles from the Estot, and the Sherko Balmos 100 to 120 Miles.

No. The Longitude of Cape Slavei (or Bos) is fixed by some late Astronomical Observations at 13° 21' W. which is probably near the truth, but it could not be adopted in the present Map without altering the relative positions of places on the Coast which there was no authority for doing.