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Edited by Charles Hansford Adams

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THE NARRATIVE OF ROBERT ADAMS, A BARBARY CAPTIVE

First published in London in 1816, *The Narrative of Robert Adams* is an account of the adventures of Robert Adams, an African American seaman who survives shipwreck, slavery, and brutal efforts to convert him to Islam, before finally being ransomed to the British consul. In London, Adams is discovered by the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa, which publishes his story, including a fantastical account of a trip to Timbuctoo. Adams's story is accompanied by contemporary essays and notes that place his experience in the context of European exploration of Africa at the time, and weigh his credibility against other contemporary accounts. Professor Adams's Preface examines Adams's credibility in light of modern knowledge of Africa and discusses the significance of his story in relation to the early-nineteenth-century interest in Timbuctoo and to the literary genres of the slave narrative and the Barbary captivity narrative.

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For My Parents, Again

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Figure 1. West Africa.

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I

Through much of the month of November 1815, an illiterate African American sailor sat in an office in the City of London, talking with some of the most powerful men in Britain about Timbuctoo. Had they passed him in the crowded streets of Regency London, these men of affairs – merchants, statesmen, scientists, and military officers – would not even have glanced at the dark, impoverished, and sickly figure sitting before them. But he had a story to tell that they could not afford to ignore. He had, he claimed, crossed the deadly Sahara as a slave, spent six months in the fabled city on the Niger, and (most remarkably) returned to tell the tale. For those who listened to his narrative, this was important news indeed. No reliable witness – that is, no one from the West – had brought Europe information about Timbuctoo since Leo Africanus in the sixteenth century, and Leo was, after all, but a Christianized Moor of Granada. An account of Timbuctoo by an ignorant American “mulatto” might require some sifting, but his subject was worth the effort. For the City merchants in attendance, the word Timbuctoo triggered visions of a great emporium in the African interior, the wealth of which rested mainly on its trade in gold and slaves. Those who came from Westminster and Whitehall, fresh from conversations about Britain’s role in the world five months after Waterloo, thought of both gold and national power. A lot might depend on what this black man had to say.

The sailor wanted to go home to New York, but he also needed the money that these men were giving him in return for his story. He was destitute, and they offered clothes, shelter, and cash as long as he answered their questions, with a promise of a bounty once they had

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finished. He needed their protection, too. Even eight months after the ratification of the Treaty of Ghent, renewed hostilities between Britain and the United States seemed possible. He had good reason to fear impressment if he were to risk a sea passage home without the guarantee of redemption that the Admiralty had offered. He could not bear another captivity – although a freeman at home, he had been a slave to several brutal masters in Africa, and, as he hinted to his London benefactors, he had already tasted of the brutal discipline of the Royal Navy.

His name was Robert Adams. Or, at least, that was the name that he gave to Mr. Simon Cock, Secretary to the Committee of the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa. Mr. Cock had found him living in the streets “in very ill plight, both from hunger and nakedness” (*Narrative* 9). More precisely, Mr. Cock had been led to him by a man lately arrived in London from Cadiz, who recognized the indigent sailor as the same one who had caused a stir just a few months earlier in that Spanish port by his fabulous tales of Timbuctoo. Mr. Cock knew that such a story, if credible, would be of great interest to the members of the Committee that employed him, and arranged for the American to be brought to the office of the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa. It was in the office of the African Company (as it was called) that this broken wanderer met the men of trade and empire interested in his tale. It was there, in Frederick’s Place, off Old Jewry, that Simon Cock and his colleagues stitched the sailor’s various answers to the gentlemen’s questions into a consecutive narrative, assembled the supporting materials (introduction, map, notes, and appendices), and arranged for the house of John Murray to publish *The Narrative of Robert Adams*.

The sailor had used the name of Adams in Cadiz as well, but Mr. Cock would eventually discover that his name might actually be Benjamin Rose, the name that he had given to those who ransomed him from slavery in Africa, and under which he had shipped as a merchant seaman from New York five and a half years before he was found living in the streets of London. Or, he might be neither Rose nor Adams. He stuck with Adams throughout his time in London, but his name was of no particular interest to the Committee of the African Company, or to the “upwards of fifty” gentlemen who made their way to the African Company’s office to see him, or even to the really important men to whose offices in Westminster and the West End Mr. Cock took the American for interviews (11). Sailors of this period often changed

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their names; and in any case, the capital was “crowded” with “distressed seamen,” many of whom were black, and all of whom would be assumed by respectable people to have good reason to use more than one name (9; Bolster 19–20).

Still, the matter of his name bothered his sponsors. Mr. Cock included in his introduction to Adams’s published narrative an extended discussion of the sailor’s name by Joseph Dupuis, the British vice-consul at Mogador, in Morocco. Dupuis (whose numerous contributions to the finished *Narrative* make him Cock’s co-editor) had ransomed an American calling himself Benjamin Rose from slavery among the desert Arabs in 1814, and had made notes of the man’s tale of travel to Timbuctoo before sending him north to meet with the Emperor of Morocco. Two years later, Dupuis very publicly staked his rising reputation in the Foreign Office on the credibility of the publication by Mr. Cock and the African Company of this same American’s tale, even if he now called himself Adams. Maybe, Dupuis ventured, he changed his name because he had been impressed by the Royal Navy; maybe he had been a prisoner of the Navy and was afraid of being apprehended; or maybe he did it because, as he had told Dupuis at Mogador, he had left America in order to escape a romantic entanglement which he was “unwilling to make good by marriage” (17). Maybe, or maybe not. The question of the sailor’s name mattered to Cock and Dupuis as they prepared his narrative for publication because they knew that it stood for the central issue raised by *The Narrative of Robert Adams*, in 1816 and today – can we believe him, whoever he was?

Some who listened to him had their doubts. Most notably, Sir Joseph Banks and John (later Sir John) Barrow had their doubts. Banks was the President of the Royal Society, the founder of the Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa (called the African Association), and one of the most famous men of science in Europe. Barrow, a Fellow of the Royal Society, had been Second Secretary to the Admiralty for more than a decade and enjoyed a reputation as one of the great scientific travelers of the age; his accounts of adventures in China and South Africa were on every educated man’s bookshelf. Cock had to admit in his introduction that Adams “had the misfortune . . . to excite some doubts in their minds by his account of Tombuctoo, and by his mistakes on some subjects of natural history,” though Cock felt at liberty to mention them as subscribers to the “*general* truth of his

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Adams is discovered in the Tent with Isha.

Figure 2. Illustration for a retelling of *The Narrative of Robert Adams* in *Robinson Crusoe's Own Book* (1846).

Narrative" (13). Others, as we shall see, would not grant Adams even that. The bare outline of his story was too fantastic for some: shipwrecked along the Mauritanian coast, captured and enslaved by desert nomads, carried hundreds of miles across the Sahara into the interior of Africa, taken from his masters by black Africans who murdered the Moors and marched him to Timbuctoo, held there as human merchandise for six months, sold back into Moorish slavery and marched back across the Sahara, sold again and traded from one vicious master to another in southern Morocco (very publicly cuckolding one), ransomed by Dupuis at Mogador, taken to Meknes and interviewed by the Emperor himself, conveyed under imperial guard to Tangier, and placed aboard a ship to Cadiz, where he was put to work as a groom for more than a year by an English gentleman residing there, before finally making his way via Holyhead to London and the office of the African Company.

Fantastic though it was, most of those who listened to him in London had no trouble believing, with Banks and Barrow, the "general truth" of his story. That is, they believed that he had been shipwrecked and

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enslaved by the desert tribes, since such stories were familiar enough by this time; the reasons for their popularity will be addressed in Section V of this Preface. The question that vexed those who listened to Adams in 1815 and that continues to vex his readers right up until the present time concerns Timbuctoo.

Did he go there? Did this obscure African American accomplish on his own what several well-funded and widely publicized explorers before him had failed to do? Did he crack the mystery that had fascinated Europe for nearly five hundred years? Almost certainly, the answer to each question is no. “Almost” should be stressed, since Adams’s story, as we have it, is so heavily mediated by the editorial presence of Simon Cock, Joseph Dupuis, and other unnamed members of the Committee of the African Company, that nothing is perfectly certain about the “very dark man” at the center of the *Narrative*. We know of him only what his English handlers chose to show. Still, by comparing what his amanuenses say he said, with what we know now about Timbuctoo and the Sahara, we may cautiously sort his tale into more and less credible portions. The “general truth” of his account of shipwreck and slavery among the desert peoples – that is, everything before and after the putative journey to Timbuctoo – is reasonably secure. Vice-Consul Dupuis, a man with a reputation to lose and no discernible reason to perpetrate or knowingly endorse a very public fraud, vouched personally for Adams’s statements about life after ransom. He also assured the *Narrative*’s readers that he had conversed in Mogador with men who had either personally witnessed or reliably heard of the sailor’s misadventures on the coast or in Moroccan settlements – Adams’s shipmates, for example, or other enslaved sailors, or tribesmen and merchants fresh from the Saharan trade routes. Furthermore, some of his claims are corroborated by other captivity narratives from the period, and others are confirmed by more modern historical studies of the region. But even here, we should be careful. The narrative constructed in Cadiz by Samuel A. Storrow, a “gentleman of Boston” to whom Adams/Rose related his travels, differs in several particulars from the tale he told in London, including details warranted by Dupuis. The “Cadiz Narrative” (published under the title “Interiour of Africa” in the May 1817 issue of the *North American Review*) is included in this edition of the *Narrative*, along with an analysis by the *Review*’s editor, Jared Sparks, of its numerous contradictions of the London account. But if Adams’s credibility is a bit wobbly

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regarding events along the coast and in the Sahara, it collapses where Timbuctoo is concerned. Why this is so will be the subject of the next section.

Although the particulars of the *Narrative*'s truth may be difficult to establish, and although Adams/Rose almost certainly invented his trip to Timbuctoo, the book retains enormous interest for modern readers. From the simplest historical perspective, the *Narrative* – both Adams's story as told by the African Company and the extensive notes appended to it – offers a rich source of information about North African society in the early nineteenth century. What Adams saw from a slave's viewpoint, and what Dupuis knew as a result of his extensive experience in the region, combine to provide a fascinating portrait of a complex world prior to its transformation by European colonialism. From a literary perspective, Adams's story is a good read, however mediated and however strictly true. His journey through Africa is a marvelous adventure tale, featuring shipwreck, slavery, exotic cities and strange people, a resourceful and determined hero, spiritual struggle, sexual transgression, and much more. The relationship of the *Narrative* to popular literary forms of the period – and especially to the Barbary captivity narrative – will be addressed in the final section of this essay.

But a different interest lies in placing the *Narrative* in contexts that help us both to understand its relationship to its time and to connect the *Narrative* and its time to our own day. One such context is the issue of slavery. The story involves slavery of several types: the North African enslavement of captured westerners like Adams, the desert trade in black slaves from Timbuctoo and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, and the British slave trade in West Africa. Moslem slavery is Adams's interest, and that of his London editors. Christian slavery, though, informs the book at every turn and is the unwritten story behind the production of the *Narrative*; Section III of this Preface outlines the relationship of the African Company to the slave trade and explores the connection between the Company's decision to publish Adams's story and its role in the history of British slavery. Related to the matter of slavery is that of imperialism. The *Narrative*'s elaborate editorial material provides a snapshot of British attitudes toward Africa in the crucial years immediately following the abolition of the slave trade – an image that adumbrates the imminent expansion of British power on the continent. In this regard, the *Narrative* is a crucial document for understanding

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the development of European knowledge about Africa – a case study in the process by which knowledge was determined to be authoritative, and by which it was assimilated into the growing body of information deemed reliable according to standards that were frequently more social than strictly scientific (see Heffernan 203–5). Section IV considers the image of Timbuctoo in the western mind before 1815 and explores the purposes driving Dupuis and his colleagues to reconcile that image with Adams's unsettling story.

An aspect of the *Narrative* that is of particular and urgent interest today is the clash between the Christian and Moslem worlds. As a Barbary captivity narrative, Adams's tale shares with other examples of the genre an ugly picture of North African Islamic society. Depicted as hopelessly barbaric in their attitudes and manners, the Moslems who enslave Adams and sell him one to the other like a sack of dates are a uniformly cruel and capricious lot. The more devout the believer, the more vicious the master: Adams's only respite from suffering comes during his sojourn in a Timbuctoo he describes as being free of Moslem influence and indeed free of any significant religious activity at all. This view of Timbuctoo is, historically, the most implausible part of Adams's story, but considered in relation to the conventions of the captivity genre, it helps confirm the hero's essential role as a Christian martyr thrown into an Islamic lion's den. Section V surveys the orientalist assumptions (in Edward Said's sense) of the captivity genre and the particular popularity that it enjoyed in the United States in the period of Robert Adams's adventures. The anti-Islamic rhetoric of these stories, widely disseminated during a time of conflict between the young republic and the Barbary states, eerily anticipates similar vilifications of the Moslem world filling the popular media in the wake of the September 11 attacks.

In considering each of these spheres in which the *Narrative* moves – slavery, imperialism, the development of knowledge, and the clash of cultures – the strict truth of what Adams says is less important than what was believed about what he said. Adams's story is fascinating, but equally fascinating is the mediation of that story for purposes that resonate with some of the most vital topics of Adams's day, and of our own. Adams's narrative may not reveal very much reliable information about Timbuctoo *per se*, but the *Narrative* reveals a great deal about what Timbuctoo and North Africa meant to those who told his story and to those who read it.

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II

Robert Adams, or whoever he was, disappeared from the historical record soon after telling his tale. Mr. Cock wrote in his introduction that Adams had gone back to America in December of 1815, leaving behind “a large balance of the bounty of the Lords of the Treasury, and the expected profits of his book.” Adams said that he would be back, but, ocean crossings in the winter being what they were, he left with Cock “such particulars of his family” as might be needed to verify any claims on his money should he not return (*Narrative* 14). Unfortunately, Cock’s minutes of the meetings of the Committee of the African Company do not reveal these “particulars,” nor do the Company’s accounts specifically show any money paid or held for Adams. Indeed, a search of various public records in Adams’s stated hometown – Hudson, in Columbia County, New York – gives no sign that anyone of Adams/Rose’s probable age and mixed race lived there in the years immediately before or after those described in the *Narrative*. If Cock did in fact make provision for Adams’s financial future, the money went unclaimed. Where Adams went, and what he called himself, are unknown.

Jared Sparks did not feel a need to check Adams’s assertions against the Columbia County records as he wrote his review of the first American edition of the *Narrative* in the *North American Review* in 1817. “We state with confidence,” Sparks wrote, “on the authority of a gentleman who has resided at Hudson ever since its first settlement, that no . . . person of the character and pretensions of Adams has ever been heard of in that place.” For Sparks, the doctrine of *falsus in uno, falsus in omnibus* applied; Adams’s lie about Hudson just confirmed his mendacity in general. His methodical comparison of the stories Adams told in London and Cadiz remains one of the most devastating indictments of Adams’s credibility. The general outline of the tale is the same in both versions, but the discrepancies between them are significant and inexplicable. If the Cadiz narrative is not itself a fake, and if Storrow recorded Adams’s story faithfully, then either one or both versions are false in several details. Joseph Dupuis anticipates Sparks’s skepticism in his awareness, expressed at several points in the “Notes and Illustrations,” that the tale he heard in Mogador deviated in several respects from the London version. Occasionally Dupuis attempts to explain a discrepancy. More often, he notes it without comment.

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Sparks may have been driven to dissect Adams's story by a cultural nationalism that distrusted everything British. He begins his assault with the double-edged remark that the sailor's relation "would not be worthy of serious attention, had it not excited so much interest, and gained universal belief in England." Adams might be an American, but his gullible sponsors were, Sparks observed gleefully, "some of the most distinguished men in England," and thus irresistible targets for a man whose entire career was devoted to establishing American cultural independence from Britain. The *North American Review* stood for a nascent national culture and offered an excellent platform on which to display the spectacle of an illiterate sailor hoodwinking some of Britain's brightest minds. Especially gratifying, from Sparks's perspective, would have been the fact that these "distinguished men" were obviously connected with the London *Quarterly Review*, a Tory publication mentioned with approbation in the *Narrative*.

Nationalism, and specifically Anglophobia, also may have motivated the attack on Adams's credibility that came from France in 1830; although, as in Sparks's case, the criticism was based on serious evidence. Edme-François Jomard, one of France's leading geographers and a distinguished member of the Société de Géographie de Paris, had an important advantage over both Sparks and the men who packaged Adams's story in 1816. In 1828, a Frenchman named René Caillié had gone to Timbuctoo with a trading caravan, disguised as a native Egyptian whose Arabic had been corrupted by a lifetime in France and Senegal. Secretly keeping his journal in a notebook made to look like a copy of the Koran, Caillié spent about a fortnight observing the city and its people, and brought back to France a richly detailed account. Jomard relied on Caillié's record to dispute nearly every piece of Adams's description of the city.

Jomard begins with geography, and he notes, in the spirit of Jared Sparks, that Adams could not keep his story straight. Adams claimed that the city is on a level plain, and yet a couple of times mentioned two mountains just to the south of the city, between which ran a river three-quarters of a mile wide and flowing to the southwest. Caillié had not seen any mountains near the city, nor had he seen a river matching Adams's description. In fact, there are no such mountains at Timbuctoo. Furthermore, the river, which Adams called the "La Mar Zarah" in London but "La Parsire" in Cadiz, and which he claimed to have followed

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upstream a couple of hundred miles to the northeast on his way back to Morocco, simply does not exist. The nearest large river is the Niger, which flows to the east past Cabara, the port serving Timbuctoo and located several miles to the south. Moreover, if Adams saw mountains and rivers that Caillié missed, he also saw a lot more people than the Frenchman saw. Adams's Timbuctoo was "as extensive, without being as populous, as Lisbon," while Caillié estimated the population at ten thousand to twelve thousand. Jomard wryly notes that between the two men's guesses there is a difference of perhaps a quarter-million people (244). More recent evidence about both cities suggests that Lisbon's population was around two hundred thousand in 1811 and that Caillié may have overestimated Timbuctoo's population in 1828. Whatever the precise figures, any comparison with Lisbon is difficult to defend.

One by one, Jomard ticks off Adams's mistakes. The royal palace is one example. Adams describes it as a walled compound half an acre in area, enclosing a two-story dwelling with "eight or ten" rooms on the ground floor. Caillié saw only a "small and extremely simple house" – the same one, apparently, described in the narrative of an Astrakhani merchant named Wargee, who visited Timbuctoo in 1821. Based on Wargee's testimony, one historian of Timbuctoo concludes that, in fact, "there was no 'royal palace' of any particular distinction at the time in Timbuctoo" (Saad 214). Jomard found Adams's zoology suspect as well. He claimed to have seen numerous elephants in the area, at least one of which (and a young one, at that) was more than twenty feet high and sported four tusks, two of them five feet long. Caillié saw none, and certainly none so fantastic. And so Jomard methodically compares Adams's observations of Timbuctoo – its language, customs, and architecture – with Caillié's eyewitness reports on the same subjects. He concludes that "ignorance" or "a want of memory" are not sufficient to explain the gross discrepancies between the two reports and declares himself "opposed to the authenticity of [Adams's] travels" (243). The modern reader, with the advantage of more and better information, is compelled to agree.

In short, the German explorer Heinrich Barth may have exaggerated only slightly when he wrote in 1857 that Adams's description of Timbuctoo "does not reveal a single trait which can be identified with its features" (310). Barth spent a month there in 1853, and although he was under virtual house arrest the entire time and had to observe the

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city mainly from the roof of his quarters, he saw enough to identify the most telling weakness of Adams's account: the assertion that the people of Timbuctoo do not "have any public religion, as they have no house of worship, no priest, and as far as Adams could discover, never meet to pray together" (*Narrative* 43). "It is," Barth scoffed, "unintelligible that a person could actually visit the town without becoming aware that it contained several mosques, and very large ones too, for such a place" (298).

Barth's judgment is hard to contest. The city had been a center of Moslem worship and learning for five hundred years before Adams told his tale, and the "large" mosques that Barth mentioned had been an integral part of the city's cultural and architectural fabric for nearly as long. René Caillié anticipated Barth's point in stating that "all the inhabitants of Timbuctoo are zealous Mohometans" whom he regularly observed attending the town's eight mosques, including two very large "houses of worship" on its northeastern and southwestern sides that were among the first things to strike the visitor's eye upon approaching the city (60, 71–6). Indeed, these two mosques, the Sankore and Jingereber, still dominate Timbuctoo's architectural profile and are, along with the Sidi Yahya mosque in the center of town, city landmarks. The Sankore, built in the early fifteenth century, housed the schools of numerous great imams whose teachings had made the name of Timbuctoo synonymous with wisdom throughout the Moslem world. Though the city's reputation for Islamic scholarship had declined by the early nineteenth century from its meridian just prior to the Moroccan invasion in 1591, Timbuctoo still produced great spiritual leaders. Until his death in 1811 – the very year that Robert Adams said he visited the city – Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kunti led a spiritual *jihad* of mysticism and piety from the Timbuctoo region, attracting students from throughout western and central Sudan (Willis 548–9).

Indeed, according to the best scholarship on the city's history during this period, Sidi al-Mukhtar's influence was political as well as spiritual. Although the city was nominally ruled by a Pasha, as it had been (for the most part) since the Moroccan invasion, and its religious affairs were nominally overseen by a Qadi, the actual management of the city's secular and spiritual affairs was in the hands of a group of scholars of the Kunta clan. That group was led by Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kunti. The Pasha was named Abu Bakr (d. 1230 A.H./1814–1815), and the

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Qadi was most likely a cleric named Muhammed al-Aqib, but Sidi al-Mukhtar commanded actual power in Timbuctoo. According to Elias Saad, he dominated the city's *Jama'a*, the ruling group of Kunta scholars, for several years before his death in 1811 (213–15; see also Abitbol 261). Adams's irreligious King Woollo, whom he claimed to have met upon his arrival early in 1811, does not much resemble Pasha Abu Bakr, Qadi al-Aqib, or Sidi al-Mukhtar. Adams's Queen Fatima, with her "hair stuck full of bone ornaments," is also hard to find in the picture of the city's administration drawn by modern historians.

Assuming that Simon Cock faithfully recorded Adams's thoughts on the city's religious life, this point alone forces one of two conclusions: either Adams was the worst observer in the history of African exploration or he never set foot in Timbuctoo. One scholar, Brian Gardner, has bravely mounted an extended defense of Adams's credibility (27–34), but his arguments, while ingenious, do not much narrow the gap between Adams's Timbuctoo and the real thing. As Dupuis says, "Woollo" is obviously a name from sub-Saharan Africa, and indeed many items in Adams's description of Timbuctoo seem drawn from cultures found south or west of the city: for instance, the facial tattoos, the women's dress (or undress), the style of the communal dances, and the bodies greased with goat butter. Possibly Adams traveled to some place like the Soudenny he describes, outside the Moslem sphere, and attributed things he saw there to Timbuctoo. As we shall see in Section III of this Preface, though, one aspect of Adams's account of the city was confirmed by Caillié and others: compared to the legends of its splendor that had circulated for centuries, Timbuctoo was a distinctly unimpressive place. Adams may have inadvertently gotten this right either by describing (whether from hearsay or personal experience) some other modest trading town in West Africa and calling it Timbuctoo or by mingling things that he heard about the city with information from Bambara or further west. Whatever his sources and whatever his method, he managed to produce a story that was wrong in nearly every detail, but right in its repudiation of the myth of Timbuctoo.

Why did he do it? Money, attention, the plain fun of fooling people, especially important or self-important people – any or all of these may have motivated Robert Adams, or whoever he was. To their credit, Adams's London editors seemed aware that much about his Timbuctoo strained credulity. The motive of Simon Cock's "Introductory Details

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Respecting Adams” is to assert his witness’s credibility, and the “Concluding Remarks” is a long brief in Adams’s defense, although the author admits that the only part of the story for which there is no corroborating evidence is the journey “from the Douar to which he was first conveyed from the coast, until his arrival at El Kabla” – that is, the journey to Timbuctoo. Cock makes much of the fact that Adams left behind most of the money offered him for his story, as though this demonstrates that a destitute and desperate man would not have told his story simply for the money, clothes, and shelter that he received before disappearing. Joseph Dupuis, a man with first-hand knowledge of Africa, is careful to distance himself from Adams’s boldest inventions. The fantastical “cour-coo” – a dog-like, tree-climbing creature, distinguished by a marsupial-like pouch on its back, and feeding on everything from coconuts to children – left Dupuis speechless; in his briefest note in the *Narrative*, he says only, “I have never before heard of this extraordinary animal, either from Adams [in Mogador] or any one else” (80). Like other statements by Dupuis regarding the sailor’s name or the disagreements between his London and Mogador testimonies, this one reveals his unspoken awareness that the American could not, in fact, keep his story straight. Other lapses, such as Adams’s inability to describe a coconut after assuring his audience that he saw them in Timbuctoo, are extenuated by reference to his social rank. Readers are admonished not to “attach much value to the botanical recollections of a common sailor,” although the same readers are expected to attach a great deal of value to this sailor’s other “recollections,” botanical and otherwise (77).

The abiding anxiety of all those connected with the *Narrative* is suggested in a line from a letter written to Simon Cock by Sir Willoughby Gordon and introduced by Cock with a dramatic flourish among the “Introductory Details.” Gordon, the Quartermaster of the Horse Guards at the time, had been among those listening to Adams in November of 1815. After announcing his faith in “the truth” of the story, Gordon concludes that “if he be proved an imposter, he will be second only to Psalmanazar” (13). The reference to England’s most famous liar of the eighteenth century is telling. George Psalmanazar (1679?–1763) was the assumed name of a Frenchman who, between 1703 and 1708, deceived numerous luminaries of the English literary and scientific establishment with his claim to be a native of Formosa. He lectured and wrote extensively about the (fabricated) customs of his country and actually

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taught the (invented) Formosan language at Oxford for a few months in 1704. Sir Hans Sloane, a man whom Sir Joseph Banks resembled in his interests and range of accomplishments, was among Psalmanazar's sponsors before the hoax was discovered. Gordon's quoted reference is a hedge against embarrassment and represents an admission of its possibility. Even as he insists on Adams's veracity, Cock inserts a disclaimer: only the most accomplished of liars could gull such men as Sloan or Banks, or Simon Cock.

So why, despite their doubts, did Dupuis and Cock and the Committee of the African Company publish Adams's tale? Convinced, for good reasons, of the "general truth" of his story, and lacking sufficient knowledge of Timbuctoo to dismiss even the most outlandish statements on the subject, they published everything – and then spilled a great deal of ink in the notes, appendices, remarks, etc., striving to explain how it all might be true. But why did Mr. Simon Cock and the Committee of the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa spend so much time and energy on such a project? Why did a group of busy London traders care so much about a poor black sailor's tale of African adventure?

III

The most radically skeptical commentary on the *Narrative* to date is found in Ann Fabian's *Unvarnished Truths* (2000). Fabian suggests that "Robert Adams" may have been a fiction and that the same hoaxer may have created Simon Cock and the African Company as well – all, presumably, to sell books to an unsuspecting public hungry for exotic tales of Timbuctoo. Consider, she says, the dedication page, in which the *Narrative* is offered to the "African Committee" by "S. Cock": "Perhaps Cock's salutation was designed to alert readers to a ruse, suggesting that, like the long story that concludes Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–1767), Adams's tale was a 'cock and bull' story. It is also possible that Cock's 'African Committee' was a deliberate play on the African Association, the group of aristocrats and businessmen underwriting the European exploration of Africa" (30).

There is good reason to doubt some of Adams's story, but this goes too far. To believe that Adams never existed, we would have to believe that a number of very important men did not protest having their names attached to an elaborate joke about a matter that they took very

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seriously, the exploration of Africa. As for the “cock and bull” theory, there really was a Simon Cock and an African Committee. Fabian may be excused for suspecting that the African Company was a “ruse,” since the Company and its Committee cast a dim light in historical studies of the period. But this lack of attention is surprising, since the African Company played for several decades a vital role in one of the most consequential social and economic phenomena of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – the slave trade.

The Company of Merchants Trading to Africa was created by Parliament in 1750, with the passage of “An Act for Extending and Improving the Trade to Africa” (Donnan 474). The legislation dissolved the Royal African Company, a joint-stock association founded in 1672, and replaced it with a Company of Merchants structured to avoid the dangers of monopoly while keeping the trade free of control by officers of the Crown. The Act of 1750 delivered to the Company all the African possessions of the Royal African Company and entrusted it with sole management of British trade “between the Port of Sallee in South Barbary, and the Cape of Good Hope,” a coastline of about seven thousand miles. According to Eveline Martin, “the constitution of the company was extremely simple in design, consisting of two main parts, the general body of traders, all those who by paying forty shillings had become free of the company, and a committee of nine” that governed the Company (10). The Committee was composed of three merchants from each of the three cities principally involved in the African trade, with each committeeman elected by those merchants “free of the company” in his respective town: London, Bristol, or Liverpool. While Parliament controlled the Company’s purse strings through an annual grant to support its London office and its African holdings, the Committee also reported to the Exchequer, the Admiralty, and, after 1782, the Secretary of State for War and Colonies – which explains why these offices are so well represented in the list of important men to whom Cock took Adams in November of 1815.

Control over British trade along a seven-thousand-mile coast sounds grand, but in reality the African Company inherited from the Royal African Company only nine rather humble African trading outposts, called forts or factories. All but one were situated on the Gold Coast, in what is now the nation of Ghana. Annamaboe, Accra, Sucondee, Winnebah, Appolonia, Tantumquerry, Dixcove, Commenda, and the

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administrative center, Cape Coast Castle – each Company factory consisted of a fortified barrack, a storehouse, and, most importantly, a slave pen, called a barracoon (Craton 60). Each employed a contingent of up to a hundred soldiers, plus perhaps a couple of dozen assorted book-keepers, craftsmen, surgeons, surveyors, scriveners, and, of course, the factors who traded with the peoples along the coast, principally the Ashanti.

While each factory did some trade in commodities like ivory, hides, beeswax, and gold, the real business of each factory before 1807 was to collect slaves and ship them to the West Indies. The Gold Coast factories run by the Royal African Company and the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa accounted for about 20% of the British slave trade to the New World between 1690 and 1800. While the “yield” from the Gold Coast was down to about 10% of the total by 1807, the African Company presided over the transportation of nearly four thousand slaves in the last six years of the (legal) trade (Craton 76–7). In short, Parliament created the African Company in 1750 to “improve” trade to Africa because it was better suited than the Royal African Company to “trade in Africans more efficiently, more nimbly, and more economically” in a time when the demand for slaves was increasing rapidly (Walvin, *Black Ivory* 35).

Everything changed for the Company and its Committee in 1807, when Parliament declared the slave trade illegal. Pressure to abolish the trade had been building since the 1780s, and significant action was taken as early as 1791, when Parliament created the Sierra Leone Company to compete with the African Company in trade along the coast without dealing in slaves. Other goals than trade, indeed, were increasingly championed by those interested in Africa. While it is difficult to tease commerce and empire out of the motives driving Sir Joseph Banks and others to create the African Association in 1788, that organization’s very public goal to expand Europe’s knowledge of African geography, ethnography, and natural history offered an embarrassing contrast to the African Company’s bald pursuit of wealth through traffic in human bodies. In 1790, when the African Association had already underwritten expeditions of discovery by John Ledyard and Simon Lucas, the Committee of the African Company sponsored the publication of a treatise entitled *Slavery No Oppression: or, some new arguments and opinions against the idea of African liberty*. Pressure on the Company

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was added with the formation in 1807 of the African Institution, led by William Wilberforce and others who had been connected with the Sierra Leone Company. Their explicitly humanitarian purposes – dedicated to bringing civilization to Africa and fueled by an evangelical passion to save black souls – captured the popular imagination and further isolated politically the merchants of the African Committee.

After 1807, the African Company tried, as Martin says neatly, “to advance with the time, and, by accepting the new shibboleths of the early nineteenth century, to maintain their position in an age which had declared unlawful the pursuit of the object the Company had been created to promote” (145–6). Recognizing that their parliamentary grants were threatened by the new state of affairs, the Committee’s Secretary, Mr. Simon Cock, assured the government in 1808 that trade in different commodities – rice, indigo, cotton, palm oil, or perhaps timber, in addition to the existing traffic in ivory and gold – would eventually replace the trade in humans, and asked for patience as they made the transition (Parliamentary Papers, VII 110–13). But the Company was perceived as a relic, and the Committee was suspected of being less than enthusiastic in abandoning the shameful practices that had generated so much wealth for its “freemen.” A commission appointed by the Secretary for War and the Colonies to investigate the factories delivered a report to Parliament in 1810 that was sharply critical of the African Company; among other recommendations, the commissioners pointedly advocated removing a number of the sitting members of the Committee and replacing them with “other Gentlemen, whose long and public hostility to the Slave Trade had clearly proved their sincere desire to ameliorate the state of Africa” (Papers, VII 138). After this, the Company’s end was just a matter of time. As the Company faced nearly annual assaults on its funding from Parliament and government, the factories deteriorated, the trade diminished, and the profits declined. The Committee and its faithful Secretary Cock put up a brave fight through the end of the Regency, until the passage in May 1821 of “An Act for abolishing the African Company and transferring to and vesting in His Majesty all the forts, possessions and property belonging to or held by them.” With the fullness of empire on the horizon, the Gold Coast’s bounty became Crown property.

Clearly, Simon Cock and the African Committee had a lot on their minds as they listened to Robert Adams and prepared his tale for

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publication in 1815–1816. Their precise concerns may be gleaned from the record of an inquiry by a Select Committee of the House of Commons into the operations of the African Company, undertaken just six weeks after Cock completed his introduction to the *Narrative* on 30 April 1816. Simon Cock was, indeed, the first witness called. For two days, 12 and 13 June 1816, the Secretary answered a volley of hard questions about matters of Company business: the salaries the Company paid its employees in Africa, the costs of supplying the factories, the prices paid for goods to be traded with the Africans, the qualifications of the Company's employees in Africa, and the means by which they were evaluated and promoted. The tone of Cock's exchange with the Select Committee was often tense – many of the members' questions were sharp and mistrustful, and Cock's replies were at times curt, evasive, or defensive. In these instances, the presumption of many of the committeemen was that the Company was wasting Parliament's money. The members demanded from Cock dozens of lists, tables, and letters detailing specific expenditures and administrative decisions over a period of several years, all of which he turned over and referred to frequently during his testimony (Parliamentary Papers, VII 5–24). He must have been gathering documents and preparing for this grilling even as he was pulling together the *Narrative* for publication. But the Select Committee was not solely concerned with accounting. Several times during these two days, members posed questions that exposed the often submerged theme informing every aspect of the inquiry: the Company's long and deep connection with the slave trade.

As they listened to Simon Cock talk about Africa and slavery, some among the Select Committee would have remembered earlier inquiries in which Mr. Cock had been a willing apologist for a very bad cause. His first appearance before a Commons committee had been in 1799, when he was an agent for the slave traders of Liverpool. At issue then was a proposal before Parliament to increase the amount of space allotted to each slave on vessels plying the Middle Passage. Cock's role was to provide a "Calculation upon the Returns," as he called it, demonstrating how much money the traders would lose if the proposal were enacted. The chart that he submitted to the House on this occasion is a perfect product of the bureaucracy of horror; in neat rows and columns filled with cargo sizes and ship dimensions, Cock demonstrated that the legislation being considered would cause an average reduction

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of one-third in the number of bodies the traders could pack in their holds. Add to this reduction in cargo that proportion of slaves who died of disease or despair on every voyage, and the loss to the merchants would be intolerable (“Minutes of Evidence” 4–6). A decade or so later, during the inquiry initiated by the Secretary for War and Colonies resulting in the report of 1810, he wrote ingratiating letters assuring Lord Castlereagh and others that the African Company would carry on its commerce with Africa “upon such principles as the legislature shall sanction, and in such manner as the Government may direct” (Martin 146). Such language would not have assured many in government that Mr. Cock or the African Committee were now born-again abolitionists.

So, as Simon Cock’s 1816 appearance before the Select Committee wore on, the members focused less on the Company’s business practices and more on its effect on the Africans themselves. Several questions illustrated the contrast in some members’ minds between the Company and the other prominent bodies concerned with Africa, the African Association and the African Institution. “Have the [African] Committee,” asked one, “ever taken measures to promote education upon the Coast of Africa?” Cock replied that they had recently sent their first schoolmaster – “a young mulatto, who had wounded his hand” – to one of the factories. This was the Company’s first and only educational “measure” in the eight years since the abolition of the trade. Wondered another, “Have any measures been taken to promote religious instruction?” Cock pointed out that a black clergyman named Quaue had been residing at one of the factories “for fifty years; he was educated at Oxford, and about two years ago he sent for his tomb-stone.” Cock admitted that the Committee had not yet been able to persuade anyone to take his place; although, as another witness later testified, Mr. Quaue was “superannuated” and “perfectly childish.” By the time another committeeman asked Cock if “any measures for civilizing the natives [had] been adopted by the African Committee since the abolition of the Slave Trade,” the Secretary could only refer the questioner to his earlier answers about the schoolteacher and the clergyman (Papers, VII 13–14, 23, 31). The Age of Improvement clearly had not yet arrived in the Company’s office in Frederick’s Place.

After Cock’s testimony, the hearings went on for another two weeks, with the increasingly evident aim of some members being to confirm

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their suspicions that the Company was, if not actually engaging in the slave trade, at least aiding others who were. They were able to establish, through the testimony of a ship captain familiar with the Gold Coast, that the Company's officers had allowed fresh water to be sold and carried to passing slave vessels in Company canoes. Though this violated the Act of 1807, it was a minor matter, and no witness produced the smoking gun that some clearly sought in order to take action against the Company. The Select Committee of 1816 issued no report, but Simon Cock and others from the Company were summoned again to Westminster in May and June of 1817 to face yet another round of hostile questions. This second special committee drew on both years' testimonies to issue a report that began by perfunctorily recommending the continuation of the annual grant of £23,000 to the African Company, and then made a lengthy case for comprehensive reforms to its administration and stricter governmental control of its activities (Papers, VI 3–12). Wasteful, obtuse, and obsolete – the Committee of the African Company might have read its approaching demise on every page of the reports of 1817.

But in November of 1815, when Robert Adams was brought to his office, Cock had not yet faced the Select Committees and very likely believed that the situation could be saved. Such an old warrior in Westminster's battles would have understood that what the Company needed most in order to survive was credibility, and that the credibility it needed was of the sort possessed by its two rivals on the African stage, the African Association and the African Institution. Scientific credibility, on the one hand, and moral seriousness on the other – Robert Adams's extraordinary tale offered both. The quest for the first is reflected in nearly every line of what Jared Sparks mocked as “the greater part of the” published *Narrative*, “composed of introductory details, copious explanatory notes by various hands and on various subjects, elaborate concluding remarks in defense of the story and the notes, together with two learned and well written appendices, which have no connexion with any other part of the book” (163). Sparks was right that Adams's story is sometimes lost in the editorial scaffolding erected to support it, but he was wrong to assert a lack of “connexion” among the parts. These materials, which relentlessly test Adams's account against the touchstones of knowledge about Timbuctoo and West Africa provided by authorities from Leo Africanus to Mungo Park, are meant to work together

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to firmly place Robert Adams in this great scientific tradition. Or, more precisely, they are meant to place the African Company in the great tradition, since this ignorant son of a “mulatto” could not be properly ranked with a luminary such as Park. The achievement of the *Narrative*, from Cock’s perspective, properly belonged to those informed and circumspect enough to know what to make of the sailor’s story – that is, Simon Cock and the African Committee. The usefulness of the *Narrative*, to the Company, depended on Cock’s ability to make its readers understand just whose achievement this poor man’s story was.

In this sense, the *Narrative* may be read as a performance – a very public demonstration by the African Company that it was not, as so many thought, a wastrel with a scandalous past, but rather a player in the new game of African discovery and the march of human progress. This is probably why Cock began his introduction with a portrayal of his own foresight and perseverance in putting Adams’s story on paper, as well as of the Committee’s quick recognition that Cock was right to entice Adams to talk. We are to understand that without the Company’s initiative, this important contribution to knowledge might have been lost. This is also why Cock quickly placed the Company’s interest in Adams in the context of the “recent embarkation of Major Peddie and his companions.” The Peddie expedition was a government initiative, undertaken by the Colonial Office to complete Mungo Park’s fatal effort to discover the true course of the Niger in 1805. Cock’s earnest, and unctuous, hope in searching for Adams in the London streets was that “the man might be rendered useful to the views of Government in the exploratory expedition” (*Narrative* 8). He should have said that he hoped that the African Company might be rendered useful, although he must have known that there was precious little to benefit Peddie in the tale that Adams told. Adams supposedly approached Timbuctoo from the Sahara, and said that he had not seen Niger while there; Peddie was to seek the Niger’s headwaters from the Windward Coast, and then follow it to its termination, thought to be somewhere in the African interior.

But, having served its rhetorical purpose, Peddie’s name quickly disappears. Mungo Park’s presence in the *Narrative* is, on the other hand, ubiquitous. Indeed, the model for the structure of the *Narrative* was Park’s popular and influential *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* (1799), describing his first mission to the Niger. Though Park’s *Travels*

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is not quite so freighted with explanatory material as the Company's publication, it similarly features a map and an extended appendix examining the significance of Park's discoveries, both contributed by the famous geographer, Major James Rennell. Many features of the *Narrative* echo those of the *Travels*, while reference is made to Park's story and to Rennell's map and essay throughout the book. Notice is taken of every detail in which Adams's account is confirmed or made plausible by information from Park's. In those cases where Adams's tale contradicts Park's, Cock and his collaborators laboriously try to reconcile the two or delicately show that even the great Park might have been mistaken.

The deference shown to Park is based on his near legendary stature among both the scientific community and the general reading public of the time. His death on his second mission to the Niger in 1806, the details of which were still fresh in the minds of many after the publication in 1815 of his *Journal*, was broadly conceived as a glorious martyrdom dedicated, on the one hand, to the selfless pursuit of knowledge about the dark continent and, on the other, to British territorial expansion for the sake of the twin gods, civilization and commerce. But these abstract goals – knowledge, civilization, commerce – were given specific political meaning for the African Committee in 1816 by a consideration of the various sponsors of Park's expeditions and of his memory. His first patron was the African Association, which had sent him in 1795 as a "Geographical Missionary" to discover the "course, and, if possible, the rise and termination" of the River Niger (Hallett, *Records of the African Association* 158). His second was the government, specifically the Colonial Office, which in 1805 gave him a brevet commission of captain, put him in charge of a contingent of soldiers from Goree, and sent him off to Africa to "discover and ascertain whether any, and what commercial intercourse can be opened therein for the mutual benefit of the natives and of His Majesty's subjects" (Park, *Journal* liii). His third was the African Institution, to whose care the records of his second mission were entrusted, and which arranged for their publication in honor of Park's consistently stern condemnation of slavery (*Journal* xx–xxi). No wonder that Simon Cock and his friends gave Mungo Park a major part in their production of Robert Adams's *Narrative*.

Indeed, the political stagecraft of the *Narrative* becomes clear in light of the African Company's precarious position in 1816. The pressure from Westminster explains, for instance, the italics used at the end of

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the “Concluding Remarks” to highlight two points “which the present Narrative decidedly confirms; viz. *the mild and tractable natures of the Pagan Negroes of Soudan, and their friendly deportment toward strangers*, on the one hand, – and, on the other, *the extended and baneful range of that great original feature of African society – Slavery*” (124). The first point bodes well for commerce with the natives, and implicitly assures the world of the African Company’s willingness to participate in this prosperous future “upon such principles as the legislature shall sanction, and in such manner as the Government may direct.” This commitment is given an imperial twist by the unnamed member of the African Committee who penned the first appendix, in which he suggests that in order to control the trade in the Niger headwaters ahead of “some rival and more active European nation,” Britain should immediately occupy the Gambia (134).

The second shouted point about the “baneful” extent of slavery seems strained, coming as it does from the sponsors of *Slavery No Oppression*. However, from a political perspective, the Company needed to shout such a point in 1816, and Robert Adams’s tale of the horrors of slavery in the desert gave them an occasion to do so. Just how unconvincing the performance was may be gauged by the irony that one of those responsible for the Company’s eventual demise in 1821 was none other than Vice-Consul Joseph Dupuis. In 1818, he was given a royal commission as consul at Kumasi and charged with promoting peace and good relations with the Ashanti. His reports from the Gold Coast, eventually published as a *Journal of a Residence in Ashantee* (1824), were highly critical of the African Company’s management of its forts and factories and significantly contributed to the erosion of parliamentary support for the Company. He never commented again on Robert Adams after the publication of the *Narrative*, but we must wonder if the severity of his censure of the Company was motivated by an awareness that he had lent his good name to a very bad cause in 1816.

IV

If Robert Adams, or whoever he was, used the African Company for money and/or the pleasure of manipulating powerful men who would otherwise despise him, the Company used him to persuade the right

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people that these old slave traders had washed their hands and were fit to serve the pantheon of Britain's expanding interest in Africa: Trade, Civilization, Nation, and Knowledge. With regard to the last of these, the men of the African Committee would have known that publishing a book purporting to settle long-standing questions about Timbuctoo would attach the Company's name to one of the most fascinating subjects of the day, while giving it the leading position in a broadly European race to "discover" something certain about this storied city. Having decided to believe Adams, the main task facing Cock and Dupuis was to reconcile the sailor's tale with their meager knowledge of Timbuctoo, and thereby establish the *Narrative's* relationship to the history of western interest in the place. If Adams's story could be established as an eyewitness account, the Company's book would achieve a goal that had eluded some of the best minds and deepest pockets in European science, despite a quarter-century of determined effort. Whether he actually went there or not, their effort, filling the many pages of the *Narrative's* notes and appendices, is a revealing chapter in the history of Europe's attitude toward Africa.

With the exception of Park's second journey, all of the expeditions of this period that included Timbuctoo among their objectives were sponsored by Sir Joseph Banks's African Association. By the time Simon Cock found Adams/Rose in the London streets, the Association had sent seven explorers to Africa, recruited from nearly as many countries. An American, John Ledyard, was the first. Thomas Jefferson had, a few years earlier, encouraged this extraordinary man to try walking east from Europe to the Atlantic coast of America, a quixotic adventure that ended with his arrest in Siberia. Ledyard's African mission was even less successful; preparing in Cairo to cross the continent from the east, he suffered a "bilious complaint," which he treated with "too powerful a dose of the acid of vitriol," the painful effects of which he medicated with "the violent action of the strongest tartar emetic," the combined effects of which killed him (Hallett, *Records* 61). Next was Simon Lucas, an Englishman who set out a little after Ledyard in 1788, intending to make a northern approach across the Fezzan. He got only a hundred miles or so from Tripoli before tribal unrest in the desert forced him back. In 1790, the Association sent an Irishman, Major Daniel Houghton, to find Timbuctoo by way of the River Gambia. Late the following year, he disappeared, having been robbed of all his possessions