

Comptes Rendus Méga-Tchad - Mega-Chad Book Reviews

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KEMPER, Steve. 2012. *A Labyrinth of Kingdoms - 10,000 Miles through Islamic Africa*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company. 396p.

Book review: Gerhard Muller-Kosack - www.mandaras.info

Kemper's interesting book is about the German scientific explorer Heinrich (Henry) Barth who travelled in the mid 19th century for the British government for over five years from Tripoli to the Kingdom of Bornu to the south of Lake Chad and beyond, as far as Timbuktu. The book also describes how, on his return to Europe, Barth failed to receive satisfying recognition. The book, meant as a long overdue English biography, appears to be well researched and is very well written but is obviously aiming for a general rather than an academic readership. This manifests itself in the fact that the main text, full of biographical and other historical details, is completely unreferenced. However, Kemper has produced a separate note section in which he tells us what his sources were for each chapter. It certainly feels that he did read most of the relevant English materials on Barth, as this is also visible in his selected bibliography which includes not only published but also archived materials. Kemper also familiarised himself with African explorers contemporary to Barth not only to contrast and appreciate Barth's achievements but also to assess Barth's style and influence in the context of the general trend of the other 19th century English literature on the exploration of Africa. For some of the important German literature Kemper commissioned a translation, which is a refreshing admission, adding to the honesty of the book.

Kemper, who is a journalist by profession, puts Barth's complex character in the centre of the book and page by page we see Barth emerging as a person not only inspired by Alexander von Humboldt and Carl Ritter, founders of modern geography, but also as someone who was not exactly endowed with the skill of diplomacy. The latter becomes particularly clear after his return when he had to deal with his own frustration regarding certain responses of the British government and the Royal Geographical Society. Kemper describes Barth as a 'thorny' but loyal character who was able to form many friendships on his African journey, for example with al-Bakay, the sheikh of Timbuktu, although his sense of loyalty seems to have lacked insight into the bigger picture of the political international intricacies of that time. He took everything personally and his straightforward sense of honesty may have worked with many of his African counterparts but took a destructive turn, not only with some of his British counterparts, but also with leading German academics of his time, especially after his main supporters, von Humboldt and Ritter had died. In this way, perhaps the greatest Africa explorer of all times was not able to fit into the world of 19th century European academic life. He might well have lacked or lost the ability to sufficiently abstract from the very detailed and descriptive scientific accounts so ardently collected on his journey. This also suggests that he might have come across as tediously long-winded in his presentation. This would have made it difficult for him to make his amazing data interesting enough for potential students. Kemper points to a similar criticism in Barth's writing style but perhaps the sheer mass of the data he had collected forced him to be more concrete in his approach, not only when describing his scientific findings but also the circumstances in which he collected his data. This personality trait of Barth is fortunate for us today since it makes him the most authentic scientific and historical source and Kemper's more popular Barth biography certainly pays homage to that.

Kemper begins by describing Barth's difficult character and his tendency to be a loner. He quickly moves through Barth's earlier travels and his unsuccessful attempts both to get married, and to get a university career. He notes that he might well have lacked the necessary

personality traits to succeed in either case. The call to join Richardson as a scientifically trained explorer on his antislavery quest (by means of establishing trade relations with Bornu) appears to have been a relief for Barth. Kemper contrasts Richardson's and Barth's personalities very early on in the book and illustrates that by comparing their different approaches to the logistics of travelling. Barth was the meticulously organised explorer-scientist and Richardson the religiously driven abolitionist possibly lacking in managerial skills. He also shows how Barth guards his independence by doing his own thing at a very early point in the expedition by going off on scientific excursions - "Barth was a new breed, an explorer who was also a trained linguist, scientist, and historian", Kemper writes (p36).

Kemper skilfully paraphrases and quotes from diary entries by both Barth and Richardson while the expedition continues to move south. He positively highlights Barth's ongoing scientific and historical discoveries and ardent journal keeping but refers negatively to Richardson's logistical and fiscal incompetence which often creates delays and other unnecessary costs for the expedition. In descriptions of the nature of Richardson's shortcomings as leader of the expedition Kemper relies not only on Barth's criticism but equally on that of those British officials in touch with the expedition. Richardson frequently expresses his anxieties about Barth's impatience since he not only risked his life but also the overall success of the expedition by travelling ahead. Kemper also points to the forming of a first misunderstanding regarding the loyalty of Barth as to who should first receive his reports. Barth seemed to be rather oblivious about the political intricacies involved and the fact that they should be sent directly to the Foreign Office and not via Berlin.

Richardson's difficult leadership ends with his death in Ngurutuwa which Barth learns of on his way to Kukawa to the south of Lake Chad. Later, Barth also loses Overweg. Kemper highlights Barth's lack of compassion about either of his companions' deaths. It remains uncertain whether this was part of Barth's general character or whether he was simply convinced that being on a dangerous scientific mission would naturally entail that risk. He certainly appears rather affectionate when he describes his farewell to his friend al-Bakkay and his entourage when he eventually leaves Timbuktu. Kemper describes how he quotes poems in different languages to them dressed in his European suit and how later feels a sense of loss when finding himself alone again on his way back to Kukawa. Perhaps Barth thought that it was part of his scientific mission to describe the latter but not so important to put much emphasis on the first.

Kemper's book is full of such details and as a result the reader gets a real sense of Barth's personality. After Richardson's death Barth then becomes the leader of the expedition but communications with Europe are often delayed for months or even years and this results in wrong reports of his alleged death. It becomes clear that Barth very much relies on his intimate knowledge, in particular his linguistic skills, but also often uses his gun to shoot in the air before he goes to sleep in his tent at night in order to let people know that he can look after his own security. He gets unknowingly involved in political intrigues with the rulers of Bornu and Timbuktu and elsewhere but always seems able to rely on the loyalties of some, mainly those who have an education, in order to secure his own physical safety. His main aim is the completion of his scientific objectives, which are to describe almost every inch of the landscapes he travels through and the languages and histories he discovers including original documents in Arabic which he copies. Barth's tenacity and determination to secure first hand scientific knowledge of the Saharan and sub-Saharan regions he travelled over that period of five years and five months is his recipe for success. However, that same skill does not secure him literary and academic success after his glorious return.