Out of the Dark Continent

Africa, an enormous continent five times the size of the United States, was long protected from outsiders by the formidable Sahara Desert in the north and a forbidding and rocky western coast with few safe harbors. Despite the barriers, there were still those who chose to fight their way into its dangerous and dark corners. The University Libraries is fortunate to have a small but significant collection of books written by some of the early European and, later, American adventurers.

Most of the collection was compiled by Dorothea Kercher, who was the African Bibliographer for Waldo Library during the 1960s and 1970s. Her life is profiled elsewhere in this issue of Gatherings. To honor her accomplishment in building the Africana collection, the University Libraries, in May of 1994, held an exhibit of some of the outstanding volumes that are now part of the library holdings found in the Rare Book Room. A sense of the value of the collection is found in the following descriptions of a few of the items that Mrs. Kercher brought together.

Our earliest volumes were written by a French ornithologist who traveled to Africa long before modern methods of transportation could smooth his journeys. His major purpose, in the 1780s, was to locate and collect unusual specimens of birds and animals. François Le Vaillant described his voyage in two separate editions, one published in 1790 and the second in 1798—Waldo Library has a copy of each, and of special note is the fact that both volumes include many fine prints that reflect the untamed African world that he visited at the end of the eighteenth century. Le Vaillant hoped that his collection of rare birds and animals would be of interest to the many natural history museums and botanical gardens that were then being built in French cities.

Unfortunately, his timing was poor and he crossed swords with the French Revolution; instead of profiting from his travels, he spent a year in prison. However, he also escaped the guillotine that took so many, was eventually released, and later wrote several books on ornithology. [Le Vaillant, François, 1753-1824. Voyage de F. Le Vaillant dans l'intérieur de l'Afrique. 1790 and 1798]

Besides those who traveled to Africa because of their scientific interests, the continent was visited by missionaries and soldiers, but serious explorers were quick to follow. John Hanning Speke (1827-1864), an officer in the British army, joined Richard Burton in 1854 on an expedition into Somalia. They both became obsessed with the idea of finding the true source of the River Nile. Speke thought that the lakes in the interior of East Africa must be the original source. In October 1860, he led an expedition from Zanzibar, reaching Lake Victoria Nyanza in October 1861. By January 16, 1862, he reached the capitol of Uganda, and by the 28th of July he found what he thought to be the mouth of the Nile where it debouched from the lake. He followed the course of this flow to the Egyptian outpost of Gondokoro, thus proving that Lake Victoria was, indeed, the source of the Nile. His account of the adventure, published in 1863, was soon translated into many languages. The University Libraries has an 1865 edition in French as well as a copy of the English edition. [Speke, John Hanning 1827-1864. Journal of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile. Edinburgh, London: W. Blackwood, 1863; Les Sources du Nil; Journal de voyage du Capitaine John Hanning Speke. Paris: Hachette, 1865.]

Another name oft-recognized as a searcher for the source of the Nile is that of David Livingstone (1813-1873), who sought the true source in 1866—apparently not knowing of or believing in Speke’s discovery. When he had not returned by 1871, the New York Herald sent journalist Henry Stanley to find him. The binding of the volume by Stanley of his travels in Africa pictures the famous meeting between the two men when Stanley is quoted as saying, “Dr. Livingstone, I presume.” [Stanley, Henry M. How I Found Livingstone. Travel, Adventures, and Discoveries in Central Africa; Including Four Months’ Residence with Dr. Livingstone. London: 1874]

Most might be surprised to learn that men were not the only ones who explored Africa in the nineteenth century. Mary French-Sheldon, an American, also took a safari, in the later part of the century, to Kilimanjaro and other areas of Africa. Fortunately, she documented her travels in a book published in the early 1890s—a period in which women were more and more recognized for their ability to do what men alone had been permitted to attempt. [Sultan to Sultan. Adventures Among the Masai and Other Tribes of East Africa by “Bebe Bwana.” London: Saxon; Boston: Arena, 1892.]

Africa was, of course, an enigma and a challenge to people from every culture and country. Long before the English and French became interested in East Africa, West Africa had been explored by the Portuguese looking for a route to the Indies. They were successful in their search and then built forts along the coast to protect their fleets as they sailed south around the Horn. By 1575, they had also founded the city of Luanda on the coast of what is known today as the People’s Republic of Angola. However, because of the steep escarpment that separates the coast from the interior highlands of Angola, Portugal had never conquered or ruled the interior kingdoms of West Central Africa. But, by the end of the nineteenth century, it became evident that Portugal either had to gain control of that area or else other European countries would do so. As a result, military expeditions were sent to the interior to strengthen the Portuguese claims.

A unique manuscript in the University’s collection is a field book of an expedition into the interior of present day Angola. Written in 1878 by an anonymous Portuguese soldier or settler, it details and maps the rivers and other topographical features along the Cunene River in the interior of the country. The author left his residence near the Calunge River on January 1, 1878, and reached Cacona on February 11, 1878. He noted the distance traveled each day—12 to 18 miles
The Dictionary...
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Dictionary. Some are restricted to a particular aspect of language, such as word origins, slang, dialect, pronunciation, rhymes, clichés, and euphemisms. Some are restricted to the technical language of a profession, such as librarianship or law. Many of these dictionaries are clustered together by the Library of Congress classification system in the general dictionaries section, but many others are classed by subject, so that dictionaries of words in economics are found near other economics books.

With those final comments, my additional words of suggestion or guidance to the student (or other user) who asked for the dictionary would end. But, of course, I invite all members of this audience [and our Library Friends] to visit our dictionaries. After browsing among them for a time, I’m sure you’ll agree with me that each is unique, and, therefore, it’s not true that one is as good as another nor, indeed, is there the dictionary. D.I.

For those who would like the full references to the titles cited in the article:


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kilometers—and the temperature which often reached 27 degrees centigrade—for us a florid 80 degrees Fahrenheit. His last entry is March 6, 1878.

The Africana Collection in Waldo Library’s Rare Book Room includes many first and early editions of other explorers of Africa. Often the records of their travels and exploits reflect the late nineteenth century attitude that Africa contained an inexhaustible supply of flora and fauna to remove, hunt, or conquer. The legacy from this perspective has become a sad inheritance for the twentieth century, but the volumes in the collection return us to a time and to exotic places that haunt our dreams, pique our curiosity, and shape our fantasies. B.B.

Friends Meet...
The Annual Meeting and Reception of the Friends of [Western Michigan] University Libraries was held on Sunday, April 17, 1994. A number of donors, contributors, associates, students, and life members met in the Rare Book Room in Waldo Library to conduct the annual business meeting and hear Dean Lance Query describe the University Libraries’ unusual collections and aspirations for the future. The nominating committee put forth the following slate: President, Leta Schoenhals; Vice President, Robert Hegel; Secretary, Kristin Johnston; and Treasurer, Bettina Meyer. The membership unanimously elected the slate and added Kristen Badra to the Board of Directors; she joins Judy Canaan and Hazel DeMeyer Rupp. Retiring president Peter Krawutschke welcomed the members and conducted the annual business meeting.