

Edward Long's Libel of Africa

Edward Long's Libel of Africa:

*The Foundation
of British Racism*

By

Folarin Shyllon

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



Edward Long's Libel of Africa: The Foundation of British Racism

By Folarin Shyllon

This book first published 2021

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2021 by Folarin Shyllon

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-6226-3

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-6226-4

To my children
Oyinolá Olániran
Oláyẹmi Gbṓláhàn
Olṓládé Olákìtán
Olámídé Oládiméjì

It is, then, the strife of all honorable men of the twentieth century to see that in the future competition of races the survival of the fittest shall mean the triumph of the good, the beautiful, and the true; that we may be able to preserve for future civilization all that is really fine and noble and strong, and not continue to put a premium on greed and impudence and cruelty. To bring this hope to fruition, we are compelled daily to turn more and more to a conscientious study of the phenomena of race contact – to a study frank and fair, and not falsified and colored by our wishes or our fears.

—W. E. B. DuBois

(*The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903)

CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	viii
Preface	x
Acknowledgements	xi
Prologue: Edward Long: Eighteenth Century Jamaican Planter.....	xii
Chapter One.....	1
The Meaning of Africa: Myth and Reality	
Chapter Two	18
British West Indian Slave Society	
Chapter Three	33
Early Life	
Chapter Four.....	40
Onslaught on the Somerset Decision	
Chapter Five	44
<i>The History of Jamaica: A Seminal Racist Propaganda</i>	
Chapter Six	74
The Impact of <i>The History of Jamaica</i>	
Chapter Seven.....	103
The Tragic Legacy of Edward Long	
Epilogue: From Edward Long to Enoch Powell.....	136
Bibliography	144
Index	154

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

SEE COLOUR CENTREFOLD

1. William Hogarth: *Four Times of the Day – Noon* (1738). Humorous depictions of life in the streets of London. In *Noon* the black man fondling the breasts of a white woman represents Mars and the woman Venus. A subject fraught with emotion is depicted by Hogarth with verve and serious fun. © British Museum.

2. Saint Maurice (Place of Birth: Thebes, Egypt; born 3rd century; Died 287 AD). Saint Maurice was the leader of the legendary Roman Theban Legion. The image here is in the Cathedral of Magdeburg, Magdeburg, Germany. It is considered to be the earliest realistic depiction of an ethnic African in Europe. Freely available – Wikipedia.

3. The Adoration of the Three Kings. Three Wise Men, or Magi from the East Are described in the Gospel of Saint Matthew as having seen a new star in the East and journeyed to pay tribute to the child marked as divine by the heavens. The Wise Men are often depicted as Kings, and the youngest is frequently depicted as an African, here holding a gold vessel containing myrrh, a precious resin from Arabia and Africa used for perfume. Freely available – Wikipedia.

4. Francis Williams 1799-1770. This portrait of Francis Williams Jamaican scholar and poet was painted in Jamaica around 1745 by an unknown artist most likely based in Jamaica. This portrait was owned by Edward Long's descendants until it was given to The Victoria and Albert Museum. © Victoria and Albert Museum.

5. Thomas Masterman Winterbottom 1766-1859. English physician, philanthropist and abolitionist, who really deserves the accolade “a pioneer of African Studies.” Freely available – Wikipedia.

6. Edward Long 1734-1813. A most polemical defender of slavery and slave trade of the Africans whose *History of Jamaica* (1774) is a seminal racist propaganda. © National Portrait Gallery

7. Bryan Edwards 1743-1800. A Jamaican planter who on his return to Britain became a Member of Parliament and used his position to support slavery and slave trade vigorously opposing abolition. William Wilberforce described him as a formidable opponent. © National Portrait Gallery.

8. James Ramsay 1733-1789. A surgeon and Anglican priest who witnessed slavery at first hand on the island of Saint Christopher (now Saint Kitts) and on return to Britain became an implacable opponent of British West Indian slavery. He died early in the struggle for abolition and his immense contribution was not recognized until recent times. © National Portrait Gallery.

9. Granville Sharp 1735-1813. A most formidable opponent of the slave trade and slavery of Africans. He wrung from Lord Mansfield, the Lord Chief Justice of the Court of King's Bench the famous decision of 1772 that slaves brought to Britain from the West Indies cannot be forcibly returned to the West Indies and slavery. © National Portrait Gallery.

10. Thomas Carlyle 1795-1881. British historian and essayist. Author of the deplorable nonsense "Occasional Discourse of the Nigger Question" (1849). © National Portrait Gallery.

11. James Anthony Froude 1818-1894. Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford (1892-1894). He was a fervent disciple of Thomas Carlyle and wrote his biography. Carlyle's racism received powerful support from him. © National Portrait Gallery.

PREFACE

In his review of *Black Slaves in Britain* in *New Society*, Professor Lord Asa Briggs remarked that it is “a book which is less concerned with identifying heroes and villains than with getting at the truth, a truth which is buried deep and is sometimes terrifying.” However, as the title of this book betrays, it can be urged that it is concerned with heroes and villains. It deals with the terrifying opinions of Edward Long and his supporters about Africans, and the rejection of their views by other Britons. The views Edward Long espoused on Africans and people of African ancestry in his *The History of Jamaica*, qualifies him for the title of father of British racism. On the other hand, Rev. James Ramsay a calm opponent of Edward Long, was acknowledged in *James Ramsay: The Unknown Abolitionist* as championing human rights for all people, and a redoubtable champion of African humanity.

Racism dies hard. The legacy of Edward Long is still alive in Britain today. It is well exemplified in the story of Bianca Williams, a harmless black mother, and a British athlete being pulled out of her car in London and put in handcuffs by the Metropolitan Police while her three-month old son was in the car. She shouted: “My son is in the car” to no avail. Yet the Metropolitan Police reaction is, that after reviewing all the material in relation to the incident there had been no misconduct on the part of the Metropolitan Police. Nonetheless, it voluntarily referred the incident to the Independent Office for Police Conduct.

Folarin Shyllon
Ibadan, September 25, 2020.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to the staff of the following libraries and institutions for their kindness and assistance: The British Library, The British Museum Library, The British Library Newspaper Library, Colindale, London; Goldsmith's Library, University of London; The University of London Library; Institute of African Studies Library, University of Ibadan; Harvard University Library; The Institute of Jamaica, Kingston, Jamaica; The Suffolk Record Office (Ipswich Branch).

This book grew out of *Black Slaves in Britain* and *Black People in Britain 1555-1833*. It was, however, during my fellowship at Harvard University's W. E. B. DuBois Institute for African and African American Research, during the 2003-2004 academic session, that the research was concluded and the manuscript completed. I am indeed grateful to the Institute for the fellowship which ensured the completion of this work. Finally, special thanks to Cambridge Scholars Publishing and the publishing team for a job well done.

PROLOGUE

EDWARD LONG: EIGHTEENTH CENTURY JAMAICAN PLANTER

Edward Long (1734-1813) was a seminal figure in the crystallization of the British attitude toward Africans. The author of a substantial three-volume book, *The History of Jamaica* (1774), his opinions were accepted as authoritative by English readers, who were absorbed by the innocuous historical information he provided, and his picture of Africans as sub-human creatures, fitted only for slavery. The vogue enjoyed by Long's *The History of Jamaica* was principally due to his seemingly impeccable credentials: twelve years' residence in Jamaica, which included service as a Member and Speaker of the House of Assembly, experience as a Judge of the local Vice-Admiralty Court, and a reputation as a highly successful planter.

The key sections on race make *The History of Jamaica* one of the classics of literature on race vilification. It was intended to seal the fate of the Africans, and, written under different circumstances, the acrid vehemence of the pivotal sections on Africa, Africans and people of African ancestry might have been different. But, writing with the abolitionist agitation in view, Long turned to the defence of his slave society by portraying the African as congenitally inferior and a biological monstrosity. "When you take up a historical work", E. H. Carr warned, "it is not enough to look at the author's name on the title-page: look also for the date of publication or writing – it is sometimes even more revealing". Long was in so much of a hurry to counteract what he saw as an imminent disaster that the manuscript was hurriedly sent to the press, and considerable parts of the book were revised by him for a proposed second edition which never materialized.

Undoubtedly, the book is a mine of information, and one of the most interesting social documents left to posterity by any single historian of the British West Indies. Elsa Goveia praised it as "one of the truly great achievements in the writing of West Indian history". In 1932, L J Ragatz judged it as, "a classic in its field, and, after a century and a half, it

contains what is still one of the best and most nearly complete account of colonial government in existence”.

The reviewer of the *History* in the *Monthly Review* had no doubt that the major objective of the book was to win a sympathetic understanding for Jamaica, to influence public opinion, and, if possible, public policy: “by transporting Jamaica to England, he has brought the strangers together, in the generous hope that an intimacy may unite them in the same affections, and the mother country feel a natural kindness for an adopted child, who contributes so largely to her defence and support”. Prior to the first debate in the House of Commons, in June 1788, on the abolition of the slave trade, William Pitt, the Prime Minister, conferred with Long. Other key members of his cabinet, such as Lord Hawkesbury (President of the Privy Council for Trade), impatiently sought the opinion of Long on a subject on which he was regarded as a great authority, and they placed much confidence in it.

Although Long's ideas on race are, by modern standards, outrageously absurd, his West Indian background gave them a stamp of authority, as coming from one who ‘knew’ the African, first-hand. This was the factor that unfortunately enhanced the value of the *History*, and placed it in an underserved, unrivalled, position. His work was respectable because he stood for the maintenance of the social order, and in the long history of contact between Africa and Europe, the dictates of economics and trade have proved to be more urgent and attractive than the dictates of humanity and justice. Long's greatest importance was in providing an empirical and ‘scientific’ base that would lead on to pseudo-scientific racism. The part of the *History* dealing with race was reprinted in America in *Columbia Magazine*, in 1788, where it became a support for later American racism. It was used for a century, again and again, by British and Continental polygenists of scientific repute, and it provided a set of ready-made arguments for any publicist who wanted to prove the fact of African inferiority.

The central purpose of this study is to show the catalytic role that the writing of Edward Long played in English and European racial thought in the 18th and 19th centuries. His influence on the writings of Bryan Edwards, the staid historian of the British West Indies, Mungo Park (the explorer of Africa), Thomas Carlyle, James Anthony Froude (Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford), and even Rudyard Kipling, will be examined, and his enduring legacy demonstrated. It will also be a study

in contrast to my own work, *James Ramsay: The Unknown Abolitionist* (1977).

CHAPTER ONE

THE MEANING OF AFRICA: MYTH AND REALITY

“One does not react to Africa as Africa is ... One reacts to Africa as one is, as one lives; one’s reaction to Africa is one’s life, one’s ultimate sense of things.”

—Richard Wright, *Black Power* (1956)

Greco-Roman Perceptions of Africa

The ancients’ reference to Africa, or rather Ethiopia (“the land of sun-burned or black faced-men”) and Ethiopians, dates back to Homer (9th century BC). Homer writes, in *The Illiad* and *The Odyssey* of these Ethiopians (Aethiopians) as “remote people, sundered in twain, the farthestmost men, some dwelling where the sun rises and others where it sets”.¹ With Homer begins the conception of the two-fold Ethiopians; those of the east and the west; of the rising and the setting sun. With Homer, for whom Ethiopia was a land at the remotest border of the world, beside the stream of ocean, also begins the confusion about the nature study of Africa. Any attempt to place Ethiopians in a fixed geographical scheme is futile, since Homer himself says we do not know the places where the sun rises and sets.² But they were entirely fabulous. These Ethiopians were ‘blameless’ and pious, comrades of the Gods rather than of men. Zeus and Poseidon feasted each year among the “blameless Ethiopians”. Dear to the Gods, and renowned for their piety and justice, they enjoyed divine visits.³

From the fabulous Ethiopians of poetry, one is recalled to reality by the matter-of-fact descriptions of Herodotus of the two sets of Ethiopians in

¹ Frank M. Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge, Mass; 1970), 101.

² Grace Hadley Beardsley, *The Negro in Greek and Roman Civilization: A Study of the Ethiopian Type* (Baltimore, 1929), 1-3.

³ Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*, 216; W.E.B. DuBois, *The Negro* (OUP, 1970 ed.) 21; Beardsley, *The Negro in Greek and Roman Civilization*, 6.

the polyglot army of Xeres which invaded Greece in the year 480 BC. Herodotus distinguished between the straight hair of Asiatic Ethiopians and the woolly hair of those from Africa. The Ethiopians of the poets, Homer, Hesiod, Mimnermus, Aeschylus, Euripides, Apollonius, are mythical, or partly mythical, creatures, while the writers of prose – Herodotus, Strabo, Diodorus, Agatharchides – tried to deal with African reality.⁴ This is not surprising, since the latter group travelled to Africa: Herodotus went as far south as Elephantine (Aswan); Diodorus spent considerable time in several parts of Egypt; Strabo travelled up the Nile to Syene; Agatharchides lived in Alexandria.⁵ Herodotus draws a clear distinction between Libyans (Berbers) and Aethiopians (Africans).⁶ He shows himself a superficial observer of racial differences, as he mentions hair as the only distinguishing mark between the two groups in the army of Xeres, although he goes into their costumes and weapons in some detail.⁷ The description by Herodotus of the equipment of the African Ethiopians in Xeres' army is interesting. He tells us that they:⁸

Were clothed in the skin of leopards and lions, and had long bows made of the stem of the palm-leaf, not less than four cubits in length. On these they laid short arrows made of reed, and armed at the tip, not with iron, but with a piece of stone, sharpened to a point, of the kind used in engraving seals. They carried likewise spears, the head of which was the sharpened horn of an antelope; and in addition they had knotted clubs. When they went into battle they painted their bodies, half with chalk, and half with vermilion.

Aeschylus was the first Greek to locate Ethiopians in Africa.⁹ The location and description of the "Land of Black-faced men", by Homer and his contemporaries, are rather vague and limited.¹⁰ On the whole, the Greeks had quite a favourable opinion of the Ethiopians, whom obviously they knew little about. Homer called them "blameless", and Diodorus believed that Egyptian civilization originated up the Nile.

⁴ Beardsley, *The Negro in Greek and Roman Civilization*, 6.

⁵ Joseph E. Harris (ed.) *Africa and Africans As Seen by Classical Writers: The William Leo Hansberry African History Notebook*, Volume II (Washington D.C. 1977), 136.

⁶ Francis J.D. Astley, "The Black Races of Africa in the Classics", Ph.D. Thesis, University of London, 1954, 101.

⁷ Beardsley, *The Negro in Greek and Roman Civilization*, 5.

⁸ Astley, "The Black Races of Africa in the Classics", 39-40.

⁹ Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*, 103; Beardsley, *The Negro in Greek and Roman Civilization*, 4.

¹⁰ Harris, *Africa and Africans as seen by Classical Writers*, 74.

By the 7th and 6th century BC, the physical characteristics of the Ethiopian type were well known to the Greeks. As Beardsley suggests, the portrayal of the features of the type on a series of plastic vases are generally too lifelike to have been based upon word or memory pictures alone, but must have been copies from living models.¹¹ The conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great in 332 BC introduced a new chapter in Greco-Roman relations. The Ptolemies developed new trade routes into the African hinterland, and commercial stations appeared in several areas along the Nile.¹²

The Romans had more direct knowledge of the hinterland of Africa than the Greeks. The Romans built up important colonies in Africa. The period of their establishment involved many military campaigns, and they were subsequently held by military rule. There can be no doubt that Africans were a vastly more common sight in Rome than in Athens.¹³ When the Ptolemaic dynasty was defeated in 30 BC, and Egypt annexed to the Roman Empire, the Romans continued the advance to the south. In the course of those activities and campaigns, the Romans were able to produce first-hand accounts of inner Africa and its peoples. Pre-eminent among these accounts were those of Pliny the Elder.¹⁴

The earliest mention of Ethiopians in Roman literature occurs in the *Eunuchus* of Terence, where Parmeno has brought Thais what he considers two valuable gifts, a eunuch, and an Ethiopian girl.¹⁵ Beardsley has concluded that, due to excessive familiarity, the Romans' attitude towards the Ethiopian expressed in scattered passages is far less kind than the Greek.¹⁶ The earliest passage in which they are spoken of derogatively appears to be in Cicero, who coined the phrase "blockhead Ethiopians".¹⁷ Diogenes (the Cynic), we are told, was admonishing a bad man. When asked by someone why he was doing so, he said "I am washing the Aethiopian to make him white". It is difficult to resist the argument that, consciously or not, the proverb "to wash an Ethiopian white" contained the

¹¹ Beardsley, *The Negro in Greek and Roman Civilization*, 5, 111-112; Harris, *Africa and Africans as seen by Classical Writers*, 59-60.

¹² Harris, *Africa and Africans as seen by Classical Writers*, xix.

¹³ Beardsley, *The Negro in Greek and Roman Civilization*, 116.

¹⁴ Harris, *Africa and Africans as seen by Classical Writers*, xix.

¹⁵ Beardsley, *The Negro in Greek and Roman Civilization*, 116.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 119, 120.

¹⁷ Astley, "The Black Races of Africa in the Classics," 35; Beardsley, *The Negro in Greek and Roman Civilization*, 119.

seeds of racial denigration.¹⁸ It is true, of course, that in the Roman period, others wrote favourably about the Ethiopians.

The Beginning of African Denigration

That the Greeks and Romans were highly conscious of the blackness and physical type of the Ethiopians is amply documented. The crucial question is, whether blackness conveyed the meaning, or evoked hostilities, which have developed in colour-conscious societies. Many writers on this subject have concluded that no denigratory racial attitudes and concepts should be attributed to the ancients. In support of their position, they cite classical references to Ethiopians as “pious and just” and “blameless”, and point to the general absence of derogatory treatment.¹⁹ Frank Snowden, perhaps the most ardent advocate of this view, asserts that “no stereotyped conception of blacks ever flourished in their art or literature, and color *per se* was never a barrier”.²⁰ Some of the evidence, as we have seen, supports this point of view.

There is, however, another stream of records which did characterize Ethiopians as “mysterious” people with “tightly curled or woolly hair; broad and flattened noses; lips thick, often puffy and everted, and prognathous” – characterizations not complimentary in those societies.²¹ The same may be said of the earliest portrait of the African Ethiopian given by the Greek physician Galen in the 2nd century AD. Galen gives ten principal characteristics: frizzled hair, thick beard, wide nostrils, thick lips, sharp teeth, bad-smelling skin, black colour, outspread fingers and toes, long genital organs, and a great love of amusement.²² In addition, Herodotus wrote of Africans who ate locusts and snakes, shared wives, and spoke no human language, but rather “screech like bats”. Africa, wrote Herodotus, was inhabited by wild animals, and by men with “dog’s heads and those with no heads whose eyes are in their chests”.²³ These fantastic

¹⁸ Astley, “The Black Races of Africa in the Classics,” 35; Harris, *Africa and Africans as seen by Classical Writers*, xx.

¹⁹ Harris, *Africa and Africans as seen by Classical Writers*, xix-xx.

²⁰ Frank M. Snowden, “Ethiopian and the Greco-Roman World” in Martin L. Kilson and Robert I. Rotberg (eds.) *The African Diaspora: Interpretive Essays* (Cambridge, Mass, 1976), 11-36, 36; Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*, 169, 216-217.

²¹ Harris, *Africa and Africans as seen by Classical Writers*, xx.

²² Astley, “The Black Races of Africa in the Classics,” 34.

²³ William B. Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans: White Responses to Blacks, 1530-1880* (Bloomington, 1980), 1.

descriptions were taken over uncritically by the Roman compiler Pliny the Elder, who spoke of the Africans as those who “by reports have no heads but mouth and eyes in their breasts”.²⁴

The ancient Greeks and Romans may not, perhaps, have revealed race prejudice in their social relations with blacks, but in their geographic descriptions of Africa, and in their physical descriptions of the African type, they developed a number of negative stereotypes about the inhabitants of what was commonly called either Libya or Ethiopia.²⁵ The crucial thing to remember is that there were two streams of information emanating from the classical writers, and the unfavourable characterization has had the greatest influence on the image and treatment of blacks in our own times.²⁶ It must be emphasized, however, that while the Greeks and Romans thought the black Ethiopians to their south were strange, they did not regard them as inferior.

Coarse Mediaeval Representations of Africa

In Mediaeval Europe, as in classical times, people had ambiguous views. Africa was unknown, so, on the one hand, they assumed that it might well contain outlandish monsters. But Mediaeval Christians also believed that the world was a Christian one (except where the Muslims had intruded), and that Africa must be a Christian continent; the ambiguity comes out well in Mediaeval iconography. What emerges strikingly is that Africans were depicted in Mediaeval Europe in two contrasting ways. Sometimes they represent devils and evil persons. But sometimes they appear as saints and holy persons – for example, there are some beautiful paintings and sculptures of Saint Maurice, who is shown as an African. Also, one of the favourite themes of Mediaeval paintings is the adoration of the Three Kings, one of whom is often depicted as a noble-looking African.

The 3rd century geographer Solinus was the medium through which monstrous views of Africa were passed on to the Middle Ages. Solinus wrote that Africans resembled dogs, and had “long snouts”, while others had no noses, no mouths, and still others, no tongues.²⁷ Cohen says that

²⁴ Harris, *Africa and Africans as seen by Classical Writers*, xx.

²⁵ Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans*, 1.

²⁶ Harris, *Africa and Africans as seen by Classical Writers*, xx.

²⁷ Solinus (Gaius Julius) *The Excellent and Pleasant Work of Julius Solonius Polyhistor. Containing the Noble Actions of Humaine Creatures, the Secrets &*

that Solinus was read and copied for over a thousand years, providing the basis for most geographical description. The well-informed classical accounts of Africa, like the Ptolemaic maps, indicating that the ancients had at least knowledge of east and central Africa as far west as the River Niger, were lost to the Middle Ages, and instead, myths such as those of Pliny, of a fiery area inhabited by monstrous men, were perpetuated. In the Renaissance, those myths were strengthened due to the revival of interest in the classics. Pliny was rediscovered, and between 1450 and 1550, forty-six editions of his *Natural History* appeared. His influence can be seen in the comment of Rabelais, who declared, “Africa always produces new and monstrous things”.²⁸

The Baneful Influence of Classical Representations on Modern Europeans

It is clear that, due to the tradition of classical lore, the modern Europeans had developed negative reactions towards Africa and Africans long before setting foot on the continent and casting their eyes on them. Classical literature was very much in vogue in the 18th century, during the golden years of the British slave trade and the West Indian plantation system. For example, Edward Long read a lot of classics while at Bury St. Edmunds’ School, and Liskeard. From Long’s autobiography we know that he read Tacitus and Vergil.²⁹ In a letter his father sent to the young Edward, he chided his son for his style. Plain English, written in an essay manner, he told him, was much better than his “high flights and forced conceits, larded with scraps of Latin and Greek”.³⁰ Edward Long’s two works on Africa and Africans betray his penchant for lacing his writing with scraps of Latin and Greek. Thus, he criticized Lord Mansfield’s decision in the Somerset case (1772), quite unfairly, for its “Delphic ambiguity”.³¹ In *The History of Jamaica*, he reproduced some of the Latin poems of Francis

Providence of Nature, the Description of Countries Translated out of Latin into English by Arthur Golding (London, 1587).

²⁸ Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans*, 1-2.

²⁹ Robert Mowbray Howard (ed.) *Records and Letters of the Family of Longs of Longville Jamaica, and Hampton Lodge, Surrey* (London, 1925), 2 volumes, I, 96.

³⁰ *Ibid*; I, 125.

³¹ [Edward Long], *Candid Reflections Upon the Judgement Lately Awarded by the Court of King’s Bench in Westminster-Hall, On What is Commonly Called the Negroe-Cause, by a Planter* (London, 1772), 57.

Williams, and translated them into English.³² Also in the *History of Jamaica*, he wrote, after Rabelais, of “Afric, that parent of everything that is monstrous in nature”.³³ It is equally clear that he derived his charge of libidinousness from the belief of the ancients that people of the torrid regions were lascivious, unlike those of the temperate regions.³⁴ Finally, Edward Long himself admits his familiarity with classical literature, drawing from it in the passage where he uses it as corroborative evidence for his scabrous portrait of the African character. The ancient Africans, he asserted, were not different from the contemporary picture he had painted of them as being addicted to monstrous habits, “for we find them represented by the Greek and Roman authors under the most odious and despicable character, as proud, lazy, deceitful, thievish, addicted to all kinds of lust, and ready to promote them in others, incestuous, savage, cruel, and vindictive, devourers of human flesh, and quaffers of human blood, inconsistent, base, and cowardly, devoted to all sorts of superstition, and in short, to every vice that come in their way, or within their reach”.³⁵

By the beginning of the age of European expansion and penetration into Africa, in the 16th century, the nations of Western Europe had at their disposal derogatory opinions of Africa and Africans derived from the works of classical antiquity and the Mediaeval periods. The fables of these periods are nowhere more damaging and derogatory than in the accounts of the manners and customs of the interior of Africa. Edward Long recalled all the disparaging references he had read during his school days, and then grotesquely exaggerated them, as in the passage quoted above. Yet there was a dearth of information about the interior of Africa in the classical age. In this connection, suffice it to cite Strabo the Geographer (born about 63 BC), whose geography surpassed all other geographical labours of antiquity, and is the most important treatise of its kind ever penned by a classical author.³⁶ Strabo said: “Most of the peoples inhabiting Libya are unknown to us; for not much of it is visited by armies, nor yet by men of outside tribes; and not only do very few of the

³² [Edward Long], *The History of Jamaica, Or General Survey of the Antient and Modern State of that Island: With Reflections on its Situation, Settlements, Inhabitants, Climate, Products, Commerce, Laws and Government* (London, 1774), 3 volumes. II, 478-485.

³³ Ibid; II, 383.

³⁴ Ibid; II, 370,383.

³⁵ Ibid; II, 354.

³⁶ Harris, *Africa and Africans as seen by Classical Writers*, 124.

natives from far inland ever visit us, but what they tell us is not trustworthy or complete either.³⁷

Absence of Accurate Knowledge of Africa and African Culture

The classical tradition concerning the monstrous habits of Africans of the interior did not dissipate in the face of increasing contact with Africa in the 15th and 16th centuries. The negative reactions were merely reinforced. Indeed, until both the slave trade and slavery had outlived their economic usefulness and viability, and the great explorations got under way in the last decade of the 18th century, in order to promote so-called legitimate trade, European ideas and images of Africa remained distorted and uninformed. Three major factors are responsible for what Edward Gibbon called the “very faint and imperfect knowledge of the great peninsular of Africa”.³⁸ These are African hostility and opposition to the penetration of the hinterland, the language problem, and the fabricated mendacities of European writers, who were, in one way or the other, involved in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and who, therefore, could not be expected to write anything good about the African and thereby undermined the lucrative trade in human beings. It is necessary to examine each of these grounds closely.

In the introduction to his influential book on the slave trade published in 1724, William Snelgrave wrote at length about African hostility to European penetration:³⁹

Such as are unacquainted with this country, may reasonably suppose we would have gained by this time a perfect account of the Inland-parts; yet perhaps we know the least of any Country the English have so long traded to, for reasons I shall give hereafter ... Along the greatest part of the coast the Europeans have been cautious of venturing on Shore among the Natives, they being very barbarous and uncivilized, as several have experienced to their cost. In those few places where I have been on Shore

³⁷ Astley, “The Black Races of Africa in the Classics,” 101-102.

³⁸ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London, 1776-1788), 6 volumes, II, 539. He went no to add in the same passage that the poor knowledge of the ancients led them to assume that the inhabitants were “headless men, or rather monsters, with horned and cloven-footed satyrs; with fabulous centaurs.”

³⁹ William Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave Trade* (London, 1724). Introduction. The introduction is not paginated.

myself, I could never obtain a satisfactory account from the Natives of the Inland parts. Nor did I ever meet with a white man that had been. ... and believe, if any had attempted it, the natives would have destroyed them, out of a jealousy that they designed to make discoveries to their prejudice.

Thomas Winterbottom: The Pioneer of African Studies

Thomas Winterbottom, whose views on Africa deserve the highest regard, wrote in the same vein as Snelgrave, declaring:⁴⁰

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 ... escape importunity ... they are apt to suspect that the curiosity of Europeans has some sinister end in view.

The meticulous Winterbottom, at the end of his two-volume work, appended a list of vocabularies used in the area around where he stayed. Though some readers might find them “too extensive and cumbrous”, nonetheless, an adequate knowledge of African languages was “a point of indispensable necessity to those who desire exact information”.⁴¹ Yet for four centuries the language barrier remained unbroken. This point has been recognized by modern European scholars. One notes that, “Europeans on the coast were severely handicapped by an almost total deficiency in African languages”.⁴² Another comments that “few had linguistic ability”, and proceeds to cite the case of Thomas Thompson, the 18th century English missionary on the Gold Coast who was the resident minister of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts in the Cape Coast from 1751 to 1756. Thompson found his evangelism thwarted by the language barrier. His attempt to learn the local language was unsuccessful, but in any case, he claimed he was the exception, because no other English man

⁴⁰ Thomas Winterbottom, *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* (London, 1803), 2 volumes, I, iv.

⁴¹ Ibid; I, iv.

⁴² John Ralph Ellis in Introduction to 1967 Frank Cass reprint of William Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea, Divided into the Gold, the Slave, and the Ivory Coasts* (London, 1705), xvii.

on the coast even tried.⁴³ They did not make any effort, probably because, as William Bosman reported, they found the languages too difficult to learn. It was his opinion that ten years was scarcely adequate to attain any sort of perfection.⁴⁴

The truth is that, had any one of these men acquired a reasonable knowledge of the language of the area in which he had operated, he would have had no time to make the kind of ethnographic survey conducted by Thomas Winterbottom in the last decade of the 18th century. The reason, which has been well stated by Robert Norris, the author of the infamous and very insidious *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahadee* and *A Short Account of the African Slave Trade*, is best stated in his own words, namely that, “amidst the indispensable avocations of business, one has very little time, during an occasional residence in Africa, to bestow attention upon the history, either natural or political, of that country”. But as was his wont, the Africans were entirely to blame, for he added that, “the stupidity of the natives is an insuperable barrier against the inquirer’s information”.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, the “insuperable barrier” was overcome by Thomas Winterbottom, because he really cared to know the truth, and had come to Africa with an open mind. After warning that Africans were apt to suspect the curiosity of Europeans, he added: “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”.⁴⁶

Men who came to Africa in pursuit of money as slave traders, like Norris and Snelgrave, had no time for the sort of careful approach to the study of African life and custom that Winterbottom urged. The tragedy is, that it is the works of the Snelgraves and Norrises that have, over the centuries, been accorded with the distinction of authoritative and authentic accounts. This is, no doubt, due to the fact they spoke for the capitalist interest, and not the humanitarian interest that Winterbottom stood for. The praise of

⁴³ Anthony J. Barker, *The African Link: British Attitudes to the Negro in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1550-1807* (London, 1978), 139; Thomas Thompson, *An Account of two Missionary Voyages* (London, 1758), 69, 71-73, 82.

⁴⁴ Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*, 130-131.

⁴⁵ Robert Norris, *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahadee, King of Dahomy, An Inland Country of Guinea. To which are added, the Author’s Journey to Abomey, the Capital; and a Short Account of the African Slave Trade* (London, 1789), v.

⁴⁶ Winterbottom, *An Account of the Native Africans*, I, 205.

the authors of the introduction to the 1969 reprint of Winterbottom's book, writing that he was "a pioneer of African Studies", is well deserved.⁴⁷

Travel Accounts: A Major Influence of European Ignorance

The last major factor responsible for Europe's ignorance of Africa was the prejudicial and biased reporting by European travellers who wrote anything and everything in disparagement of Africa. Thoroughly influenced by the accounts of the ancients on Africa as a land of monsters, satyrs, and headless men, European accounts from Mediaeval times to the 16th century when the slave trade got under way, did not rise above these myths and mythologies. For example, *The Cosmographie*, published by Alphonse de Saintogne in 1544, described the interior of Africa in terms echoing Pliny and Solinus: "And inland there are people who have no heads and whose heads are in their chests while the rest is formed like a man. And further east there are those who have only one eye in the forehead. And south of the Mountain of the Moon there are others who have feet like goats' and still others with the face of a dog".⁴⁸

Fabricated Mendacities in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade

The great European output regarding Africa began in the 16th century, as soon as the slave trade really became important to several European nations, including the Dutch, English, French, Portuguese, and Spaniards. Fastening on to the classical and Mediaeval accounts of Africa, they grafted their own prejudices and preconceived notions onto earlier accounts. Now, these writers during the era of the slave trade were, in one way or another, involved in the lucrative trade in human beings. To these Europeans who operated and traded on the coast, everything African was hideous.

Another critical thing to remember is that, for the most part, these writers fed their readers with unacknowledged second-hand and hearsay information. Thomas Astley highlighted this deplorable fact in the preface to his four-volume *Collection of Voyages and Travels*. He stated that he

⁴⁷ John D. Hargreaves and E. Maurice Beckett, Introduction to *An Account of the African in the Neighbourhood of Sierra Leone* (London, 1803, 1969), xviii.

⁴⁸ Quoted from Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans*, 5.

had embarked on the Collection and adopted the method of comparing all the known writings on a particular topic, because that was the only way he could,⁴⁹

best discover the fictitious Relations from the genuine, the Copy from the Original, and trace the Theft through a Series of Authors to the Fountain-Head: For instance, by comparing the several Voyages and Accounts of Guinea together, it appears that almost all the Authors have copied , or rather stolen, from Artus in de Bry's Collection (for they do not quote him) not excepting Bosman himself, who hitherto has passed unsuspected of plagiarism. Upon a Discovery of this nature, we generally take Care to point-out the Freebooter and restore the Goods to their Owners.

The Plagiarists

Astley declared that though Barbot, “had made the Voyage of Guinea, yet he is rather to be considered as a Collector of other People's Remarks, than a Relator of his own”. Astley felt that Barbot's account of Benin was unworthy of attention: “he is merely a Collector, having composed it almost wholly from the Descriptions of Nuenlander and Dapper, without mentioning either ... which renders the Writings ... of no Authority”.⁵⁰ Likewise, Bosman failed Astley's strict test. Though he spent fourteen years on the coast, representing the Dutch West India Company from about 1688 to 1702, and had it in him to write an unimpeachable account of his experience, he, too, relied on the work of Olfert Dapper and William Godschalk von Fokkenbrog, without mentioning them. Both authors in the opinion of Astley, “though commendable for what they wrote concerning Holland, did not deserve Credit in one Half of their Accounts of foreign countries”.⁵¹

Astley's criticisms of the works of Bosman and Barbot deserve our attention. It is over two and a half centuries since Thomas Astley sounded the alarm that they were not safe authorities on Africa of the slave trade, yet Bosman and Barbot continue to ride high, and remain indispensable pillars of the received canon on the benighted Africa of the European slave trade. Thus Willis, writing his introduction to the 1967 edition of Bosman's book, admits that, “since Bosman's account has long been classic and authoritative, scholars of the period have quite naturally tended

⁴⁹ Thomas Astley, *A New General Collection of Voyages and Travels ...* (London, 1745-47), 4 volumes, I, viii.

⁵⁰ Ibid; III, 88.

⁵¹ Ibid; III, 90.

to rely heavily upon it (though mainly quoting rather than questioning the information he provides)".⁵² And that is in spite of the fact, that in 1961, A.W. Lawrence after a careful study of the works of Bosman, Barbot, and two other authors, made "a plea for subjecting the sources of African history to that kind of critical appraisal which has customarily been applied to Greek and Roman authors".⁵³ Lawrence's devastating remarks on Bosman's book will shortly be cited.

Fraudulent Misrepresentations by European Slave Traders

The books of the slave traders in particular caused the most havoc. Presenting their evidence on Africa as first-hand information, they established Africa in the minds of Europe as a land of unspeakable and transcendent barbarity and terror. Among this group of authors we shall mention Bosman, Barbot, Atkins, Norris, and Snelgrave. They made sure that, even today, Africa still belongs, in the eyes of Europe, to the mysterious and bizarre. And that is in spite of the extremely impudent and absurd nature of their outpourings, and in spite of the fact they were men who, all along the coast, completely destroyed the social fabric and order they had found. Thus whatever they described – even had they been reporting nothing but the truth – was an Africa changed and transformed by their interloping and invasion.

From the beginning then, it is clear that the European image of Africa was derivative. The writings of the slave traders now require close examination. At the outset, it is well to note Anthony Benezet's warning that the accounts of the slave traders were "self-interested views", and that they had described Africans, "in such colours as were least likely to excite compassion and respect, and endeavoured to reconcile so manifest a violation of the rights of mankind to the minds of Europeans".⁵⁴ Likewise, an African commentator has reminded us that the European traders were apt to paint too dark a picture of Africa, because they had not come to

⁵² Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*, Introduction, xx.

⁵³ A.W. Lawrence, "Some Source Books for West African History," *Journal of African History* 2 (1961), 227-234, 227.

⁵⁴ Anthony Benezet, *Some Historical Account of Guinea, Its Situation, Produce, and the General Disposition of its Inhabitants with an Inquiry into the Rise and Progress of the Slave Trade, its Nature, and Lamentable Effects* (London, 1788), 83.

Africa out of any healthy regard for Africans. “Many were impecunious and necessitous and had journeyed to our continent in hopes of mending their circumstances. They had sailed to West Africa because Europe offered them little comfort. As a matter of fact, they were Europe’s failure – the very scum and offal of European civilization”.⁵⁵ As one of those engaged in this pre-eminently immoral activity, the barely literate Nicholas Owen put it: “I have no comfort or affection for it [Africa] or its inhabitants, otherwise than it helps my fortune and puts me in a way of liveing [sic] independant [sic] at home”.⁵⁶

The last preliminary point has been well stated by Lawrence in his essay on “Some Source Books for West African History”. Commenting on Bosman’s book, which he described as “the most readable, and therefore the most read, of all writers on West Africa,” he shed the following light on his technique of misinformation:⁵⁷

Examination of Bosman so far as Dixcove is concerned, I think, establishes some guiding principles whereby to assess his credibility. Upon plain matter of fact, which did not concern his personal feelings or loyalties, he can be as much trusted as anyone who wrote from memory ... Where, however, the interests and reputation of the Company he served might be injured by telling the truth, Bosman suppressed or misrepresented the discreditable incidents, while avoiding downright falsehood; very likely he took pleasure in devising a misleading form of words.

In short his *modus operandi*, where he had vested interests consisted of *suppressio veri* and *suggestio falsi*. As we shall see, Barbot, Snelgrave, and Atkins, adopted the same technique in their books. These slave traders were the most bilious whenever Africans asserted their rights, and would proceed to heap the most opprobrious epithets on the heads of Africans. It was then that the character of the African was “so artfully misrepresented”,⁵⁸ to borrow Benezet’s phrase. We can start with no better example than with the following from the Dutchman, Bosman, who perfected the technique.

On pages 348-349 of his book, he assured the reader that the Africans were “the greatest and most cunning Thieves in the World.” They were

⁵⁵ Felix Nwabueze Okoye, *The American Image of Africa: Myth and Reality* (New York, 1971), 24.

⁵⁶ Nicholas Owen, *Journal of A Slave Trade Dealer: A View of Some Remarkable Accedents [sic] in the Life of Nics. Owen on the Coast of Africa and America from the Year 1746 to the Year 1757*, edited by Eveline Martin (London, 1930), 94.

⁵⁷ Lawrence, “Some Source Books for West African History”, 290, 234.

⁵⁸ Benezet, *Some Historical Account of Guinea*, xiv.

also “expert Thieves”. The evidence offered on this occasion is to the effect that, on a particular trip, three miles from the shore, his party had “to make use of these Villains to carry our goods, they are thereby furnished with the best opportunity in the World ... and if we happen to catch them and reprehend them for it, they have the assurance enough to ask us, whether we can imagine that they would work so hard, as they do, for such small Wages without the Liberty of Stealing?”⁵⁹ What this master of the double-talk and “artful misrepresentation”, who took “pleasure in devising a misleading form of words” to suppress the truth refused to say, was that their African workers asked for better wages,⁶⁰ and when refused, being in their own country, found ways and means of enforcing their demands.

The Corruption of Africans by Sharp Practices of European Slave Traders

Barbot, the Huguenot and Agent-General of the French West India Company, made several trips in West Africa for the purpose of inspecting the company’s outposts. His book, originally written in French between 1683 and 1685, does not seem to have been published before the English translation of 1732. He labelled Africans as crafty, knavish, and deceitful, whenever they demonstrated their economic shrewdness, and refused to give Europeans unrestricted license to cheat them at will. He deposed:⁶¹

The Blacks in general being crafty, knavish and deceitful, and letting slip no opportunity of cheating Europeans ... A man of integrity, that may be depended on, is among them as rare as the Phoenix so that it is not to be admir’d that they daily offer great quantities of base and counterfeit gold, in trading with the Europeans, having attained the art of sophisticating it, which was first taught them by the Portuguese ... [and] the Dutch also ... [who] not only encouraging and instructing the natives in the way of sophisticating the gold, by furnishing them with the proper tools and metals for doing of it more masterly ... which in time proved as mischievous as to other Europeans; the Blacks being grown so expert and skilful at falsifying gold and doing it in so many different ways, that they are as often cheated themselves as any others: so that it may very well be said, the Blacks have learnt to cheat the cheater.

⁵⁹ Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*, 348-349.

⁶⁰ Okoye, *The American Image of Africa*, 24.

⁶¹ John Barbot, *A Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea; and of Ethiopia Interior Vulgarly Called Angola: Being a New and Accurate Account of the Western Maritime Countries of Africa* (London, 1732), 230.

It is interesting to note that Barbot did not classify the whites who introduced the falsification of gold as “crafty, knavish and deceitful”. He reserved the libel for the blacks, who, in order to prevent their own economic ruin at the hands of predatory and unscrupulous whites, outwitted them. Later on, as Barbot was cited as the authority, only his libels and his wholly unfounded description of the African as “crafty, knavish and deceitful” would be repeated again and again by men like Edward Long and Bryan Edwards, as first-hand testimony from Africa. The fraud, the deceit, and the perfidy of the whites which forced Africans to devise ways and means of their own economic survival went unmentioned. As, for that matter, did Barbot’s disclosure elsewhere of the fraud of the whites who used “two sorts of weights ... the heavier to receive gold by, and the lighter to pay it way, and is a great dishonour to Christianity, being contrary to the golden rule, to do as we would be done by”.⁶²

Blaming the Victim

Instead of introducing among the blacks what the whites prided themselves in possessing, “the boasted arts of civilized life ... Europeans have taught them only the vices of their own country,” and, in order “to exculpate themselves, [proceeded] to blacken the character of [Africans] and accused them of vices which they never thought of practicing”. Besides, said Thomas Winterbottom, he was quite sure that the fraudulent misrepresentations, lies and horrid accounts of the manners of the Africans were profoundly due to European resentments that the days of fantastic profits through fraudulent practices were over.⁶³

Their long connection with European slave traders has tutored them [Africans] in the arts of deceit, so that false weights and measures, damaged goods, and all the various cheats which the ingenuity of the more enlightened Europeans has strained itself to invent, are now detected almost as soon as they are attempted to be put into practice. It is in great measure owing to this cause that traders who visited the coast in hopes of becoming suddenly rich, disappointed in finding the natives better acquainted with the value of their country’s produce than they first supposed, and too well instructed by dear bought experience to be so grossly imposed upon as formerly, have drawn of them so foul a picture as they could invent.

⁶² Ibid; 235.

⁶³ Winterbottom, *An Account of the Native Africans*, I, 206.