

Cambridge University Press

0521842840 - The Narrative of Robert Adams, A Barbary Captive: A Critical Edition

Edited by Charles Hansford Adams

Excerpt

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THE NARRATIVE OF
ROBERT ADAMS

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THE
NARRATIVE OF ROBERT ADAMS,
A SAILOR,
WHO WAS WRECKED ON THE WESTERN COAST OF
A F R I C A,
IN THE YEAR 1810,
WAS DETAINED THREE YEARS IN SLAVERY BY
THE ARABS OF THE GREAT DESERT,
AND RESIDED SEVERAL MONTHS IN THE CITY OF
TOMBUCTOO.

WITH
A MAP, NOTES, AND AN APPENDIX.

LONDON:

PRINTED FOR JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE-STREET,
BY WILLIAM BULMER AND CO. CLEVELAND-ROW.

1816.

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TO THE
COMMITTEE OF THE COMPANY OF MERCHANTS
TRADING TO AFRICA.

GENTLEMEN,

I beg leave to present to you the NARRATIVE of the Sailor, ROBERT ADAMS, in the form which I conceive will be most interesting to you and to the public, and most useful to the poor man himself, for whose benefit it has been committed to the press.

I have the honour to be,

GENTLEMEN,

your faithful and obedient Servant,

S. COCK.

African Office, April 30th, 1816.

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Introductory Details Respecting Adams

Discovered in London. – examined by the African Committee respecting his travels in Africa. – his answers satisfactory. – Notes of his story laid before the African Committee, – their belief in its truth. – Mode of interrogating Adams, – his method of reckoning bearings, distances, and rate of travelling, through the Desert. – Examined by several Members of the Government, – receives a Gratuity from the Lords of the Treasury. – Sir Willoughby Gordon's opinion of his statements, – Reasons for publishing the following Narrative. – Departure of Adams for America. – Arrival in England of Mr. Dupuis, British Vice-Consul at Mogadore, – his confirmation of the whole of Adams's story in a Letter to the Editor, with other interesting particulars relating to him on his arrival and during his stay at Mogadore.

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In the month of October, 1815, the Editor of the following pages was informed by a friend, that a Gentleman of his acquaintance, recently arrived from Cadiz, had accidentally recognised an American seaman, in the streets of London, whom he had seen, only a few months before, in the service of an English merchant in Cadiz, where his extraordinary history had excited considerable interest; *the man having been a long time in slavery in the interior of Africa, and having resided several months at Tombuctoo.*

Such a report was too curious not to have attracted the peculiar attention of the Editor at all times; but the interest of the story was much heightened at that particular moment, by the circumstance of the recent embarkation of Major Peddie and his companions,* to explore those very parts of Africa which this person was said to have visited: and the Editor entreated his friend to assist him by all the means in his power, to find the seaman in question, in order to ascertain whether he really had been where it was reported, and in the hope that, either by his information or his personal services, the man might be rendered useful to the views of Government in the exploratory expedition then on its way to Africa.

Through the intervention of the Gentleman who had originally recognised the seaman, he was again found, and immediately brought to

* [An expedition under the command of Major John Peddie was sent in 1816 by the Colonial Office to continue Mungo Park's effort to discover the true course of the Niger. The company arrived on the Windward Coast early in 1817, but Peddie died shortly after striking into the interior. Peddie's successor, Captain Campbell, also died, and the expedition was finally commanded by Major William Gray, whose *Travels in Western Africa* (1825) describes the effort. The expedition was recalled in 1821.]

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the office of the African Committee. The poor man, whose name was *Robert Adams*, was in very ill plight both from hunger and nakedness. Scarcely recovered from a fit of sickness, he had, in that condition, begged his way from Holyhead to London, for the purpose of obtaining through the American Consul, a passage to his native country; and he had already passed several nights in the open streets amongst many other distressed seamen, with whom the metropolis was at that period unfortunately crowded.

No time was lost in questioning him respecting the length of his residence in Africa, the circumstances which led him thither, the places he had visited, and the means by which he had escaped. His answers disclosed so extraordinary a series of adventures and sufferings, as at first to excite a suspicion that his story was an invention; and the gentlemen by whom he was accompanied to the office, and who were present at his first examination, were decidedly of that opinion, when they considered how widely his account of Tombuctoo differed from the notions generally entertained of the magnificence of that city, and of the civilization of its inhabitants. The Editor, however, received from this short examination, and from the plain and unpretending answers which the man returned to every question, a strong impression in favour of his veracity. He accordingly took notes of the leading facts of his statement, particularly of the places he had visited, the distances according to his computations, and the direction in which his several journeys lay; and having relieved his immediate necessities, and furnished him with a trifle for his future subsistence, he desired the man to attend him again in the course of a few days.

It was nearly a week before Adams again made his appearance: but upon his return, being immediately interrogated upon all the leading points of his story, the Editor had the gratification to find, upon comparing his answers with the account which he had given on his first examination, that they were in substance the same, and repeated almost in the same terms. Thus strengthened in his previous opinion that the man's veracity was to be depended upon, the Editor resolved to take down in writing (the man himself being unable either to write or read) a full account of his travels and adventures, from the period of his departure from America in the ship "Charles" in which he was wrecked on the coast of Africa, until that of his return to Cadiz, from whence he had just arrived.

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With this intention, the Editor took measures to render Adams's situation more comfortable, by equipping him with decent clothes, of which he stood peculiarly in need. He was also supplied with a trifle in money, as an earnest of the future recompense which was promised to him, provided he would attend regularly every day until the whole of his story should be taken down. It was not, however, without considerable difficulty that the man could be persuaded to remain during the period thus required. He was anxious to return to his friends after so long and perilous an absence, and had been recommended by the Consul of the United States to join a transport of American seamen which was then on the point of sailing. His desire to be gone was increased by some rumours then in circulation, of a probable renewal of hostilities between Great Britain and the United States.* But his objections were at length overcome on receiving an engagement, that even if war should break out, and he, by any accident, be impressed, his discharge, either by purchase or substitute, should be immediately effected. Upon this understanding, he consented to remain as long as his presence should be required.

The Editor has been induced to enter into this detail for the satisfaction of those who might be disposed to believe that Adams had obtruded his story upon his hearers, for the purpose either of exciting their compassion, or of profiting by their credulity. To obviate such a suspicion, it is sufficient to shew with what difficulty he was induced to remain in the country to tell his story; and to state, that he was never known to solicit relief from any of the numerous gentlemen by whom he was seen and examined.

Previous, however, to Adams's agreement to stay, a Committee of the African Company having met, the Editor laid before them the notes

* [The Anglo-American War of 1812 officially ended on 17 February 1815, though American grievances, particularly regarding the treatment of prisoners, filled the popular press well into the autumn of the year. Consular records from this period make no mention of Adams, although they do indicate that the matter of destitute American seamen in London was a contentious one. A letter from Lord Castlereagh, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, to Consul R. G. Beasley, dated 29 November 1815, complains that "a number of American seamen have been found wandering about the streets of London in a most wretched and distressed condition," and that they are being maintained by the police and the hospitals of the city "at a very considerable expense." Consul Beasley responded on 15 December, reminding His Majesty's Government that almost all of them were formerly impressed seamen now discharged without means by the Royal Navy.]