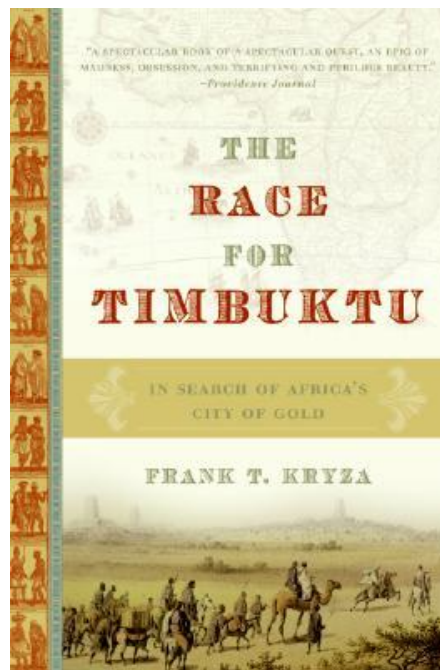




The Race for Timbuktu: In Search of Africa's City of Gold

Frank T. Kryza

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In the first decades of the nineteenth century, no place burned more brightly in the imagination of European geographers—and fortune hunters—than the lost city of Timbuktu. Africa's legendary City of Gold, not visited by Europeans since the Middle Ages, held the promise of wealth and fame for the first explorer to make it there. In 1824, the French Geographical Society offered a cash prize to the first expedition from any nation to visit Timbuktu and return to tell the tale.

One of the contenders was Major Alexander Gordon Laing, a thirty-year-old army officer. Handsome and confident, Laing was convinced that Timbuktu was his destiny, and his ticket to glory. In July 1825, after a whirlwind romance with Emma Warrington, daughter of the British consul at Tripoli, Laing left the Mediterranean coast to cross the Sahara. His 2,000-mile journey took on an added urgency when Hugh Clapperton, a more experienced explorer, set out to beat him. Apprised of each other's mission by overseers in London who hoped the two would cooperate, Clapperton instead became Laing's rival, spurring him on across a hostile wilderness.

An emotionally charged, action-packed, utterly gripping read, *The Race for Timbuktu* offers a close, personal look at the extraordinary people and pivotal events of nineteenth-century African exploration that changed the course of history and the shape of the modern world.

The Race for Timbuktu: In Search of Africa's City of Gold Details

Date : Published December 26th 2006 by Ecco (first published 2006)

ISBN : 9780060560652

Author : Frank T. Kryza

Format : Paperback 352 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Cultural, Africa, Adventure, Travel

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Joy D says

History is brought to life in this little gem of non-fiction about British and Scottish explorers of the early 19th century. It follows the history of attempts to locate Timbuktu and efforts to map the route of the Niger river. Goals included putting an end to slave trading and establishing new commerce. The book could also have been entitled “1001 Ways to Die a Painful Death.” Turns out, the “best” routes to get to Timbuktu were traveling through the up-to-150-degree heat and vast rocky expanse of the Sahara Desert or crossing swamps and dense forests with hordes of disease-carrying mosquitos from the coast. Death could (and did) come from numerous foul means: dysentery, malaria, dehydration, marauding bandits, territorial tribes, fanatic Islamists, and a variety of potentially lethal fevers.

The first several chapters describe previous journeys into the African interior, setting the stage for the rivalry to come, including a couple in which:

“England’s best and brightest had been wiped out in both of the expeditions (65 percent of the British contingent of 117 men died in Africa, while many of the rest were terminally ill when they landed in England).”

The middle chapters arrive at the focus of the book, primarily about two men striving to become the first to reach Timbuktu, and claim not only the prize of 10,000 francs offered by the French Geographical Society, but the accolades and prestige which would inevitably follow such an achievement:

“Until that August day in 1826 when the first white man in three centuries is known to have walked through the gates of Timbuktu, some dozen European explorers tried to find the city. For two of these, Captain Hugh Clapperton and Major Alexander Gordon Laing, winning this prize became an intensely personal competition, crossing that thin line that separates a passionate but realizable dream from an irrational and dangerous obsession.”

These chapters are filled with striking descriptions and colorful, larger-than-life people. Not simply conveying a historical record, the author inserts vivid narrative that conjures an image of place:

“Night fell quickly in the Tripolitanian desert. The sky overhead became rusty; the setting sun dimmed. As the light failed, the sky passed from copper to bronze but remained metallic as the sun’s embers were overtaken by the moon’s milky shimmer.”

This book is filled with adventure, courage, intrigue, politics, betrayal, and memorable people. The author is adept at conveying the personal characteristics of the individuals, both the admirable and the unpleasant. There’s even a love story embedded in the pages, which adds poignancy and human impact to those left behind.

The final few chapters recount the aftermath. These chapters, while necessary, were not quite as riveting as those in the heart of the book. Recommended to readers interested in exploration, African/British history, or true-life adventures of a bygone era.

Vikas Datta says

Exciting account of the first recorded European experience with a fable city, the reality and the tragic aftermath...

John says

Timbuktu, the mysterious "lost city" (if a city with 12,00 inhabitants can be lost). Reported to have streets paved with gold and with buildings studded with gems. How could explorers resist looking for it. And that is exactly what Alexander Laing and Hugh Clapperton did. They wanted to be the first European to see the city and return, but like many before them they did not make it back. The book is the story of them and others attempting to find Timbuktu. Stories of adventure, endurance, deprivation, with lots of political and religious turmoil to spice things up. There is even a classic love story. Marvellous book, well researched, tons of interesting information.

Stuart says

This book gives a good feel for the place, people and the dawning of imperialism in Africa. The stories of the incredibly dangerous travel in northeastern Africa are richly detailed.

Joel says

In the year 1324 Malian Emperor Mansa Musa made his legendary hajj to Mecca. This event, famous for its extravagance, was the introduction of Mali into the popular imagination – and economies – of the Islamic caliphates of old. Following the gilded trail back with Musa to Timbuktu were the emissaries, ambassadors and traders; the artisans and scholars and scam artists of powers great and small scrambling to find a place in Africa's "El Dorado". There, where the dry ocean of the Sahara meets the extensive expanse of black Africa, on a bend in the Niger River, sat the small trading post of Timbuktu – newly acquired by Musa's expanding empire. A perfect jumping off point – and an ideal meeting place of cultures – Timbuktu rapidly became an epicenter of trade and Islamic learning, with a university founded by Musa reaching 25,000 students and boasting libraries with almost half a million books (during a time when Oxford had only hundreds, maybe a thousand). A place where, it is fabled, the currency was not in gold or silver but in books. For a while Timbuktu flourished, but time and changing trading patters – and a Moroccan invasion – put an end to Timbuktu's preferential status as a city richer than London, Paris or Vienna.

But the legend continued. Timbuktu, Africa's El Dorado, remained in the popular imagination of the Europeans as the elusive prize – if only they could find it.

"The Race for Timbuktu" by Frank Kryza is the story of one chapter of this search. Specifically, it is the story of how a group of British explorers tried to penetrate the dark heart of Africa. Braving Tuareg raids, desperate Saharan expanses devoid of water, disease, betrayal, tribal wars and Muslim Jihads a group of intrepid explorers sought to penetrate the unknown to arrive at last to Timbuktu.

I like this story because, above all, it is a human story. Kryza delves into the personal travails of the travelers

on their journey, never whitewashing their not insignificant interpersonal weaknesses, while nevertheless also highlighting the tremendous bravery and courage of conviction of these singular men as they competed for the great prize – to be the first white man to visit Timbuktu, and return. It is a hard story, because it is one of suffering and pain and betrayal. It is a disappointing story, because the characters themselves often leave so much to be desired. And it is a sad story because so many died on the journey; while for those who made it, their frustration as they enter Timbuktu to find that the glory days of that fabled city were centuries in the past is almost tangible.

It is a story worth the read, because it marks the last chapter of Africa's isolation and the first chapter of Africa's place in the modern world – for good and for bad.

Carlos says

I would have given this boo one more star but i was not happy when i realized that this book is not about timbuktu, it mentions it all through the book but never gives you any information about it, therefore i feel the title is a little misleading, the book is about the race between french and english explorers to see who can get to the ancient city first, we also get a glimpse at the geopolitical relationships between both colonial powers and the african powers as represented by both explorers and the interactions they have go through on their way there. If you love a book about exploring ancient cities...this book is for you, if you like books about ancient cities.....not so much...

Forrest says

A book found in a small used book store in Costa Rica after my Nook broke :(

Brian says

The beginning and end of this book are difficult to get through. It's the juicy middle that's entertaining. The first third of the book works its way through a long line of unfortunate explorers. After a while, I found it tough to get invested in any character because I figured he wouldn't live more than a few pages. These stories demonstrated just how daunting it was to get to Timbuktu. It was satisfying when the author finally focused on a team that made some headway into the interior of the continent. I enjoyed hearing about their interactions with one another and with their African hosts. It was especially interesting to learn about African leaders' initial reactions upon meeting them. The Europeans were part extra-terrestrial and part ominous prelude to Africa's foreign relations. The anxiety was especially on the minds of those Africans who had heard about Great Britain's work in India. All this goes to show that there was a lot more to this book than a simple race to find an exotic city. It was a pivotal moment in history for two continents. The end of the book lost me though. It got really overbearing with the many details of the Timbuktu quest's post mortem. It was an unsatisfying conclusion in light of all the general themes that the author could have reinforced, touching on colonialism and European urges to gather Africa's resources. This was a good book, but you have to be willing to skim when the details get overwhelming.

Abbey says

Fascinating travelogue of river-running, backpacking, hitching, running up against truly befuddling cultural attitudes and behaviors, and meeting interesting people in unlikely places.

Lisa (Harmonybites) says

This is a story of European, specifically British, exploration of the African interior in the late 18th and early 19th century. At one point the book shows a 1829 map of Africa, and it was striking how much white space was on it. The Moon was better mapped--because you could study the Moon with a telescope--trying to get to the interior of Africa if you were a European was a different story. (The slave trade wasn't conducted by Europeans in the African interior but by Africans themselves. Europeans primarily only hugged the coasts of Sub-Saharan Africa until late in the 19th century.) *The Race for Timbuktu* is a story of exploration and cultures colliding worthy of *Star Trek*--only without the Prime Directive and not just the Red Shirts drop like flies.

I thought the book did well on several levels. The explorers themselves come across as distinct personalities. Kryza quotes one historian of African exploration in the 1960s as saying that: "It remains difficult, in the checkered history of geographical discovery, to find a more odious man than Dixon Denham." Having read Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost*, I would have thought it was hard to beat Henry Morton Stanley on that score, but I think Denham as portrayed by Kryza at least comes close. Other explorers such as Mongo Park, Lyons, Clapperton and Laing were more sympathetic, but just as interesting. I was also fascinated by the delineation of the connections between the loss of the American colonies, the push to end the slave trade, and how it drove British expeditions to find the lost city of Timbuktu and trace the course of the Niger River. The author does a great job in conveying what a barrier the Sahara Desert on one side and the tropical diseases of the Congo River basin on the other side presented and how they isolated Timbuktu.

Timbuktu, in what is today Mali is on the banks of the Niger and the southern border of the Sahara was a legendary city where "camel met canoe." It was "likely founded around 1100" and at one point had a population reaching 100,000, was in its heyday fabulously wealthy, and had boasted an important center of Islamic scholarship in Medieval times. If I had one disappointment, it is we actually don't spend much time or space on Timbuktu itself--this is a book about the journey, not the destination. Kryza claims he is "no scholar, and this is not a scholarly book" but he does include a bibliography and extensive notes on each chapter pointing to his sources. The book was entertaining, but felt solid in its facts.

Temple Dog says

Praise for Frank Kryza for his suspenseful, intriguing and historically enlightening book, *The Race for Timbuktu*.

Kryza weaves a narrative that could easily have become overly didactic, witheringly dry; but to his credit it is engaging and frankly quite fun.

Kryza takes the rivalry between Laing and Clapperton and their arduous race to be the first Europeans to reach Timbuktu to quixotic heights. You never know who to root for, but ultimately, you want one of them to win.

I was enthralled by his prose. He lyrically conveys the story without being excessively flowery, but adds a patina that visually enhances the literary experience for the reader.

I highly recommend this book.

TD.

Ken says

Let's see. We need someone to explore a new region with zero possibility of returning. You will die through contraction of awful tropical disease, starvation in a vast desert or murder at the hands of xenophobic desert nomads. Volunteers?

Well, yes, there are, if you want to count 18th century Brits. I don't know what compelled them to go, but I do not think you would get any moderns to do so unless they had been told they only had six months to live. However, for the pre-Victorian Brits, the desire to explore new regions and the attendant fame compelled them to try to be the first to visit the fabled city of Timbuktu in what is now Mali.

Timbuktu was believed to be filled with treasures and no white man had seen it since the Roman era. That an American had actually been there and reported what he'd found in the 1790s did not count-He was a freedman and not white. Also, he said there was nothing much there-and that couldn't right.

The "Race" mentioned in the title was the competition to reach Timbuktu to win a prize offered by the French Geographical Society in 1824. Earlier than that, however, two members of the Royal Society in London formed "The African Association," and that is what started the attempts to find Timbuktu.

An explorer, Mungo Park, beginning from the West coast of Africa and attempting to find the origin of the Niger River (The other goal besides that of reaching Timbuktu) was the most successful of the early explorers. He seems to have been killed in an ambush, which he seems to have brought on himself by fighting with natives along the route.

The two who were featured in the race presented here were Clapperton and Laing. Clapperton was favored as he had already been part of an expedition which had penetrated pretty far into the continent. Laing had the support of the British ambassador to Tripoli, Warrington. Laing married Warrington's daughter the night before he left and

never saw her again. They did write to each other and although no European had made the journey between Timbuktu and Tripoli there were plenty of Arabs who had done so routinely. They delivered communications between the explorers and their benefactors. Laing made it to Tripoli, wrote all about it and then was murdered when he left for home. There was some fear of the explorers since the leaders of the various cities, tribes and nations had heard what had happened in India and considered the Europeans point men for future expansion. They were prescient on that of course.

Besides exploration, the British had one more reason to penetrate the heart of Africa. It was their desire to stop the slave trade pursued by most of the tribes of the reason. Of course, the Brits had been all for the trade a few decades before, but had banned it and like an ex-smoker trying to get his friends to give up, must have seemed insufferable and hypocritical to the slavers.

Did I like the book? I thoroughly enjoyed it. Kryza switched back and forth between other explorers and Laing to give the race drama. This was a little difficult at first because the figures mentioned here are not remembered, so it was a little hard to keep straight who was who. But, once you got that out of the way it was a smooth and enjoyable read.

I don't know if Frank Kryza made much money from this. I suspect a lot of the historical writers I have been reading have not made a ton off of their books, but I certainly respect and enjoy their efforts even if they are not making the bucks of a John Grissom. It is this kind of effort that now and then brings fascinating people like Laing, Clapperton and Warrington to us 21st century readers and keep their names from being forgotten. Herodotus said history is written so great men and their deeds are not forgotten-or something like that. Thanks Frank, I appreciated the book and the effort.

Crash says

In some ways this is a brilliant book, in others it felt disappointing. Kryza's chops as a historian are more than sufficient. His descriptions of the people and places of 19th century Africa carry me there. I can find no fault in his prose or his writing. But when he writes the close of Lang's adventure, where the historical record is difficult to be certain about, Kryza does not stay with the explorer. Instead he relays knowledge of the events as they gradually surfaced to Lang's Wife and to his Father-in-Law. I wish Kryza had, instead, kept the narrative with Lang to the end, even though that would mean invention of further detail.

This is a historical novel, and at the conclusion of the book, where I wanted it to be most like a novel, it became most like a history instead. I do want that story, the long silence, the controversy over the papers, in the story.

Consider another historical novel I just recently read, [Devil in the White City](#); the author explains in a footnote how he invented the personal, dramatic detail of a character's death. Surely any historian reading this would forgive Kryza's invention of the detail so the central figure in this tragedy would not die offstage?

The book, taken as a whole, is well written and well researched. I recommend it to anyone who enjoys distant places or unknown histories.

Mark says

Excellent book for the armchair explorer, like myself. The narrative of this book takes place in the early 1820's when European explorers were seeking to find out the nature and extent of various rivers, mountains, and other geographical features of the planet. In this case the British government was seeking to know the course and terminus of the Niger River in West Africa. The explorers highlighted in this book walk across the Sahara desert to find Timbuktu and hopefully link up with the Niger River on the way. In the course of their various ramblings they stumble on to Lake Chad, find that 80% of the Sahara desert is actually rocky plains as barren as the surface of Mars, and eventually find the fabled city of Timbuktu. So, gentle reader, if you like a well written history of far away places in former times, this may be the book for you.

Loraine says

One third of this book is a 4 star read, the middle part. The start of it is kind of disconnected, going every which way, but although not a pleasure to read, it became the background I needed to develop the sense of this exotic time and place. Once into the race between these amazing explorers it was hard to put down. This is North Africa, the Sahara, early 19th century, before colonization, where slaving still exists, where the locals are..... I just can't find the words. But that's the best part, experiencing this place at that time and the

people who lived it. Jaw-dropping maybe would describe it best. Why would a sane person venture into that? But then, exploration means not knowing what is waiting for you. The last bit is tedious but, I admit, quite necessary. Just too long for what it was worth. All together a very satisfying read. Worth the effort and very memorable.

Chad says

Interesting look at the early age of European colonization of Africa, specifically the search for Timbuktu which at the time held the same level of notoriety as El Dorado. While the base story is quite interesting, I felt the book took too many diversions with side stories making some chapters a little slow.

Marty Reeder says

Having been piqued with a recent fetish for African exploration and discovery by Europeans as well as the pre-existing cultures, kingdoms and peoples, I grabbed for The Race for Timbuktu, a book I acquired long ago just as a similar desire flamed out and left it gathering dust on my to-read shelf.

So, when my yearning was rekindled this past year, I eagerly snatch up The Race for Timbuktu, ready to dive in. (You see, wife, this is why I get so many more books when I still haven't started the other ones I got the last time ... reading the right book is about opportunity, mood, and availability of text--I can't always predict the first two, but I can facilitate the latter. This is a conversation we've had before that I've failed to adequately explain, so this book is kind of my star witness. No further questions ... and no cross examination!)

For me, however, I more felt that this would be a dutiful, fact-finding read. No one had recommended it. I didn't really research it at all besides doing a general search on the Internet and figuring, through the description, that this ought to cover things pretty well. Basically, I felt that I would enjoy the information I gathered from it, but it would not be the kind of book I'd try to foist upon others.

Boy was I surprised when I actually found the background info on African exploration being fascinating, if not exciting. It's tragic and harrowing how many waves of explorers got swallowed up by the interior of Africa ... and how relentless the British/Europeans were in rounding up and sending more into the front lines of battle, even without waiting for the success or failure of the previous.

Then Kyrza gets to the meat of the tale: the breakdown of Clapperton and Laing's individual quests to find the mouth of the Niger and to locate the legendary African city, Timbuktu. I was in awe. Both of them faced daunting, though highly different, tasks (jungle survival versus desert survival). Both of them succeeded in some measure thanks to their passionate determination. Most of all, Kyrza allows the most distinct character of these stories to take precedence--the setting. Whether in the disease-ridden, jungle-mobbed West African coast or in the heat-seared sprawling expanse-of-nothing Saharan desert, Kyrza makes you feel the harsh reality of these fringe areas of Mother Nature's most uncultured side.

So amazing was his storytelling, that at one point I thought I had to be in fiction story territory. One of the characters being left for dead, yet not only surviving but pushing on. Later, I would question the true ending of the story for a couple of chapters, fully expecting a twist ending in the vein of a mystery novel. So devastating were some events, one in particular, that after reading, it threw me off for half the day as I mourned for a tragic turn of events that seemed unfair to me. What a wonderful mixture of researching a

story worth telling, and then finding a way to tell it right.

Having said that, Kyrza is not perfect. In fact, in some ways, he feels quite amateur. Some of the cobbling together of tales are sloppy enough that they needlessly repeat details, chapters apart from each other. The focus of some chapters seem to be built into a bigger whole, while others are strangely isolated or thematically irrelevant. When I read his afterword and saw how many hands touched the manuscript, how many people helped to decide the direction of the research and narrative, and his own journey and motivation in writing it, that made the discombobulated feel of the book make more sense, even if it did not fix some of the overarching problems.

While that does affect the reading experience, however, Kyrza succeeds even where he may not intend to. The strength of the stories he innately sensed as being powerful, his own contribution to the inhospitable setting that is West Africa's interior, and the characters that he wisely allowed to tell the tale--all these make for an exciting, daredevil ride. In fact, it's so thrilling that you'd read it for fiction enjoyment alone. But don't. Read it for enjoyment, and then be amazed that it's really non-fiction after all!

Susan Reed says

okay. initially a good story. end is rambling!

Julian Walker says

A slice of history about the search for a fabled city to match El Dorado, or even Atlantis – except that this one really exists.

An amazing tale of adventure, exploration, shattered dreams and meddling politicians blend together to create a fabulously untold story from the great age of gentleman explorers and a time when less was known about inland Africa than the moon.

The author paints vivid portraits of the characters, social etiquette and the political environment and sets these against the hardships experienced by the explorers themselves and their driving passions.

He opens up a forgotten slice of history and an explorer who deserves more in the history books.

A fascinating and engaging read.

Kenny says

Really enjoyed this. Back in the 18th and 19th century, more was known about the face of the moon than the interior of Africa. Good fact that. So Victorians, with their sense of order and derring do - combined of course with superiority and racism set out to discover the lost city of Timbuktu (which may have been a surprise to its residents, who must have felt they always knew where they were). Anyway, well know fact in those days that you weren't anywhere until a white bloke wandered in and said you were now an official

somewhere.

Those guys were hardy, resourceful, plucky, greedy, evil, good or some combination, but they were all a bit mental. And this is their story, concentrating on Alexander Gordon Laing, the first man to reach Timbuktu, as well as previous expeditions - (Mungo Park and the Denham, Clapperton and Oudney expeditions- with Denham winning the dubious award of most odious malevolent person to step out of Britain in that (possibly most) era. And frankly I'd include fiction as well as non-fiction there.

Anyway, the events this chronicals are hard edged explorations, dangers and dealings with the locals, and with the UK Consul in Tripoli, Warrington, a major (in every sense) character throughout the whole period, it would actually be difficult to make these larger than life characters dull. Which thankfully the book doesn't do. Quite the opposite, it picks up pace through to Timbuktu, and I found really keeps the interest for a lengthy debate started by Warrington accusing the foul French had absconded with some priceless papers that clouded relations, and made things...rather interesting.

Clips along nicely, with good use of the original surviving letters, but with an accessible, not overly academic style (but copious notes if you like that sort of thing). Recommended.
