

## Book Review

KOIVUNEN Leila, 2006.

VISUALISING THE "DARK CONTINENT": THE PROCESS OF ILLUSTRATING  
NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH TRAVEL ACCOUNTS OF AFRICA.

Turku: Self-published. ISBN 952-92-0001-3.

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The contemporary western image of Africa has its roots in the past. Although we can argue about the origins of that image, it is safe to say that it was to a large extent formed during the era of exploration in the nineteenth century. Leila Koivunen's Ph.D. thesis offers a deeper look into this important topic. Her study focuses on the dynamics and practices of visualising regions and people previously unknown to Europeans. By delving on the process of illustrating travel accounts of Africa, the author shows us why pictures of foreign places and people appear as they do. The book certainly breaks new ground. Although studies of individual authors and about the illustrations in their travel accounts have been published, this study offers the reader comparative aspects by focusing primarily on seventeen books by twelve explorers. The number of illustrations in these books – approximately one thousand – reveals the ambitious scope of Koivunen's work. Besides the published travel accounts, Koivunen also relies upon other visual and verbal records from relevant archives and museums. It is also worth noting that the book is lavishly illustrated with almost 120 black-and-white figures as well as 8 colour plates.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part is concerned with exploration and production of travel pictures in Africa, while the second part deals with the production of images for publication in Europe. Altogether, the organisation of the book in this way works very well and makes it interesting to read. This also points to the obvious processual nature of illustrating books. As Koivunen shows, the original sketches, drawings and paintings of the explorers were processed by several people before they ended up on the pages of a travel account. In this process, the original pictures were altered, sometimes slightly but at other times more radically. In order to understand this process, we have to first take a look at the way the explorers created the basis for illustrations.

In the first chapter, Koivunen shows how the explorers – and the public at large – conceptualised Africa during the nineteenth century. The nineteenth-century European ideas of Africa included the idea of a continent to be commercially exploited, civilized, scientifically explained and enjoyed. Travellers saw Africa as storehouse of exploitable raw materials and they regarded themselves as envoys at the vanguard of European commerce on

African ground. The civilizing mission included the work for the abolition of slave trade, and philanthropy was sometimes stated as a fundamental reason for departing to Africa. Although most of the explorers were scientific dilettantes, their primary scientific tasks included geography and mapping. The passion for hunting was a particularly powerful influence for some explorers, and African wildlife constituted an important part of the excitement essential to the concept of African travel. These four approaches were crucial for an explorers' ability to understand and perceive the new environments and phenomena they encountered.

In chapter two, Koivunen turns to explorers' personal motives for depicting Africa. She shows that travellers enthusiastically depicted anything they considered new to science, although what would be a "new discovery" was often far from evident to them. It seems that the explorers seldom had a clear idea which specimens or geographical features should be documented with extra care. More practical reasons for sketching and photographing included the passing of time, transmitting information and communicating with local people as well as pure amusement. However, explorers also had to face many challenges that hindered visual documentation. Shortage of supplies and haste in performing other duties were just some of the problems encountered by travellers. Some of the explorers simply lacked the necessary drawing skills. Climatic factors such as wind, humidity and heat also affected the attempts to depict Africa.

However, the surviving visual material shows that explorers were quite productive in their efforts to visualise Africa. For practical purposes, Koivunen divides travel pictures into three thematic groups: visual documents of travelling, pictures of nature and wildlife, and images of African people and culture. Travelling often appeared as lifeless and motionless, but the crossing of rivers and lakes as well as hunting episodes were often documented in dramatic fashion. The representation of nature was affected primarily by the pursuit of geographical knowledge. This is evident in pictures of landscapes, which often depict mountains, confluences of rivers, waterfalls and rapids. However, this led to a neglect of other types of environments, such as savannahs and jungles. Although the tropics were regarded as paradisiacal places of exuberance on the one hand, they were seen as an alien world of cruelty on the other hand. However, the means of conveying the alleged horrors and confusion of the tropical environment were limited. Further, flora and fauna often proved difficult and less tempting to visualise. Koivunen also shows that the travellers' ability to observe and understand African people, societies and cultures was limited. Explorers usually adopted an extremely impersonal and static style to record what they had seen. They rarely attempted to convey village scenes, rituals or daily life. Observation and documentation were not innovative or open-minded, nor did they break free from the power of earlier images and pictorial traditions. In sum, Koivunen characterises the visualisation of "darkest Africa" as "a process in which the complexity and variety of the previously unknown interior was reduced little by little. [...] Only a fraction of what they

[the explorers] actually did observe *was chosen to be depicted*” (p. 144, emphasis added).

In the second part, Koivunen turns her focus to the process of illustrating travel accounts in Europe. Visual wonders from Africa were displayed in art galleries and exhibitions as well as local or national illustrated newspapers, but the travel books came to be recognised as the most important medium of presenting visual documentation. Travel books were usually expensive but some of them – such as the works by Livingstone and Stanley – proved very popular. They were usually bought by wealthy upper-class men, but through lending libraries travel accounts spread to the wider public. Illustrations were used in the books to attract people, but they also presented scientific evidence as well as decoration in visual form. Travel pictures underwent a selection process before they could be seen in the pages of travel accounts. The criteria for approval and omission of travel pictures was dependent on factors such as the technical quality of the picture, the topic – certain topics, such as nudity, cruelty, death and supposedly bizarre aspects of African cultures were avoided – and the supply of material – i.e. a great deal of travel pictures remained unpublished because there were too many others like them. However, imagery could be complemented afterwards by hiring artists to sketch from travellers’ oral descriptions or from models and collected artefacts, or simply by borrowing illustrations from earlier publications. Thus, this leads to questioning the authenticity and the origin of pictures, as Koivunen does with splendid insight.

The inevitable transformation of travel pictures was completed in the hands of artists and draughtsmen. Sometimes most imaginative and strange landscapes were created by copying, enhancing and simple invention. Needless to say, these landscapes diverged considerably from all known real environments. The creativity and imagination of the artists was put to the test in their attempts to produce authentic looking illustrations. Wood-engraving, the technique that predominated in all the travel account illustrations studied by Koivunen, further increased the distance of the printed image from the original picture or subject it represented. Engravers controlled the degree of detail in the final product, and by applying finishing touches, they actively contributed to African imagery. Due to the multiple stages of the process, illustrations sometimes diverged from the originals, and the travellers’ personal touch was largely lost in the process.

In the final chapter of the book before conclusion, Koivunen concentrates on the techniques and practices that were used to modify the pictures and how these affected the evolving imagery. According to her, artist did not hesitate to add what they thought was missing – e.g. people or entire sceneries to connect the depicted persons and other subjects more directly to Africa and its natural environment. Koivunen argues that Africa was distanced, on the one hand, by emphasizing nature over civilized culture and by emphasizing strange and incomprehensible details in the original pictures of the explorers, especially when depicting African people as exotic. On the other hand, however, Africa was also familiarised by depicting Africans according to classical traditions – body postures were straightened and figures were modified to appear more

heroic and pleasing to they eye. In this way, illustrations were given their final appearance.

In sum, Koivunen does an excellent job in describing the processual and constructed nature of travel book illustrations. Her work touches on both the history of African exploration as well as European art. Koivunen is to be congratulated for this multifarious achievement. The book was self-published and although the layout of the book is fine, it was a little bit awkward that, in many occasions, footnotes of the body text have ended up in the next page, sometimes causing unnecessary shuffling between pages. However, such details are easily corrected if this book receives a further printing. I graciously hope that Koivunen's work would be picked up by a serious publisher willing to give it a wider circulation, because it certainly merits to be read by those who wish to understand how our image of Africa has evolved since the nineteenth century.