

STUDENT PAPER AWARD WINNER

THE IMPERFECT TRIANGLE: AFRICA IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN FAMILY ATLAS

Joelle Reiniger
Third-Year History Major
University of Alberta

As the Encyclopedia Britannica markets its final print edition, we are reminded of the epochal change in how we satisfy our curiosity about the world. Boolean logic is at our service, ready to deliver more web pages about a foreign continent than we have the time or desire to view. During the nineteenth century, armchair adventurers found an outlet in the home atlas. It goes without saying that the money and time required for overseas travel prohibited the average American from seeing the world. Maps and geographical descriptions were not the vacation planning aids that they are today but a vehicle for a well-travelled imagination – a diversion that invited curious minds into lands they would have no realistic hope of seeing with their own eyes. At the same time, they served as an important reference point for viewing American culture in the context of a wider world.

On the pages about Africa, these atlases guided the American imagination to a Dark Continent, where the fodder for fantasy comprised impressions of backwardness and obscurity. Cartographically, the continent's geography is usually distilled to a single map, which is almost always found in the last five pages of the book. Most major home atlases also contain descriptions of the continent, which reinforce notions of racial hierarchy privilege those regions nearest Europe. The portrayal of Africa as unimportant

and its inhabitants inferior surely impacted public perceptions of the continent – particularly during the second half of the nineteenth century when atlases became readily available. Drawing from popular American family atlases of this period, I will explore the geographical marginalization of Africa through this medium.

To what extent the home atlas contributed to public perceptions of the world in general and Africa in particular is admittedly difficult to quantify. However, the general appetite for geography is evident in the success of the American volume *Geography Made Easy*. Popular from 1784 through the 1820s, its sales trailed only the Bible and dictionary.¹ At that time, atlases were a luxury item. Due to the exorbitant cost of image reproduction, they did not make their way into the average American home until the second half of the 19th century.² As publishing technology made atlases accessible, the American civil war and its aftermath contributed to their popularity. In some ways, they are nation-building narratives, capitalizing on a post-war interest in American identity and its full geographical domain.³ A critical review of A.J. Johnson's 1865 family atlas remarks that the quality of the atlas's American geographical information exceeds that of its world geography. However, the reviewer seems to believe that the shortcomings of the atlas's international material

¹Susan Schulten, *The Geographical Imagination in America, 1880-1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) 19.

²*Ibid.*, 21.

³*Ibid.*, 17.

are redeemed by its ability to satisfy American families' desire to "track the progress of our arms" with the most current cartographic and statistical information.⁴ Following the war, the family atlas became a tool for national identity and unity. Therefore, depictions of Africa as backward and unimportant should be viewed in the context of another atlas motif – American progress. By glorifying the American "race", atlas publishers proffered a sense of national identity, which included only those of European descent.

Within the family atlas, maps are but one mode of geographical education. They also contain historical timelines, pages of statistics and detailed descriptions of the physical environment. In this way, the atlases occupy an encyclopedic niche. Sections that pertain to the United States are rich in tabular and general reference data. If the reader of Colton's (1862) *Illustrated Cabinet Atlas and Geography* wondered how many private school teachers there were in Delaware, she would find a precise answer on page 89. (There were 94.)⁵ The company's 1863 edition provided a comprehensive 26-page list of every city, town and post office.⁶ For the education of its audience, Cram's 1882 family atlas provided portraits and brief biographical sketches of each American president up to the publication date.⁷

With such a pronounced local emphasis, the title "world atlas" is arguably a misnomer. To illustrate, one such publication devotes 77 per cent of its pages to the United States, leaving the remaining 23 percent for the rest of the globe.⁸ The typical arrangement features the United States first, followed by the rest of the Western Hemisphere, Europe, Asia, Africa and

Oceania, in that order – a sequence shared by the Library of Congress's classification system. In virtually every atlas, Africa could scarcely be further removed from the United States. This polarization also exists in the level of cartographic detail. To generalize, a typical family atlas might map every American state, every European country, every large Asian country, two to three groups of Oceanic islands, and Africa as a single entity. Based on this descending order of detail, it would not be difficult for an intelligent reader to misconstrue Africa as a mere country.

There is also a qualitative change in the text pertaining to the world outside North America as we see a subtle transition from atlas as reference book to atlas as storybook. While descriptions of foreign locales offer some reference information, such as climate and export data, these descriptions, coupled with rich illustrations, are designed to capture the imagination. Accuracy appears to be a secondary consideration. Cram's atlas, perhaps the best illustrated of the books surveyed here, features a picturesque image of Africans leading a covered wagon train through the mythical Mountains of the Moon.⁹ (Figure One). More so than its competitors, the Cram's brand evokes a sense of exoticism. Its pages were meant to be enjoyed. In his essay "George F. Cram and the American Perception of Space," Gerald Danzer uses a common opening illustration to point to the literary function of these atlases. He suggests that the scene of a family gathered around the atlas, flanked by images of classical ruins and a docked ship, connotes exploration and the transmission of culture. According to Danzer, "Everything evokes an atmosphere of confident adventure."¹⁰

⁴Review of "Johnson's New Illustrated (Steel Plate) Family Atlas, with Physical Geography, and with Descriptions Geographical, Statistical, and Historical, including the Latest Federal Census, a Geographical Index, and a Chronological History of the Civil War in America," in *The North American Review* (Cedar Falls: University of Iowa, 1885) 625-626.

⁵G. W. Colton and Richard Swainson Fisher, *Colton's Illustrated Cabinet Atlas and Geography* (New York: J.H. Colton, 1862) 89.

⁶Alvin Jewett Johnson, *Johnson's New Illustrated (Steel Plate) Family Atlas: With Physical Geography, and with Descriptions Geographical, Statistical, and Historical, Including the Latest Federal Census, a Geographical Index, and a Chronological History of the Civil War in America* (New York: Johnson and Ward, 1863) 23-49.

⁷Cram, George F., *Cram's Illustrated Family Atlas of the World* (Chicago: George F. Cram, 1882) 203-205.

⁸Schulten, 29.

⁹Cram, 321.

¹⁰Gerald A. Danzer, "George F. Cram and the American Perception of Space," in *Chicago Mapmakers: Essays on the Rise of the City's Map Trade*, ed. Michael P. Conzen (Chicago: Chicago Historical Society for Chicago Map Society, 1984) 44.

Egypt is probably the most romanticized African nation, reflecting a widespread fascination with the ancient world. An 1896 Rand McNally atlas states, "The place of Egypt in history, together with its wonderful monuments, retaining still the earliest records of civilization, entitles the country to a consideration far other and deeper than that due to any other portion of Africa."¹¹ While African countries do not generally occupy maps of their own, Egypt is an exception. Along with the descriptive elevation of Egypt above the rest of Africa, pagination decisions might have served to sever Egypt from the rest of the continent in the reader's imagination. It is normal for a map of Egypt to be located next to a map of Africa, but it is also normal for it to be dropped into another section of the book. For example, an 1887 Cram's atlas sandwiches Egypt between China and Central Asia, which includes Turkistan, Afghanistan, Beluchistan and northwest India.¹² An atlas by a different publisher locates its map of Egypt between China and Australia.¹³ Notwithstanding public interest in the ancient world, Egypt's unique representation represents a north-to-south hierarchy in the attention given to African societies.

The vague treatment of Africa as a whole is effectively captured in a common atlas description of its form as an imperfect or irregular triangle with its base in the Mediterranean and its apex to the south. If Africa can be called triangularly shaped, this is a very rough approximation. Geometry dictates that if a triangle has a base, it is the draftsman who designates it. The image of an imperfect triangle pointing south, as trivial it may seem, could not better reveal the arbitrary nature of mapping and describing Africa. Even the language outlining Africa's basic physical

composition is loaded. This is well illustrated by an 1899 Rand McNally description of the continent. After using the Mediterranean-anchored, irregular-triangle analogy, it underestimates the continent's size by about one-third. It then points out that while Africa is triple the size of Europe, its coastline "scarcely exceeds" 15,000 miles compared with Europe's 19,000 and it is "destitute" of islands.¹⁴ Clearly, apparently neutral features of Africa's physical geography may be presented Eurocentrically. This extends to the topic of climate in Colton's 1859 atlas. The entire Gold Coast, it states, is particularly unhealthy. Here, "In the midst of the most beautiful scenery, where trees, and rocks ... give assurance of an earthly paradise, the angel of death lurks unseen, and strikes down his victims without warning."¹⁵ No doubt the heat was harsh, but the description of this climate is strikingly dire compared with that of the Canadian Arctic, where activities of the "angel of death" are not reported, even in an account of the disastrous Franklin Expedition.¹⁶

This bias continues to accrue as geographical descriptions turn from the land to its inhabitants. In pages on world geography, the home atlas follows discussions of climate with those of vegetation, animal life, and finally humans, who are sometimes included under the heading of physical geography. This format is also found in nineteenth-century school geography textbooks. Historian Susan Schulten suggests that it evokes a human-progress narrative, which frames so-called cultural advancement as an outgrowth of the physical environment.¹⁷ One nineteenth-century geography textbook expands on this view to include ideas of genetic superiority:

¹⁷Schulten, 113-115.

¹¹Rand McNally and Company, *New Pictorial Atlas of the World: Containing Colored Maps of Every Country and Civil Division Upon the Face of the Globe, With Marginal Index, Together With Historical, Descriptive, and Statistical Matter Pertaining to Each, With City Maps and Colored Statistical Diagrams, Also a Concise Review, Richly Illustrated by Engravings, of the World's Peoples* (Chicago: Rand, McNally & Co., 1896) 210.

¹²George F. Cram, *Cram's Unrivalled Family Atlas of the World* (Cincinnati, Ohio: M.A. Harris, 1887) 119.

¹³Fort Dearborn Publishing Co., *The National Standard Family and Business Atlas of the World: Specially Adapted for Commercial and Library Reference ...; With All Populations According to the 1890 Census* (Chicago: Fort Dearborn Publishing Co. 1896) 282.

¹⁴Rand McNally and Company, *Rand-McNally Encyclopaedia, and, Atlas of the World: Eighty Full-Page Colored Maps, Illustrated with Nearly Two Thousand Engravings. 2 vols.* (Chicago: Rand, McNally & Co., 1899) 19.

¹⁵G.W. Colton and Richard Swainson Fisher. *Colton's Illustrated Cabinet Atlas and Descriptive Geography* (New York: J.H. Colton, 1859) 348.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 30-31.

As the environment of the desert has given rise to the nomad, and the ease of life in the tropical forest to the degenerate savage, so the environment in the United States has given rise to a race noted for its energy and enterprise. This race has been made possible, however, largely by reason of the fact that it comes from a mixture of peoples already gifted. That resources alone will not make an energetic people and a great nation is well illustrated in China, where nature favors, but racial characteristics and customs are opposed to, development.¹⁸

A similar text found in the National Standard family atlas, and echoed in others, is congruent with this racial-locational portrait of progress. In the following order, it states that human societies evolved separately in different regions of the globe, categorizes races with mention of their physical environments, and lists the developmental stages that gave birth to “civilized” societies, noting that nearly all of these are Caucasian.¹⁹

More often than not, such introductions to human geography feature ethnographic charts, which come in two varieties. The more common style has the face of a Caucasian man in the centre, surrounded by faces representing four other races. These charts seem to distribute racial stereotypes quite equitably, not, in and of themselves, singling out Africans. An ethnographic chart from an 1896 Rand McNally atlas employs a more linear model. (Figure Two). This graphic features two rows of three faces, and on the top row, an orangutan and bare-chested black man face each other. This man, described as Malayan, not African, is situated left of an “Ethiopian” face, which is facing the other direction – the same direction the three remaining faces are looking. From left to right on the bottom row, we see faces of an indigenous

American, an East Asian and Caucasian. Everyone, even the orangutan, is looking forward. Only the first black man is looking back.²⁰ While this man is not classified as African, the typical reader might be conditioned to generalize, still associating his appearance with other images of Africans in the book. Ethnographic charts, while blatantly racist, are somewhat ambiguous in their specific portrayal of Africans. If anything, the previous example sets up indigenous Oceanic people as the most maligned race, a possibility supported by accompanying text. The Colton’s and Johnson’s atlases are among those that appear to rank races in the following order: Iranian or Caucasian, Turanian or Mongolian and Malay, (indigenous) American, African Negro, Hottentot Negro and Oceanic Negro²¹ Again, the Oceanic Negro appears last, but it is uncertain whether the American reader would have paid close attention to this distinction. I should note that the paragraph preceding this list does not purport to rank the races, but to generally classify them. However, this list directly follows a statement about wide racial variation in stages of development. It also lists the Caucasian race first, after several pages that imply European superiority.

This type of information is always found in a general introduction to geography near the beginning of the atlas. Descriptions relating specifically to Africa are often included immediately before the maps themselves. This text and its accompanying illustrations offer the best insights into the perceived role of Africa and Africans in the world. Though inaccuracies and abstractions are common, there is great variation in the number of pages devoted to describing Africa and its people. Sometimes, the maps appear alone, leaving much up to the reader’s imagination. In other cases, African regions are described in relative detail. Rand McNally’s 1896 pictorial atlas is among the most detailed, devoting eight pages to different regions of the continent.²²

¹⁸Ralph S. Tarr and Frank McMurry, quoted in Schulten, 115-116.

¹⁹Fort Dearborn Publishing Co., 8.

²⁰Rand McNally and Company, 1896, 165.

²¹Colton and Fisher, 1862, 26.

²²Rand McNally and Company, 1896, 210-218.

Most of its illustrations are portraits representing various cultural groups. While the images outline diversity between ethnicities, the text suggests homogeneity within ethnicities. After describing a particular group's location and power structure, the typical entry lists a set of personality traits said to characterize the group. Egyptians are "apathetic" and "stolid" but "not without liveliness" during festivals.²³ The Madeiran people are "sober, industrious and civil," implicitly due to Arabian racial roots.²⁴ Meanwhile, the indigenous people of South Africa are called savages with "almost nothing to redeem the baseness of the general type."²⁵ As the descriptions move farther south and into the interior, assumptions of savagery prevail. Similarly revealing comments include a statement complimenting Algiers as one of Africa's few interesting cities²⁶ and an assertion that colonists saved the southern Hottentot and Kaffir populations from utterly decimating each other.²⁷

An edition of Colton's atlas published 40 years earlier is much more detailed and less prone to ethnic character evaluations. It is unquestionably less prejudicial than the Rand McNally atlas, indicating that the publishing company, more so than the passage of time, accounts for differing portrayals in American atlases of this period. This is not to say that Colton's atlas portrays Africa objectively. Like the Rand McNally company, it reserves its kindest adjectives for societies that resemble Europe or the United States, and for people with lighter skin. Its illustrations emphasize scenery more often than portraiture; however, one drawing of a Congolese man departs from this trend, substantially distorting his facial features.²⁸ (Figure Three) His country is described briefly as having "luxuriant" plant life but inhabitants that are "the least favoured of the race" and "low on the scale of civilization."²⁹ It shares Rand McNally's north-to-south and exterior-to-interior

regression in the detail and dignity attributed to African societies. The Eurocentric elements discussed so far promote a conceptual separation between Africa and (white) America through popular notions of social Darwinism. In this regard, the atlases' racial and geographical caricatures are not unique to the United States. However, the treatment of Liberia brings to light an overt Americentric bias. Colton's 1959 atlas, after a dispassionate description of British colonies along the Gold Coast, adorns the text on its own colony with a range of neutral to grandiose adjectives. The climate is hot and humid but "never oppressive" and its landscape is covered with a "verdure that never fails." "In no other part of the world" is the vegetation more bountiful; prized crops, such as cotton, indigo and sugar cane are said to grow spontaneously.³⁰ The description of an apparent agricultural and pastoral paradise continues in the claim that cattle and fowl "thrive without care."³¹ After this preamble, the reader learns that Liberia "owes its origin to the efforts of the American Colonization Society."³²

While presented in different ways, the notion of a gulf in human progress between African and American societies appears in virtually every nineteenth-century family atlas. Each constructs a dichotomy between notions of Western advancement and Eastern backwardness. At the same time, descriptions of Africa echo a Eurocentric bias. In the atlases examined here, Americentrism is most obvious in the placement and number of maps. Finally, though every paragraph and picture provides valuable insight into historic views of the continent, what is absent is as important as what is present. The Africans conceived by nineteenth-century atlases lack history, complexity and collective achievements. It is easy to imagine how, by viewing the continent through this lens, the armchair adventurer just might see an imperfect triangle.

²³Ibid., 211.

²⁴Ibid., 213.

²⁵Ibid., 218.

²⁶Ibid., 212.

²⁷Ibid., 218.

²⁸Colton and Swainson, 1859, 371.

²⁹Ibid.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Colton, G.W. and Richard Swainson Fisher. *Colton's Illustrated Cabinet Atlas and Descriptive Geography*. New York: J.H. Colton, 1859.

Colton, G.W. and Richard Swainson Fisher. *Colton's Illustrated Cabinet Atlas and Geography*. New York: J.H. Colton, 1862.

Cram, George F. *Cram's Illustrated Family Atlas of the World*. Chicago: George F. Cram, 1882.

Cram, George F. *Cram's Unrivalled Family Atlas of the World*. Cincinnati, Ohio: M.A. Harris, 1887.

Cram, George F. *Cram's Universal Atlas, Geographical, Astronomical, and Historical: Containing a Complete Series of Maps of Modern Geography, Exhibiting the World and its Various Political Divisions as They are Today, Also an Elaborate Series of Authentic Historical Maps*. New York: George F. Cram, 1897.

Fort Dearborn Publishing Co. *The National Standard Family and Business Atlas of the World: Specially Adapted for Commercial and Library Reference; With All Populations According to the 1890 Census*. Chicago: Fort Dearborn Publishing Co., 1896.

Home Knowledge Association. *The Home Knowledge Atlas: Geographical, Astronomical, Historical ... Containing a Complete Gazetteer Showing all the Cities, Towns, Villages and Post Offices in the Dominion of Canada and the United States; Fully Indexed*. Toronto: Home Knowledge Association, 1891.

Johnson, Alvin Jewett. *Johnson's New Illustrated (Steel Plate) Family Atlas: With Physical Geography, and with Descriptions Geographical, Statistical, and Historical, Including the Latest Federal Census, a Geographical Index, and a Chronological History of the Civil War in America*. New York: Johnson and Ward, 1863.

Johnson, Alvin Jewett. *Johnson's New Illustrated (Steel Plate) Family Atlas: With Physical Geography, and with Descriptions Geographical, Statistical, and Historical, Including the Latest Federal Census, a Geographical Index, and a Chronological History of the Civil War in America*. New York: Johnson and Ward, 1864.

Lucas, Fielding Jr. *A General Atlas Containing Distinct Maps of all the Known Countries in the World*. No. 138, Market Street: Fielding Lucas, Jr., 1823.

Rand McNally and Company. *New Pictorial Atlas of the World: Containing Colored Maps of Every Country and Civil Division Upon the Face of the Globe, With Marginal Index, Together With Historical, Descriptive, and Statistical Matter Pertaining to Each, With City Maps and Colored Statistical Diagrams, Also a Concise Review, Richly Illustrated by Engravings, of the World's Peoples*. Chicago: Rand, McNally & Co., 1896.

Rand McNally and Company. *Rand-McNally Encyclopaedia, and, Atlas of the World: Eighty Full-Page Colored Maps, Illustrated with Nearly Two Thousand Engravings*. 2 vols. Chicago: Rand, McNally & Co., 1899.

Review of "Johnson's New Illustrated (Steel Plate) Family Atlas, with Physical Geography, and with Descriptions Geographical, Statistical, and Historical, including the Latest Federal Census, a Geographical Index, and a Chronological History of the Civil War in America." In *The North American Review*. Cedar Falls: University of Northern Iowa, 1885.

Secondary Sources

Bridges, R.C. "Maps of East Africa in the Nineteenth Century." In *Maps and Africa: Proceedings of a Colloquium at the University of Aberdeen*, edited by Jeffrey C. Stone. Aberdeen: Aberdeen University African Studies Group, 1994.

Danzer, Gerald A. "George F. Cram and the American Perception of Space." In *Chicago Mapmakers: Essays on the Rise of the City's Map Trade*, edited by Michael P. Conzen. Chicago: Chicago Historical Society for Chicago Map Society, 1984.

Schulten, Susan. *The Geographical Imagination in America, 1880-1950*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.



Map of Africa, photographed from: Rand-McNally Encyclopaedia, and, Atlas of the World: Eighty Full-Page Colored Maps, Illustrated with Nearly Two Thousand Engravings, 1899. (Page 800)



Figure 1 - Mountains of the Moon, photographed from: *Cram's Illustrated Family Atlas of the World*, 1882. (Page 321)



Figure 3 - "Negro of Congo," photographed from: *Colton's Illustrated Cabinet Atlas and Descriptive Geography*, 1859. (Page 371)

Figure 2 - Ethnographic chart, photographed from: *New Pictorial Atlas of the World: Containing Colored Maps of Every Country and Civil Division Upon the Face of the Globe, With Marginal Index, Together With Historical, Descriptive, and Statistical Matter Pertaining to Each, With City Maps and Colored Statistical Diagrams, Also a Concise Review, Richly Illustrated by Engravings, of the World's Peoples*, 1896. (Page 165)

