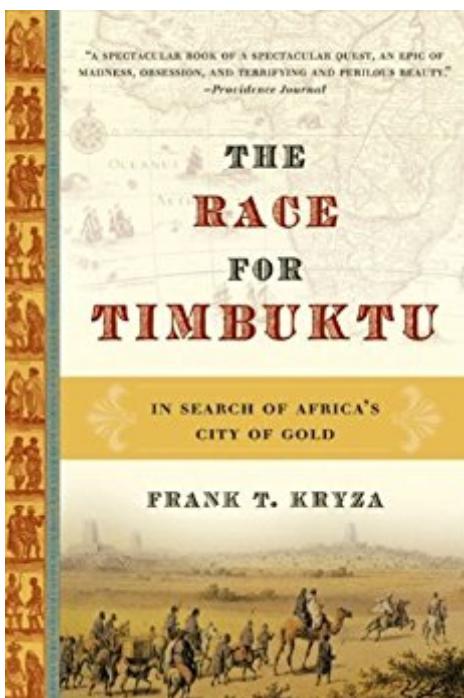


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# The Race For Timbuktu: The Story Of Gordon Laing And The Race



## **Synopsis**

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.

## **Book Information**

File Size: 2686 KB

Print Length: 352 pages

Publisher: HarperCollins e-books; Reprint edition (March 29, 2011)

Publication Date: March 29, 2011

Sold by: Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B004KKXWN8

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #108,546 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #1 in Books > Travel > Africa > Western Africa: Mali, Mauritania & Western Sahara #13 in Kindle Store >

## Customer Reviews

great history

An interesting and well-written account, but doomed by the publisher's failure to provide maps. (There's one map, which is completely inadequate and shows only one of the journeys described in the book.) Compare this to Sattin's *The Gates of Africa*, which has a new map for each expedition. You cannot read a book like this without maps. Know where Ghat is? Or Zinder? Fortunately, I used maps from other books--a pain. Shame on HarperCollins.

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.

A few years ago I was contacted by Deni Cooperrider, who’s husband was staying in a hotel in Timbuctu. Bob Cooperrider, her husband, had discovered that the host at the hotel was Miranda Dodd. Now Miranda was the daughter of Terry Dodd who had rented our old house for some years. To a great extent Miranda had grown up on our property and with our books. I knew that she had visited Africa while she was in College, or afterward, but I didn’t know that she had married a Timbuctu chieftan and that they had a hotel. Bob Cooperrider and I had collected firewood together in the 70s and shared an old Farmall Cub tractor. Bob was a teacher then but was interested in organic farming. He later edited a Tilth periodical. He eventually retired and found himself helping Africans set up grain cleaning operations and other agricultural functions. At the hotel in Timbuctu, Miranda and Bob found that they had lived on the same road less than a mile apart. When this book became available I thought that perhaps I should know more about Timbuctu. I knew that it was solely or mostly made of earthen structures and was a very old crossroad city of importance. And there was a hint of an ancient library there something like that in Ethiopia, full of ancient scrolls that exist no where else. Well, this book is not about the details of what remains in Timbuctu but about the British search for the source of the Niger River and Timbuctu. Timbuctu is near to and possibly once on the river. Africa was basically closed in the early 1800s to Westerners. And then there was that Sahara Desert to cross. Or maybe one could go up the Niger River from the coast. But no one knew where the Niger River went! This book is about the Brits who died trying to get to Timbuctu and to find the route of the Niger. Mostly they failed and suffered greatly in the process. The excruciating British hierarchy that created these explorers is well displayed. And this drama takes place in preparation for the colonization of Africa, which followed these explorations, orchestrated by men in plush armchairs in private clubs in London. The book has a great amount of detail about the other men with boots on the ground or on camel back struggling through the sand and rocks, and

drinking bad water.

This is a fine well researched book on a portion of early 19th Century African exploration by Gordon Laing and other courageous explorers of the 1820's. Most of these explorers died by Arab guides or thieves or suffered unbearable hardships from the Sahara Desert or disease solely to be the first to reach Timbuktu and discover the source of the Niger River. The author's ability to form a coherent and convincing narrative is truly extraordinary.

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