Adrian Wisnicki’s *Fieldwork of Empire* is a study about nineteenth-century British exploration of South, East, Northern and Central Africa that combines insights from the historiography of the British Empire, post-colonial and subaltern studies, area studies and digital humanities so as to demonstrate that local (African) contexts and people have influenced the production of expeditionary literature and knowledge to a much larger extent than is generally assumed by scholars.

Much of the critical literature on the Victorian exploration of Africa has dealt with the topic of “race relations”; that is, the encounter between explorers, standing for “the West”, and the various African societies they came in contact with. Scholarship has focused, through different fields (imperial history, post-colonial theories, travel writing studies, history of geography and other sciences, book and publishing history, visual culture studies, etc…), on the representation of such encounters and societies in Western literary production, especially by studying the published narratives of exploration.

This scholarly landscape can broadly be pictured as such: there has been a longstanding disagreement – shall we say feud? – between historians of the British Empire on the one hand and scholars in post-colonial studies on the other, as to the value and epistemological contribution of the explorers’ writings to Victorian and even modern-day knowledge, or distortion of knowledge, about “Africa.” The historiographical tradition – not only scholarly work, but also popular histories of exploration and biographies of explorers – has also been known to remain too closely associated with the celebration of manly heroism, embodied by the explorers, and with a Eurocentric perspective of the world.

The two opposite sides of the debate have best been represented in a discussion across several articles, between Roy Bridges, an expert on the history of Victorian exploration in Africa and former President of the Hakluyt Society, and Tim Youngs, a major figure in travel writing studies at Nottingham Trent University. While Tim Youngs, relying on Anthony Fothergill’s reading of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, contended that “What travellers describe in Africa is mostly Britain”, Roy Bridges maintained that it was “possible to use the explorers’ testimonies to learn something of the reality about the people they encountered in Africa.”

Imperial history was then criticized for not accounting enough for local perspectives, cultures and agencies in the history of exploration and empire; whereas the analysis of imperial discourse in post-colonial studies was seen, in words quoted by the author reviewed here, as “overgeneralizing and insensitive to the specificities of temporal and spatial contexts.” Indeed, area studies about Africa had existed for some time and evolved while most historians of the British Empire or scholars of literature took little notice of it, if any.

Adrian Wisnicki’s book, the result of years of research and archive work, seems to provide an answer to all these complex issues within scholarship. *Fieldwork of Empire* “examines the impact of non-western cultural, political, and social forces and agencies on the production of British expeditionary literature” (xv). By relying on his extensive knowledge of and experience with the archive of exploration, Wisnicki makes a strong case that “non-western impact [on the production of the literature of exploration] was considerable, that it shaped the discursive and material dimensions of expeditionary literature, and that the impact extends to diverse materials from the expeditionary archive at a scale and depth that critics have previously not acknowledged” (xv).
The introduction offers a brief summary of the history of the British Empire, and the evolution of its relationship with Africa in the nineteenth century. It comprises a brief sketch of what historian Felix Driver has called “the wider culture of exploration”, that is, of the different ways in which exploration appealed to the British public and involved different types of actors at home, in metropolitan Britain. The author then considers how non-western influences have been acknowledged to a limited extent by relevant scholarship, while arguing for the need to reassess the extent of such influences. Finally, in the critical literature review, Wisnicki contends that scholars must move away from explorer-centred perspectives and rely more substantially on contemporary Africanist historiography.

Crucially, “each chapter”, Wisnicki notes, “targets intercultural encounters and expeditionary literature associated with a specific time period and African region or location.” (1)

The first chapter shows how David Livingstone’s Missionary Travels (1857) “develops, suitably populates, and so overdetermines an ideal, interstitial site for British colonial intervention.” The second chapter focuses on the erasure, by the explorers, of local contribution – native or non-western informants – to the production of geographical knowledge and mapmaking related to Burton and Speke’s East African Expedition (1856-1859). What is striking, especially in this chapter, is the degree of knowledge, intimacy even, with extant material: rarely have the maps and sketches held by the Royal Geographical Society been so closely scrutinized for differences in coordinates, and from this archival work Wisnicki is able to argue about the consequences of the explorers’ cartographical practices: “In effect, the RGS and Lake Regions maps write the routes of the EAE – i.e., the maps place the story of British exploration in Africa – over existing Arab-African trading routes and so mark at the minute level the introduction of a new cartographical approach to representing the African continent while eliding on-the-ground material reality” (65).

The third chapter contrasts the events told in Samuel White Baker’s published narrative with what the explorer recorded in his private diaries; so that different perspectives of the same event arise to the benefit of a re-evaluation of local agency in the explorer’s travels. The fourth chapter no longer follows one individual explorer but focuses on British expeditionary literature associated with the village of Nyangwe, in Central Africa. It considers how several accounts of the same place by different explorers can contribute to an urban history of Central Africa. It also shows how the explorers’ focus on one particular ethnic group, the Wagenya, living near Nyangwe on the Lualaba River, may have helped reinforce Victorian clichés about Africa. The chapter, in its implications, therefore reaches a very different conclusion from Tim Youngs’s view, stated above. By relying on Google Maps screen captures of modern-day Nyangwe, it also offers innovating, more straightforward ways of looking at the Victorian exploration of Africa.

The final chapter shifts to fiction and to a reading of Joseph Conrad’s novella Heart of Darkness (1899) to suggest that non-western agencies may have influenced the writing of British fiction as well; so that the author’s approach in the previous chapters on factual exploration can be extended to fiction “where representation grows out of on-the-spot experience” (134).

The epilogue argues that the analysis of different contexts and intercultural encounters can help formulate a theoretical model of intercultural influence according to various ad-hoc methodologies depending on the context and availability of material. Such a purpose, the author notes, can be better fulfilled now with the rise of digital humanities, and this has been illustrated by projects which he has supervised in relation to explorer David Livingstone: the Spectral Imaging Project and the digitization of archive material (accompanied by valuable critical notes) on Livingstone Online, have yielded valuable results and insight in the archive of exploration. Wisnicki finally considers the contribution of
Digital Humanities scholarship to our reading and understanding of archival records, related to exploration, empire and beyond. Such scholarship, Wisnicki concludes, can provide an insight into alternative histories of intercultural encounter. The epilogue is followed by a valuable glossary of keywords, including that of the “field”, which the author construes as similar but not identical to Mary-Louise Pratt’s concept of “contact zone”, insofar as, he argues, “the explorers did not always personally visit [the non-western areas they collected data about]” (159), but often relied on local informants.

*Fieldwork of Empire* therefore provides powerful arguments in favour of the need to ground new studies of Victorian exploration in local contexts, to the extent that the relationship in the field between British explorers and “subalterns” can be reconsidered and general assumptions about intercultural encounters can be challenged. It also opens up promising leads for scholars of literature interested in the archive: looking at the material in all its diversity and complexity, what may be required is a re-evaluation of the genre of expeditionary literature that goes beyond published narratives – those are, after all, but a very specific type of travel writing – and draws from studies in the epistolary genre, in life writing, etc. The book is likely to appeal to various audiences: people interested in British exploration and subaltern studies alike, which is still a rare feat; but it will also be useful to people interested in archival work, scholars in digital humanities, and more.