



# The Honorable Consul

Unknown artist  
*Slave-traders Embarking Slaves*  
1820s  
hand-coloured mezzotint;  
46.7 x 65.5 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an8934776

Nicola Walker reads of the ordeal of the anti-slaver Lyons McLeod in East Africa in the late 1850s

Sometime in 1857, a Portuguese slave-owner on Ilha de Moçambique ordered that a soft-boiled egg should be placed in the mouth of a servant girl who had displeased her. The girl's lips were then skewered with a sail-needle and her cheeks slapped until the egg broke and the scalding contents slid down her throat. Lyons McLeod, the newly arrived British consul, didn't witness this incident first-hand, but recorded it in a notebook which was published in two volumes in 1860, as *Travels in Eastern Africa: With the Narrative of a Residence in Mozambique*.

A rather battered copy of this book can be found in the Asian Reading Room of the National Library. The publication is fascinating, both on account of its importunate and much put-upon author,

and its relatively rare subject matter. With his justifiable indignation fairly leaping off the page, McLeod also describes coming across a female overseer evidently enjoying the vicious flogging of a handsome slave who was guilty, McLeod discovered later, of 'refus[ing] to castigate his own mother'. What McLeod saw in Mozambique provoked him to plead: 'Women of England, and mothers of Portugal, hear me; and when you hear, speak, so that Don Pedro the Fifth of Portugal shall cause slavery to cease in his African dominions.'

Poor McLeod can have had no idea what he was letting himself in for when, in 1856, he accepted the post of British consul to Mozambique—a new position hurriedly conceived in an age of intense rivalry between Britain and France. Things went awry from the moment he and his wife started their seven-week journey to the Cape on a ship in which they shared a cabin the size of a 'dog kennel'. The rudimentary plumbing conked out, and drinking water

became scarce. They then had to wait five months for a suitable ship to take them the considerable stretch up to Ilha de Moçambique, the centre of Portuguese administration for nearly 400 years.

On the way, HMS *Hermes* stopped at Lourenço Marques, now the site of Mozambique's capital Maputo. McLeod depicts 'a square of squalid-looking houses' surrounded by the huts of 'enslaved' natives, and goes on to say that 'the town is ... so surrounded with filth ... that none but the Portuguese and Natives ... can approach it without being attacked with fits of vomiting'. (His wife, whose Christian name he never reveals, must surely have been daunted.) This bombastic streak makes the book wonderfully vivid, while simultaneously rather undermining its import by making McLeod sound like Evelyn Waugh's hapless reporter protagonist in *Scoop*. McLeod was clearly an honorable man who took to heart his mission to obstruct the slave trade in Africa, but he seems to have completely lacked guile, and was therefore no match for his Portuguese hosts whose income depended almost entirely on slavery.

American, Portuguese and French slavers hid from the British Navy pursuit ships in sheltered bays waiting for their cargo to arrive from the interior. The victims that survived this first ordeal were then despatched either to Cuba, the American South, Brazil or in the case of the French, to Réunion, where under the French Free



left:  
J. Saddler  
*Lyons McLeod, F.R.G.S. &c &c*  
Reproduced from *Travels in Eastern Africa: With the Narrative of a Residence in Mozambique*  
by Lyons McLeod (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1860)

below left:  
Louis Choris (1795–1828)  
*Negres de la cote de Mosambique*  
1822  
hand-coloured lithograph;  
26.2 x 41.2 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an10460551

below right:  
Title page of *Travels in Eastern Africa: With the Narrative of a Residence in Mozambique*  
by Lyons McLeod (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1860)

Labour Emigration Trade, they 'signed' a contract for five years. Yet, if the Portuguese, as McLeod noted in his diary, 'are always dreading their slaves rising upon them; and therefore exercise all their ingenuity in devising means to keep them down', so did the British with equal barbarity in their sugar plantations in the West Indies, until Abolition in 1838. By the time of McLeod's appointment, according to Malyn Newitt in his authoritative *A History of Mozambique*, 'the idea that Britain was conducting a moral crusade coincided with, and provided an ideological justification for,





Lyons McLeod  
*Map of East Africa*  
 Reproduced from *Travels in Eastern Africa: With the Narrative of a Residence in Mozambique*  
 by Lyons McLeod (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1860)

the pursuit of a variety of British interests in the western Indian Ocean.'

The McLeods finally reached Mozambique island on 18 July 1857, having settled with Mr Soares, a seemingly genial fellow-passenger on the *Hermes*, to rent a large house on the island to use both as residence and consulate. Unhappily, it was soon discovered that renovations due to be finished months earlier had not yet even begun. The Union Jack was therefore raised to 'open the Consulate', but the consul himself was forced to live three miles across the channel on the mainland (in a house also belonging to Mr Soares). There was a German microscope, a French alarm clock, Chinese puzzles, an American cotton-gin, photographic apparatus and 23 malnourished slaves, 'covered with scars and sores'. The admirable McLeods set about planting a fruit and vegetable garden and, to

the irritation of the Portuguese, began to improve the health of their slaves with a better diet, regular sea bathing and basic medicines.

McLeod reports a community of 7000 inhabitants, including several Portuguese officials attached to the Customs House and Treasury, one German and one French merchant, 30 or so Banyan traders from India, some 'half-castes' from Goa, as well as the mulattos of the slave dealers with local women, and Arabs. In case of trouble, there was a garrison of 200 Portuguese convicts. The town itself had a wharf 'which would grace any harbour in Europe', and an impressive pink and white Governor's Palace, built by the Jesuits in 1670; a public whipping post for the negroes stood in the principal square. Some of the two-storey whitewashed houses on either side of the narrow alleyways were still opulent, reflecting the glory days of the slave trade between Mozambique and Brazil, which though not yet over had considerably slowed.

McLeod's difficulty was that while the Portuguese had prohibited the slave trade

since 1842, it was unofficially condoned. Appointments to Mozambique were hard won among the 'cadets of noble families' in Portugal because of the kickbacks: for each slave sold for 40 dollars, 18 would be divided between the governor-general and his aides. As McLeod observed: 'There is no mistaking the meaning of the smile and shrug ... with which [the officials] reply to any one who ventures to state that the Portuguese government is sincere in its endeavour to suppress the slave trade.' When McLeod continued to petition the governor on the matter of the slave traders, he made himself tremendously unpopular with a cartel of men whom he eventually acknowledged as being 'all-powerful'.

The situation was already unpleasant when, much to McLeod's relief, the British frigate *Castor* briefly anchored off the island. At an official dinner at the palace,



he asked the ship's captain to deliver a bundle of official letters to England. The captain agreed, but proved susceptible to bribery, and sailed without them. McLeod consequently noted that: 'Finding that I had been so shamefully deserted by one of Her Majesty's ships, he [the governor-general] began to be quite careless about the suppression of the slave trade, and informed me that ... he found himself quite powerless to protect me.'

At this point the narrative begins to resemble the plot of an English farce: the McLeods' former friend and landlord, Mr Soares, borrowed back his servants and forgot to return them; likewise the carriage and horses. The slaves who sold them chickens, eggs, milk and wood were forbidden on pain of a beating to continue doing so, though some secretly persisted; Mrs McLeod was poisoned with strychnine by the governor-general's doctor, recovering only because it acted as a severe emetic; they were woken every night for weeks by intermittent thumping on the front door and, on petitioning the governor-general, were rescued by a night patrol from the garrison which made even more noise. In the nick of time, with scant food in the house and all the packing cases used up for firewood, they were saved by the arrival of a British crew whose ship, the *Herald*, had been impounded by the Portuguese. The captain, a Mr Duncan, stayed with the McLeods and proved invaluable, partly because he spoke fluent Portuguese. As

McLeod described things: 'Mr Duncan gave the Portuguese very clearly to understand that their treatment of the British consul should be made known to the world; and as they already were aware that he had exposed slaving practices at Lourenco Marques [sic] by his letter in the *Natal Mercury*, they were afraid of him, and consequently hated him intensely.'

On 1 April 1858, the island was devastated by a hurricane which shook the three-foot-thick stone walls of the McLeods' house. Just over a month later, faced with the imminent departure of the *Herald*, and the continuing ruthless animosity of the slave-dealers, McLeod decided it would be prudent to 'retire' to England until the 'reception of a British consul' to Mozambique could be made 'in honour and safety'.

He was to be followed by Dr David Livingstone, who had little intention of residing on Mozambique island but was given vice-consular status, just in case. Other lesser-known English explorers, such as Frederick Elton and Henry O'Neill, took up consular posts to Mozambique in the 1870s and 80s respectively, and wrote of their findings for the Royal Geographical Society. Slavery was finally abolished in Mozambique in 1878.

NICOLA WALKER is a freelance writer and editor who is researching a popular biography of Mozambique

Lyons McLeod and T. Picken  
*Lithograph of Mozambique*  
Reproduced from *Travels in Eastern Africa: With the Narrative of a Residence in Mozambique*  
by Lyons McLeod (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1860)