Special 40th Anniversary Issue

Translated Bosman Finally Corrected

David Henige

Albert van Dantzig, "Willem Bosman's *New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*: How Accurate Is It?," *History in Africa* 1 (1974), 101–108, http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3171763; Albert van Dantzig, "English Bosman and Dutch Bosman: a Comparison of Texts," *History in Africa* 2 (1975), 185–216, http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3171472; *History in Africa* 3 (1976), 91–126, http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3171563; *History in Africa* 4 (1977), 247–276, http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3171587; *History in Africa* 5 (1978), 225–258, http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3171488; *History in Africa* 6 (1979), 265–285, http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3171749; *History in Africa* 7 (1980), 281–291, http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3171666; *History in Africa* 9 (1982), 285–302, http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3171611; *History in Africa* 11 (1984), 307–329, http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3171639.

As the only person on Planet Earth who read every paper in *History in Africa*, I find it especially invidious to choose only one of them as having a singular impact on my ways of thinking. After due ratiocination I ended up cheating by choosing a "paper" that is almost a book in disguise. This is Albert van Dantzig's ten-year-long series on the English translation of Willem Bosman's *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*… . In the end, this was published in no fewer than nine parts between 1974 and 1984. There were several reasons why I finally gravitated to this piece. Firstly, it helped provide needed momentum to get *History in Africa* off the ground. Many journals, not least in African studies, get founded, but not funded. As a consequence, a few issues appear, and then nothing. At the time I had no reason to

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imagine that *History in Africa* would be different; the fact that it proved to be is owing to the contributors to the first few volumes, whose work managed to attract other contributions, and things mushroomed.

Closely akin to this is the fact that the serial publication of Van Dantzig's work showed that *History in Africa* was willing – and now able – to publish studies that could not be canvassed in the "standard" article length (say 6,000 to 10,000 words), but also had no hope of being published separately (more on this below). This of course was long before the invention of the World Wide Web made it practicable, even attractive, to publish matter of this kind (intermediate length, limited audience, potentially interactive).

Finally, at the time this was one of only a few examples of legitimate text criticism in the lists. Certainly, some text editions *qua* editions had appeared previously, both in article and book form, notably a series of studies of Sierra Leone and environs by Paul Hair, whose work appeared principally – and obscurely – in *Sierra Leone Studies*. As for book-length studies, these largely took the form of reprints of early editions with rag-tag editorial notes appended. These were intended to support the new and burgeoning field of African history as well as take advantage of the library market. Minimal standards were acceptable, perhaps even required, by publishers that saw interested parties largely in marketplace terms. They were helpful in the short run, but in the long term probably had a negative impact by making it more difficult for truly learned editions of the same works to be published.

Most of these early publications were European travel accounts. Of these, Willem Bosman's generally eyewitness account of European life on the Gold Coast at the end of the seventeenth century was considered indispensable for modern west African historians and historians of the slave trade.[1] *Description* had been translated into English in 1706, only a year after the appearance of the Dutch original (know thy enemy!), and it was this edition that was reprinted by Frank Cass in 1967. For the modern scholar two issues regarding such editions are key. The most obvious is: was the author a reliable reporter and interpreter of events? The second is: was the translation true to the original? This approach was once called internal and external criticism.

Albert van Dantzig, singularly positioned to comment on both, thought that the answer to the each question was: sometimes. As I recall it, I asked him to write a brief critique of the translation, but happily he countered with a more grandiose proposal – to do a page-by-page correction of the English edition by comparing it with the original Dutch version, published. Neither of us knew what we were in for. Ten years and more than 100,000

[1] Since 1974 much greater light has been shed on this particular corner of Africa, especially in: Robin Law (ed.), *The English in West Africa. The Local Correspondence of the Royal African Company of England, 1681–1699* (three volumes) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997–2006).

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words later the project was completed. Van Dantzig found – and detailed – virtually numberless instances where the meaning of the Dutch word in the first edition was (intentionally?) misunderstood and/or the translator/s had exploited the occasion to "correct" or supplement Bosman's versions of events. Neither is surprising.

What *was* surprising is that the corrections to the text aggregated to some two hundred pages of fairly dense text. The 1706 edition ran to 577 pages of much less textual density. If the words per page of the 1706 English edition were approximately 75% of those in *History in Africa* articles, then the critique consumed almost one-half the words of the original.[2]

While it was not quite the same as having a fully-fledged one-volume translation-edition *vademecum*, Van Dantzig's decade-long effort did put into the public domain the wherewithal for each reader to use the English of the 1706 edition in concert with Van Dantzig's observations on it.[3] I don't really know what role as catalyst this series of articles had on the Africanist community of scholars. What I do know is that it was not before very accomplished scholars were producing superb scholarly editions with publishers of high standing and long experience, and even getting grants to do so. In short, textual editing had found itself a place in the academic sun and, while the pace might have diminished, the enterprise is still going strong.

In the smaller ambit of *History in Africa*, Van Dantzig on Bosman demonstrated that, yes, there are outlets for investing time and trouble into producing text editions. I haven't counted up the number of such mini-editions that have appeared since 1980 but it seems to me that, whatever that number, it would have been much more modest had not Albert van Dantzig picked up the cudgels lo these many years ago.

Now that instances of text editing have reached the hundreds, we desperately need is a catalog of these editions, both in print and on the Internet to bring Adam Jones' early effort up to date. Once accomplished, this should be updated no less often than biennially and be done collaboratively.[4] Included would be editions *per se*, whether partial or complete; commentaries on source-textual issues; and reviews of such work. The advent of the Internet makes it possible – almost easy! – to accomplish this with a central guiding hand, multiple inputting, continuing access, keyword searching, and interactivity. We are nearly thirty years in arrears for such a project – and counting.

[2] This proved to be true for other editions of African texts that were to follow, e.g., that of the work of Jean Barbot.

[3] And probably put paid to any modern translation incorporating Van Dantzig's work integrally.

[4] Adam Jones, *Raw, Medium and Well Done: a Critical Review of Editorial and Quasi-Editorial Work on Pre-1885 European Sources for Sub-Saharan Africa, 1960–1986* (Madison: African Studies Program, 1987).

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