

Sufferings in Africa by Captain James Riley



Review by: Genie Bolduc

This book was listed by Abraham Lincoln as one of the books that most influenced his life.

Born in 1777 in Connecticut, Captain Riley's school education ended when at 8 years old when he was lent out to a farmer neighbor to earn his keep. The farmer, preferring that he stay working in the field rather than attend school, limited his school education, but his parents had taught him "by both precept and practice, that to be honest, industrious and prudent; to govern my passions, (which were violent,) to feel for and relieve the stresses of others when in my power; to be mild and affable in my manners, and virtuous in all my actions was to be happy; and they, generally, had instilled into my youthful mind, every good principle." With this solid moral compass, Captain Riley went to sea at 15 years old to see the world. He was somewhat prosperous until the year of 1808 when his ship was seized by the French and he was held until the later part of 1809, and though he lost nearly all of his property, he remarks that he returned wiser for he had learned to read and write both English and French, and "took lessons from the school of adversity" which served him well in his later sufferings in Africa.

He attached himself to a ship and sailed, having left the Bay of Gibraltar on the 23rd of August 1815, only to be shipwrecked on the western coast of Africa. Captured and enslaved by nomadic Arabs, Captain Riley and his men are beaten and starved while traversing the Sahara. His tale is a harrowing story of adversity and survival, from drinking camel urine when there was no water because it was less salty than their own urine to finding a way to convincing his captor that if he and his mates were delivered to Morocco that their captor would be handsomely rewarded . His ability to keep his wits about him in horrible adversity and to be constantly thinking of how best to gain any advantage for himself and his men is impressive and inspiring.