

## **Exploration as Knowledge Transfer: Exhibiting Hidden Histories**

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The production of geographical knowledge through exploration in the modern era required the work of a wide variety of people. European explorers in many parts of the world were dependent in many ways on local people and intermediaries not only for sustenance in the form of physical resources and labour, but also for information and knowledge that could sometimes mean the difference between life and death. The extent of this dependence was often hidden in the textual, visual and cartographic archive of exploration produced within the metropolitan centres of science and learning, though it was rarely entirely erased. In some respects, as suggested by recent work in the history of cartography and botany, the process of exploration can be conceived as a form of knowledge transfer, in which indigenous and local knowledge was transmuted and absorbed into European systems of knowledge. Yet on closer examination it becomes clear, especially in the case of the major geographical expeditions, that the knowledge thus transferred was not always strictly local or indigenous: and in the often uneasy process of exchange, intermediaries such as guides, brokers and interpreters played a significant role. In this paper, I reflect on the history of exploration as revealed through the collections of a major metropolitan institution – the Royal Geographical Society, founded in 1830 – highlighting the ways in which work on these archives can bring this agency into view. This is partly enabled by methods of historical research informed by subaltern and postcolonial perspectives; but it is also augmented and in some respects challenged by the communicative and design strategies deployed in a recent exhibition on the subject ([www.rgs.org/hiddenhistories](http://www.rgs.org/hiddenhistories)).