The entanglement of modern geography with the history of European colonialism and imperialism has been the focus of much critical attention in the last decade or so. One effect of this attention has been the unlikely emergence of the sub-field of the history of geography as one of the more theoretically dynamic fields of the discipline, as ideas from colonial discourse, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis and cultural studies have been deployed and interrogated in trying to make sense of geography’s past. Felix Driver’s book sets out to destabilise some of the critical certainties that have grown up around this whole topic, and in large part succeeds because it combines a historical sensitivity with a broad theoretical sensibility.

Geography Militant (the title phrase is taken from an essay by Conrad) is, to a large extent, centred upon an analysis of the Royal Geographical Society during the nineteenth-century. It also, although this too is perhaps not given enough explicit attention, a book about Africa, or at least one influential strand of discourse about Africa. In a series of case-studies of different dimensions of the project of African exploration in the nineteenth-century, Driver pursues a tightly related set of arguments about the heterogeneity of geographical debates and interests. The main argument running throughout the book is that geographical knowledge in the Victorian period cannot be adequately understood as a simple projection of an imperial-will-to-power. This idea tends to impose far too much unity of purpose on a set of projects that were rather more messy. In distancing himself from the ‘will-to-power’ variant of colonial discourse analysis, Driver emphasises that he prefers ‘contextual interpretation’ to ‘close textual reading’ as a mode of analysis. I have to say that I think this distinction is too starkly drawn, and it is not discussed in any detail, but nonetheless the key methodological theme to emerge from the book is a (re-)assertion of the importance of putting things in context. More than this, though, Driver’s analyses multiply the sense of just what ‘contextual interpretation’ might mean. It turns out to be more than simply putting texts, personalities, or events, back in their historical settings.

There at least three strong senses of context deployed in this book. Firstly, a geographical sense of context as the different spatial sites that exploration had to straddle, between the field ‘out there’ and the studies and lecture-rooms at ‘home’. This is the focus of two chapters on the Royal Geographical Society, one examining its role as...
an ‘imperial information exchange’ through which a huge variety of interests and knowledges passed, the other focussing upon the significance of the RGS’s *Hints to Travellers*. The theme that emerges from these two chapters is that scientific exploration was permanently dogged by a crisis of epistemological authority, by virtue of being split between the singularities of fieldwork in distant places and the universalising imperatives of public science. If the *Hints* were one means by which attempts were made to elevate exploration above mere impressionistic observation, then more broadly the RGS became the ‘arena’ not for the marshalling of clear and certain knowledge, but rather for the playing out of various conflicts over the authority of knowledge and the credibility of different actors. The early chapters of *Geography Militant* therefore develop a clear theoretical riposte to overly simplistic accounts of the instrumentality of geographical science, by establishing the constitutive grounds for geography’s crisis of epistemological authority, which in turn leads into an account of the necessarily contested nature of scientific exploration.

The contests and conflicts that raged throughout the early history of the RGS centred on these issues of authority. And here, a second sense of ‘context’ opens up, one which refers to a broad set of social relations and networks of social interaction which are explored in three middle chapters of the book. These consist of case-studies of individual personalities: David Livingstone and Henry Morton Stanley, of course, but also Winwood Reade, a less well-remembered figure who is memorably described as a ‘casualty’ from the struggles for reputation that characterised Victorian metropolitan science. What Driver manages to do in these chapters, having already outlined the key conceptual issues in the opening chapters, is indicate why, at this particular juncture in the history of this particular field of knowledge, the character and personality of individuals took on such import. The exemplary individual explorer became a key site for negotiating the contradictions of scientific exploration. The rhetorical and institutional personification of epistemological authority required lots of hard work, and success depended on the ability to deploy the appropriate repertoire of personal and political qualities. Reade’s failure in this game turns out to be perhaps the most revealing, because it indicates the boundaries around which scientific credibility were drawn, boundaries woven by a web of social standing, religious affiliation, and personal ambition.

The three chapters, focussing upon the struggle for reputation that secured the right to talk with authority on matter of scientific importance, lead onto what I think is probably the key chapter of the book, ‘Making Representations’. This chapter explores a specific legal case of 1890 concerning the future of two African children who had been displayed as ‘slave boys’ at the Stanley And African Exhibition in London. The chapter broadens the question of scientific authority examined in the previous chapters to encompass broader issues of the right to represent in a broader politico-legal sense. The case exemplifies the central conceptual and normative problematic of
postcolonial theory: the relationship between the representative authority of claims to knowledge, and the representative authority of claims to speak on behalf of, or in the interests of, absent or silenced others. In this case, claims to represent in the second sense were overdetermined by paternalistic assumptions about imperial guardianship over colonial peoples that depended, of course, on particular representations of non-European societies bolstered by geographical science. What emerges from this chapter is not an easy denunciation of the impertinence of presuming to speak on the behalf of others, which is all too easy a gesture to make as well as being an unfortunate misreading of lots of poststructuralist theory, but rather a careful statement of some of the dilemmas that the unavoidable work of representation inevitably raises. For anyone who has struggled to understand the point of Spivak’s ‘Can the subaltern speak’, I would recommend reading it alongside this chapter, which is as good an analysis of the problem identified in that foundational text of postcolonial theory as I have come across. And it's an easier read than Spivak’s piece.

The final two chapters examine a third sense of ‘context’, focussing more explicitly upon the process of recontextualisation to which knowledge and meaning is always prone. The first case is that of the metaphorical exploitation of the theme of ‘Darkest Africa’ in a domestic context of social reform, which reveals some unsettling implications for modern understandings of social citizenship. The second case, and the final chapter, is that of the ‘after-life’ of Geography Militant, namely the ways in which the stock of images and figures of colonial exploration have been recycled in popular culture throughout the twentieth-century. This recycling is even parodied in television shows like Seinfeld, where one of the characters works for a company producing catalogues of clothes for manly adventuring men very much like the River Island catalogue cited in the final chapter. Just how and why this recycling works is not, I think, really addressed in enough detail in Driver’s discussion. He does, however, suggest that the continuing force of this image of geography-and-exploration has significant consequences for professional academic geographers, whose expertise in multi-level modelling or theories of performativity constantly come up against a popular image of the discipline which they struggle to overcome.

In short, Geography Militant is not just another book about the history of geography. It makes a subtle, if under-stated, contribution to key theoretical debates in both cultural and political theory, tied together around the themes of representation, authority, and context.