

A COMPENDIUM  
OF THE EAST  
BEING AN ACCOUNT OF  
VOYAGES TO THE  
GRAND INDIES

MADE BY THE SIEUR JEAN DE LACOMBE, OF QUERCY,  
FORMERLY CAPTAIN AT ARMS  
IN THE SERVICE OF THE  
COMPANY OF THE INDIES OF HOLLAND

Now published for the first time  
[from the *Bordeaux* Manuscript of 1681]  
in an English translation by  
STEPHANIE & DENIS CLARK

Edited, with an Introduction and Notes, by  
ASHLEY GIBSON

Contemporary Engravings of the  
principal places visited reproduced from  
Schultzen's *Ost-indische Reyse*  
[Amsterdam, 1676]

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**HE VOYAGES OF JEAN DE LACOMBE, Sieur de Querçy, made through the Grand Indies in the years 1668-76, now translated from the old French and in the following pages printed for the first time, were brought to our notice in January, 1937. In that month an acquaintance of great expertise in bibliographical matters, with happy hunting grounds of his own in all sorts of remote and unconsidered byways, put into the present writer's hand a small octavo volume which he had picked up the night before, he said, in Paris.

Its neat if not particularly inviting exterior (straight-grained citron morocco, lightly tooled, late eighteenth or perhaps early nineteenth century, the lettered title *Compendiare du Levant* occupying the position proper to it on the spine) did not promise overmuch. Many of us like to argue that books of old travel are the best books of all, but we prefer, because it makes our argument easier, that their authors should have shown enterprise in the choice both of routes and objectives; should have tried, like Barents & his companions (who left copies of Mendoza's *China* and Medina's *Art of Navigation*, thumbed to tatters, behind them in the hut they built to keep out the bears in Nova Zembla) to make the passage to Cathay via the Arctic Circle, or at the least to have run South till the albatrosses spotted and shadowed them, and doubling the Cape of Good Hope, or it might be Cape Horn, sailed on into the Indies of Portugal or Spain, and so home, perhaps, in eighteen months if they were lucky [Note 1].

But one had, in this case, no hint of such doings. The Near East was indicated, and nothing beyond, a favourite subject, truly, with sesquipedalian writers of the Napoleonic epoch, but nowadays few are anxious to read their works, and here, we thought, comes another of them. There was, however, a date lower down on the backstrip. It was 1681, and if that were so the binding was clearly too late for the book.

On opening the volume, I found it was not a printed book at all, but a manuscript of hundreds of leaves in clear, fine script, the ink faded to yellow but still legible enough except on certain pages that had been scrawled and scored upon in a clumsier hand & darker ink. These corrections, or most of them, seemed when the translators & myself came to examine them curiously pointless. They mystified us considerably, and eventually I must confess that we decided to ignore them. If they were the author's own, it seemed his second thoughts were never best. But more of that later. A single worm only, thoughtfully sparing the text, had excavated its mausoleum among the stitching. Then a series of names, etched in elegant capitals among the formal entablatures of the chapter headings, caught my eye—Ceylan, Java, Sumatra, Ternat,

Nambonne, Gounong Apy—a handful of words signifying not the Near East but that much farther Levant beyond Suez, in a word the Grand Indies, through which delectable part of the world, from Ceylon to Halmahera, this Sieur de Querçy appeared to have ranged at large. My friend enquired if the item had any attraction for me, at all.

It certainly had, and five minutes' scrutiny of those yellowed pages justified me in making the volume my own. Of the period & genuineness of this manuscript there could be no doubt. An hour's work in the British Museum Reading Room conclusively established the fact that no trace or record of any printed version existed, that its author was quite unknown to the biographers, though other Lacombe hailing from the same part of France had achieved some species of eminence in various respectable walks of life.

It seemed the volume had no more history than I had been given, and that the first place to hunt for clues was between the covers, and nowhere else. There were a few, and not in the manuscript proper, but we did not discover them, still less unravel their meaning, all at once. A careful and complete translation was the first desideratum, and with aid available that wedded competence to enthusiasm this was put in hand without loss of time. Scorning delights and living laborious nights as well as days, my colleagues showed themselves indefatigable in their endeavours, and the fifteen chapters of Lacombe *anglicé* were clicked out with gratifying regularity on an office typewriter in the extremely good time of six weeks.

Apart from speculation regarding Lacombe and his manuscript, the *provenance* of the book after it had left his hands was distinctly a matter of interest. Where and in what ownerships had it lain for the last two hundred and sixty years—it seemed reasonable to assume not outside France, where all who ran might have read it at any time—and why had it never been published? Various clues have been mentioned which in the upshot provided partial answers to these questions, and they were four in number, in the form of certain jottings and scribblings on the endpapers and elsewhere, three apparently in the same hand, the other in a different one.

Number One (on 1st fly-leaf) was:

'ce livre m'a été donné par mon ami Rouillet'

Number Two (back of last MS leaf):

'sur M. de la Haye mentionné pag. 75 et ailleurs voyez Relation de Knox t. 1 p. 208'

Number Three (back of last fly-leaf):

'sur les caractères qui sont p. 268' (should be 266 but the 6 is very like an 8) 'voyez Francklin's Palibothra part II p. 26'

and confusedly 'Ha, ha, ha' in one top note of their voices while they regard the Moon, which makes the Hollanders think that they worship her since in truth they only do this on nights when she shines forth, and nearly all the time that she stays above the Horizon. But I think rather that it is a Device of the Devil to captivate and lead them into Perdition, as he does in many other ways with many other wretched Nations such as this one, that are deprived of the Light of Faith.

I do not know how to suppress the Resentment that I feel here, more than in any like part of this Work, to see on the one side so numerous a Nation as this enlisted so unwittingly in the Devil's party, deprived utterly of Light and of Faith, and abandoned by all Christians; and on the other, the ease of Access (for it is but half-way on the Road to the Indies, and is so frequented by many ships that sail very often from Europe), the zeal of so many good Monks who are in this Kingdom [of France], who would find Ears and Hearts to spread the Gospel (for this Nation is so docile that for the most trifling recompense they do all that one may desire of them), and, lastly, to see voyages so long and dangerous taken for this same object, as are those to China and Japan, without gaining, very often, other fruit than death or martyrdom, while these poor Ottontots, having never been preached to, remain in their blindness, without anyone willing to undertake their enlightenment. It is true that, the country being a wilderness and without any French settlement, it would not be entirely easy and convenient to enter there and proceed as one wished, for the very reason that the Hollanders from the Cape of *Bonne Esperance* would maliciously oppose themselves to such a Saintly undertaking, as they do throughout the Indies, being in this like the Dog of the fable which would not let the Bull eat hay and did not eat it himself.

But it is not a wrong without remedy, nor without a Cure begun, since it has been undertaken there already and the most pleasant situation on all the Coast, at a little distance from the Cape of *Bonne Esperance*, has been chosen for the establishment of a French Colony, that this poor Nation awaits ever more impatiently, believing that it will receive from it much greater Benefit and Profit than from the Dutch who are there now (as I have learnt myself from the report of that Savage Captain who, as I have told, gave me his bed for a night). So, waiting only for the French to transport themselves thither, no more is needful than the Zeal of some select persons for Religion or the Motherland to bring it to His Majesty's ear, so that he may facilitate all measures and appoint capable people for such an Enterprize.

Although the Cape of *Bonne Esperance*, situated on the 35th degree Longitude South, may be destitute of wood and good supplies of water, that is not to say that the whole country is the same, and that there are

not places filled with trees and well watered by many springs and streams; but they are at some little distance from it, either upon the borders of the sea or in the interior of the Coast. Nevertheless this does not prevent this place, as well as all the other Southern Coasts of Africa, to be well provided with all that is necessary, so that it may be Accounted a fertile Country and abundant, according to the Disposition of its Climate, which is not burning, being so distant from the Line, but almost as temperate as our Meridional Europe. That is why nearly all Species of animals, birds, fish and plants that are encountered here are found there also; and that even the Pheasants, the Partridge and many other kinds of Game, which are not as common here as other birds, are there in prodigious quantity with the other ordinary species and as many others that are not found in Europe: for the Ostriches, whose feathers we prize so highly, are more common there than Geese in France.

The Cattle, great and small, of which we have spoken, are assuredly prodigious: for a sheep of France is not worth half a one of that country, and it is the same of the rest and of their number, which proves well enough that since the pasturage is very good for cattle, the land that produces it cannot be of a sterile nature.

The Venison there is too numerous to distinguish each Species: Deer, Elands, Wild-boars, Roe-deer, Otters, Steinbocks, that are no bigger than Leverets and have a Goat's feet, and a great quantity of other kinds, known and unknown, are there in vast abundance in the more Hidden and remote places. The Sea-Cow is notable above all for the excellence of her flesh, which I have many times tasted, although she is much larger and taller than a fat bull. To behold she is frightful, so strange is she; her Ears, that she holds straight, are five or six feet long, and she has two tusks like a Wild-boar's, which stand out from her jaws about two feet in height and are proportionately thick. She is also furnished with two great fins, like fishes', which extend far into the water and that she has above her flanks. She stays in the water during the day in the most open places, and comes out at night and even sometimes in the day on the most deserted shores. I took pleasure on some mornings before sunrise to behold them on the sea-shore in Hundreds, so many were there; but as soon as they perceived or heard something, they hurled themselves into the water with an unbelievable promptitude and confusion.

The Savage Beasts are no less numerous than those others: for, since the Elephants, Lions, Bears and Rhinoceros form alarming bands, I leave to the imagination how teeming must be the more ordinary sorts there. Among others there is a kind of monkey named Babians, that are appalling for their enormous size, which equals that of a great mastiff. They carry a tail a fathom long, and are carnivores, devouring men like the Lions. Being curious one day to see this sort of Animal, I took with me two friends as well armed as myself and made straight for an

three elephants of *Ceylon* in our following, all loaded with luggage and merchandise, we met an Indian Ambassador who had a number of Elephants which were from elsewhere than *Ceylon* in his retinue. These, on encountering ours as they passed, lifted at once their trunks at full stretch above their heads, and, having passed, drew them in again: but it was done with a certain Expression and particular signs which showed that they felt reverence for them. And to show that it was done of duty more than of Courtesy, they did not embrace them with their trunks as they do ordinarily: but ours, after the salutation of the others, only returned it with great simplicity and haughtiness by merely extending their trunks to each without raising them, nor in any haste.

If this Species of Animal, which dwells in the wastes of the Mightiest Places in the World, is yet met with in this island, one may easily believe that nearly all others of the same Climate have their places here: The Tygers, The Rhinoceros, The Jackals (these are a kind of fox), The Crocodiles, The Serpents of Prodigious Size, and such find also the same easy means of livelihood; but they are not in the same quantities as in other places. Conversely, Venison abounds, and there is not a grove of trees nor a clump of timber in which a Hunter does not find plenty of diversion. Stags, Elk, Wild-boars, Wild Buffaloes, and many other species, not so well-known, are in no small quantity, but it is very dangerous to follow them into their coverts or lairs among the herbage because of the Leeches which are everywhere in the island, but in greater quantity in some places than in others, so that if one does not take great care one finds oneself entirely covered by them. They live under the leaves of trees and grasses, in places that are not even damp, and as the people pass without heeding the leeches hurl themselves upon them and principally on places where the body is exposed, so swiftly that the traveller has no time to throw them off; and they are sometimes so huge that two are capable of exhausting all the blood from a man. They are so penetrative that they will pierce even the Buffalo to devour its Flesh: which thing causes very often the death of many people in this island [45].

As to the birds, of almost every kind, their quantity is truly prodigious, and I have sometimes had delight in taking a walk in some little wood (always in very good Company) and discharging my gun at the branches of trees to make them fall in dozens. Partridges, Pheasants, Jungle Cocks, Peacocks, Woodcocks and Doves fly on every side. I have recognized two species of these last, because they have there some that resemble those we have in Europe, and others which are as great again and green like Parrots, which are the best; a difference that I have been able to judge at table. Only a part of these birds are known to us and the rest are unknown.

One kind there is above all others that I do not wish to pass over, because of its Great Singularity and of which I have seen no others except

against the Portuguese, whose General of the galleons was Luis de Mendonça Furtado, later Governor and Viceroy of India. See Caron and Schouten, *A True Description of the Mighty Kingdoms of Japan and Siam* (Ed. C. R. Boxer, Argonaut Press, 1935) p. cxvii, also Baldæus, *Ceylon (Churchill's Voyages)*, pp. 716, 723.

38 Xandis.

Schweitzer mentions these functionaries, whom he calls 'Sandis'. According to him the rank was a military one. 'They have a General, which they call Dissave, next to him some Sandis, Then the Araski, which are as Captains . . .' Many of these old Sinhalese titles are still retained, their bearers exercising civil functions, e.g. Ratemahatmaya, Dissawe, Korale, Aratchie, but the Xandi cannot be identified. While Schweitzer makes him a Sinhalese officer, Lacombe's friend was from his name a Dutchman.

39 Cingalese.

Popular use has never adopted the authorized spelling, which is 'Sinhalese'. *Sinha, Sinhala*: country and people of the Lion.

40 Cassis and metis.

See Fryke (1929 edn.), pp. 94-6. F. speaks of these communities as *Kastizees* and *Mastizees*.

41 Caps.

Caps of European material and manufacture were very popular among the Sinhalese in Knox's time, and he and his fellow-prisoners earned a considerable amount of pin-money by knitting these. 'Now I learned to knit Caps, which Skill I quickly attained unto, and by God's blessing upon the same, I obtained great help and relief thereby' . . . 'They (his companions from whom he had removed) were now no more like the Prisoners I left them, but were become Housekeepers, and Knitters of Caps.'

The manner of wearing these is illustrated in several of the plates in Knox's *Historical Relation*.

42 Knives of Guiana.

L. is making the comparison from memory. See his First Chapter, paragraph one.

43 Ears.

Schweitzer (p. 212) says 'Their Arms and their Legs are all adorned with Silver Rings, and their Ears, about a Span long, with Gold'.

44 Sinhalese script.

The suggestion that the Sinhalese derived their writing characters from the Portuguese is of course quite incorrect.

45 Fauna of Ceylon.

Though leopards, loosely described as 'tigers' up to a much later period