

Review Article

“The affections of a man of feeling in the midst of the wilderness”: François Le Vaillant on the South African frontier.

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François Le Vaillant, *Travels into the Interior of Africa via the Cape of Good Hope*. Vol. 1. Trans. and ed. Ian Glenn. Van Riebeeck Society second series 38. Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 2007. ISBN 0-9585134-2-2. 194+lxv pp.

Concluding his Introduction to the first volume of this welcome new translation of Le Vaillant's *Travels*, Ian Glenn declares: “Le Vaillant is much more our contemporary than Schreiner or many later writers seem to be” (lxiii). Earlier Glenn sums up the double disadvantage that has for decades militated against the proper recognition of Le Vaillant's importance in our literary traditions: “Right-wing settler ideology disqualifies Le Vaillant as meddling creole Frenchman, or presents him [. . .] as simple adventurer and naturalist, while a later generation of anti-colonialist discourse critics is happy to present him in the right-wing's simplified, politically censored version [Glenn is referring particularly to the Library of Parliament's *édition de luxe* of 1973] to prove that there was only one mode of colonial Africanist discourse” (lix) – a mode only and obviously Eurocentric to the core.

Glenn and his able assistants, Catherine Lauga Du Plessis and Ian Farlam, have done much to correct these oversimplifications and biases. The

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new translation itself, by which any such edition must stand or fall, is beautifully idiomatic, accessible and faithful to the infectious (if sometimes naïve) energies of the author. Sometimes it is almost too good to be true. Does Le Vaillant really produce the wonderful black comedy of: “A cannonball cut off his head and carried away his reply” (30)? And does he actually claim that in the Tsitsikamma “you cannot walk one pace [sic] there without coming across a thousand [sic] swarms of bees” (76)? The textual apparatus is impressive and detailed, and bears witness to many years of scholarly effort, although some recent works of South African scholarship in the field seem to have slipped through the net – see Works Cited at the end of this review.

The editors have restored the full text of the 1790 edition which had been extensively cut and bowdlerized in the earliest English translations and is still markedly imperfect in quite recent editions. Unfortunately, the editors do not indicate in the new edition just which the restored portions are. We must, however, with Glenn lament the disappearance of Le Vaillant’s extensive notebooks which might have provided the ultimate arbitration as to what Le Vaillant had actually written. There is still a lot of debate, briefly explored by Glenn, as to how much of the finally published version of the *Travels* was penned by the traveller himself, as well as to how much was the product of Le Vaillant’s own promotionalism back in France. Much of what made its way into print in 1790 would appear to have been the product of Le Vaillant’s anxieties to sell his bird collection, to utter sentiments in conformity with those of the revolutionary France to which he had returned, and, as we shall see later, to be less than frank about the circumstances under which he had gained access to the Cape in the first place. For instance, the sudden and very unfavourable digression into the Cape’s Dutch colonial history quite late in the volume (121-24) looks like an afterthought inspired by the Revolution’s designs on the Netherlands that would soon lead to Napoleon’s conquest of the Lowlands and, of course, the retaliative British occupation of the Cape in 1795. Along with Glenn and, earlier, Vernon Forbes, one has to raise an eyebrow, too, at the impulsive decisions the traveller claimed to have reached somewhere on the Sunday’s River to rush to the help of the survivors of the shipwreck of the *Grosvenor*, or “to travel fifty leagues across *Caffraria* [. . .] and re-establish peace in these unhappy regions for ever” (136). Furthermore, he tells us early on that “I took my first steps in the wilderness and was born almost savage” (5), and this image of an Emile-like *ingénue* with a metropolitan sense of humour is carefully fostered throughout the work, expressive of “an unsophisticated and simple soul like mine” (69) yet well versed in “the language of human rights in a colonial context,” as Glenn reminds us (122 n122).

Some of the enigmas still unresolved in the Le Vaillant saga must remain suspended until we have further instalments of Glenn's edition. This volume ends in the middle of the most famous (some might say notorious) sequence in the *Travels*, namely the encounter with the Gonaqua among whom Le Vaillant discovered the Lolita-like erotically playful Narina, who endlessly charmed him and who has joined a gallery of "Sable Venuses" that adorn the library of African exploration. Glenn's treatment in this volume, however, of Le Vaillant's account of spying on the nude Narina and her friends bathing as merely "teasing" does not get us into the complex cultural, ethical and racial vectors operating here. The resonance of Le Vaillant's evident allusion to the myth of Actaeon and Artemis, frequently portrayed in eighteenth-century salon painting, alone suggests otherwise, but there are other indicators.

For instance, the first encounter is highly stylized, almost balletic, and occurs as Le Vaillant wakes up. We could be in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The Gonaqua troop, the women "in all their finery," their faces "painted in different ways" and their bodies gleaming with fat, buchu and clay, approach Le Vaillant with gifts. Among them Narina, at first "lost in the crowd," emerges "as the youngest of the Graces in the guise of a Hottentot" (163-64), or like Venus from the foam or Aphrodite among the Nereides. It is a delightful and erotic moment, and no doubt benefitted from careful refurbishment in France. Furthermore, while Glenn is correct in suggesting that "to eroticize African travel" (lv) was encouraged by the Narina sequence, the trope was well developed by 1790, as a glance at William Smith and Charles Wheeler's *New Voyage to Guinea* (1744), Isaac Teale's "The Sable Venus: An Ode" (1765), Joseph Hawkins's *History of a Voyage to the Coast of Africa* (1797) and Silvestre Golberry's *Fragmens d'un voyage en Afrique fait pendant 1785, 1786 et 1787* (1802) will confirm. In the same year that Le Vaillant published his account of Narina, James Bruce came up with his "nymph of the Nile," described in much the same terms: "She was about sixteen years of age, of a stature above the middle size, but she was remarkably genteel, and, colour apart, her features would have made her a beauty in any country in Europe; she was, besides, very sprightly" (1790/1813, 5.392). Le Vaillant's infatuation with Narina was controversial and censured for years afterwards. His countryman, Louis Marie Degrandpré, who visited the Cape about a decade later was outspoken: "It is a fact that nothing is as filthy as a Hottentot" (1801, 2.187), a sentiment echoed by John Barrow and numerous others.

Perhaps Glenn's intention is to return to the Narina phenomenon in a subsequent volume, but as it stands the incomplete sequence and its cursory critical treatment point to other mild frustrations that confront the reader. It

is not clear, for instance, whether the editor plans to revisit the complex bibliographic saga of Le Vaillant's *Travels* (J. H. Ogilvie's *Bibliography* of 1962 and A. M. Lewin Robinson's contribution to the Library of Parliament volumes provide the groundwork), but the publication details provided here are cursory. Much of our understanding of the contemporary and subsequent controversies about what Le Vaillant had witnessed and written is dependent on knowing what contemporary readers had actually had before them (notably in the case of repressed or bowdlerized passages and illustrations, of which the plate of the "Hottentot apron" is only the most obvious), and the VRS edition will ultimately have to confront this thicket. The "Select Bibliography" at the end of the present volume is equally abrupt, omitting many of the works cited in Glenn's Introduction and footnotes. In such a context the editor's sceptical references to, for instance, the Library of Parliament volumes of 1973 are ungenerous. Considering that these volumes were produced as a government-sponsored project at the height of National-Party *apartheid* rule, one may still treat a contribution such as Margaret Shaw's "Hottentots, Bushmen and Bantu" as remarkably percipient and sympathetic. It is also not clear whether the VRS team propose to translate the account of the Second Voyage, first published in 1796. What we make of the reception of the 1790 work is obviously not dependent on our reading of the 1796 *Travels*, but the converse is certainly true and reinforces the need to have a full bibliographic history of how Le Vaillant and his assistants perceived the Second Travels as a continuation of the First, and manipulated the presentation of the later journey in the light of both the success and the controversies that had met the publication of the 1790 volumes.

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A more serious matter that one hopes might receive further attention in a subsequent volume is the more secure placing of Le Vaillant's *Travels* in both the history of travel writing and in what J. M. Coetzee dubbed the discourse of the Cape. The brief treatment of such matters here leads at times to rather more enthusiastic claims for Le Vaillant's originality and insights than the evidence warrants. Glenn foregrounds Le Vaillant's use of "a trustworthy central narrator, a man of feeling and sensibility, who becomes our guide" (xlix). Yet the semi-fictionalized and dramatized first-person travelogue, conveyed in terms of heroic self-fashioning or what one might call a discourse of anxiety mixed with wonder (the author-narrator in exotic and perilous surroundings), is at least as old as *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). By Le Vaillant's time much travel literature was written in this mode.

As for Le Vaillant's humanitarian persuasions, the abolitionist debate was by 1790 at its very height (Hogg 1973), rendering many of Le Vaillant's verdicts on slavery and the treatment of indigenous peoples commonplace. In this context the notoriety of the Cape was well established. Three years before the publication of the *Travels* the freed slave, Ottobah Cugoano, expressed an opinion common among abolitionists: "The Dutch have some crocodile settlers at the Cape that should be called to a particular account for their murders and inhuman barbarities" (1787, 133). That colonialism was a species of theft was, as Glenn rightly points out, another Enlightenment commonplace to which Le Vaillant duly subscribed. His verdict that "wherever the savages are totally apart from the whites and live in isolation, their manners are gentle; they get adulterated and corrupted the closer they come to the whites" (124) was virtually the only one a writer could honourably express in the France of 1790. (Incidentally, the "terrible Caffres" or amaXhosa met later, despite being such "savages [. . .] totally apart from whites," are not initially seen in such idyllic terms.)

At least as central to the lasting reputation of Le Vaillant as his ornithology and his botany must be his memorializing of the "Hottentots" or Khoi, yet despite mentioning once "the wildly contrasting observations visitors had made of the 'Hottentots'" (xliv) Glenn makes little attempt to explore this obsessive preoccupation in the discourse of the Cape. By 1790 the "Hottentot" was a universal set-piece of ethnographic observation, notably as the very lowest on the scale of humanity, but Le Vaillant's determination to rehabilitate the image and status of the Khoi was anticipated in the work of Dapper (1668), Tachard (1688) and Kolb (1719). Visiting the Cape between 1767 and 1771 another Frenchman, P. M. Pagès, had attempted "with sincere concern" (1782/1791–92) to form an independent and sympathetic opinion of the Khoi. In this regard Glenn's claim that "Le Vaillant's *Voyage dans l'intérieur de l'Afrique* was the first literary work about South Africa to reach a wide audience and to have a wide effect" (1) is too enthusiastic. The accolade should probably go to Peter Kolb's *Vollständige Beschreibung des afrikanischen Vorgebürges der guten Hofnung* of 1719 and its several redactions and translations (see Van Wyk Smith 1992). Indeed, Le Vaillant may have suspected this himself, hence some scurrilous references to the earlier traveller. His robust and unjustified dismissal of Kolb early in the present volume (54) may, however, be inspired as much by rivalry as by a failure to appreciate that, since Kolb compiled his work almost a century earlier, Khoi culture had disintegrated to such an extent that most traces of the "religious ceremonies" and other symbolic indicators identified by Kolb had irrevocably disappeared.

There is an even sharper irony at play here, which is that Le Vaillant may himself have relied on attenuated and inadequate translations of works such as Kolb's to produce the same kind of unjust verdict on his predecessors that Glenn identifies as vitiating much modern postcolonial discourse which depends on cut and bowdlerized versions of Le Vaillant's own work. (Incidentally, Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* [1992], pilloried by Glenn for "shoddy scholarship" in relying on a crippled Le Vaillant text, does exactly the same with Kolb [see Van Wyk Smith 2006]).

There are other themes and approaches in Le Vaillant's work that have either earlier or more authoritative exponents. His preoccupation with a Rousseauist conception of natural innocence: "the affections of a man of feeling in the midst of the wilderness" (xxvii); the worship of "the pure and natural feeling of liberty" (71); the predilection for the erotic Oriental tale as evinced in the Narina sequence; the fascination with scientific exploration – all these had by the time of Le Vaillant's writing emerged, or were emerging, in the works of other travellers, whether at the Cape (Sparrman 1783, Paterson 1789, Thunberg 1789) or in other parts of the world (Byron 1767, Bougainville 1772). Within ten years of the publication of the First Travels, John Barrow's *Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa* (1801-1804) would have made Le Vaillant's text redundant as an introduction to southern Africa, were it not for the latter's splendid illustrations. These, however, have not been widely available till our own time, though they have now ensured that Le Vaillant will continue to be appreciated for the quality of his sketches and paintings, his ornithology and his lively narrative, rather than for the range and depth of his socio-political, cultural, topographic and ethnographic observations.

Some aspects of the "lively narrative" raise other difficulties. Time has changed the Le Vaillant profile, and the contours of his project often do not conform to modern expectations. While one must be in general agreement with Ian Glenn's wish to promote the *Travels* as a worthy text in the canons of South African literature, it remains difficult to see how students and even the general reader might now respond to the misdemeanours of Le Vaillant's story. While not one of the great butchers in the saga of southern African hunting, Le Vaillant nevertheless takes his place in the rogues' gallery of killers who within a century (about 1700-1800) wiped out the animal riches of the sub-continent. He set off from the Cape with 16 guns, 500 pounds of gunpowder and a ton of lead and tin for bullets (56). One's heart bleeds at his description of the Bloubok, "the rarest and most beautiful of African antelopes" (63), but extinct twenty years later. And what must the modern reader say to Le Vaillant's starting fires in the Knysna forests in order to flush out elephants (118-19)?

Coupled to his unquestionably patronizing attitude to indigenous peoples – often playful and generous but persistently conveyed in terms such as “my dear Hottentots” and “my dear children” (123) when they are not “traitors and cowards and worse enemies to me than the Caffres” (138) – and his explicit reluctance to say much about colonial customs and society, the relentless focus on hunting makes it difficult to imagine a new life for Le Vaillant in a new South Africa.

Like the hunting, the ornithology at times gets in the modern reader’s way, too. Le Vaillant saw himself primarily as an ornithologist and the *Travels* as the report of an extended field trip. Thus what was of most importance to Le Vaillant may now often be of least consequence to us and this can be frustrating to non-‘twitchers.’ There is a charmingly teasing sequence of bird-hunting by-play just before the nude-swimming episode (169-70), but elsewhere the modern reader’s eagerness to learn more of the landscape, natural features and inhabitants of places as stunning as the Overberg game fields (“I had more than four or five thousand animals before my eyes at the same moment” [65]), the Tsitsikamma forests, the Knysna lagoon and Plettenberg Bay, all by the 1780s virtually still unvisited by anyone capable of leaving a record of such glories, is repeatedly stymied by the author’s zeal to shoot the next bird. As he puts it himself at one point: “I was dying of hunger but dreaming of collections” (84). In this regard one must mention that Glenn’s own earlier involvement in a major project concentrating on Le Vaillant’s ornithology (Rookmaaker et al. 2004) may have skewed the present work’s Introduction away from issues of more interest to the modern reader or historian. So, for instance, the inordinately detailed accounts of Le Vaillant’s family register and the number of bird specimens he collected sit oddly with the adumbrated sections subtitled “Influences on the text” (xl-xli) and “Influence” (l-ll).

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Le Vaillant’s “Hottentots” will continue to be the feature for which his *Travels* remain most famous. But while he assures us repeatedly that he was mostly ably served by his Khoi retainers we learn little of them as either individuals or representatives of a vanishing culture. His pet baboon, Kees, seems to have held a more secure place in his affections than his men, for apart from the famous Klaas – “my equal, my brother, the confidant of all my pleasures, my thoughts, my sadness” (104) – and his partner, Ragel, the retainers, unlike the baboon, remain unnamed. The encomium or “simple monument” to Klaas (103-104), while no doubt charming and deeply expressive of Le Vaillant’s fond and romantic longing for a world now lost

to him, comes many months after the beginning of their relationship in the narrative sequence, and it does not deter him, a few days later, from execrating his men as traitors and enemies. While it may be argued that such a frank confession reveals Le Vaillant's self-deprecating honesty, it also evinces a naïvety that could not encompass more subtle relationships.

Or, perhaps, more portentous events. For the modern reader a frustrating limitation of the *Travels* is that although it is not only one of the earliest accounts of the colonists' encounter with the amaXhosa but virtually an eyewitness record of the devastation wrought by the first East-Cape frontier war of 1778-79, Le Vaillant notes these events only in passing. One is reminded of Marco Polo's failure to notice the Great Wall of China.

There may, on the other hand, have been intriguing reasons for Le Vaillant's reluctance to comment in more detail on these and other matters of Cape colonial politics, some explored by Glenn. Le Vaillant claims early on to have found "the mores, manners and customs of the inhabitants of the Cape, and [. . .] the forms of its political, civil and military government" to be "what least concerned me" (53) – indeed, Cape Town is dismissed as filthy, lacking in culture, miasmatic with disease, and blasted, then as now, by the south-easter (16-22). He reverts more than once cryptically to "Particular considerations and powerful motives [that] silence me" (141). Glenn has a good stab at fathoming the reasons for Le Vaillant's coyness, pointing out that his presence in the colony was either illicit or tolerated by the Dutch East India Company as a privilege to a naturalist deemed harmless. Glenn notices that while Le Vaillant at various times (but from the safety of Paris) criticizes the Governor and the *trekboers*, he is silent about the VOC and its colonial policies.

The result is that our man often falls quiet at moments that would be of crucial interest to a modern historian, or reverts to information that was common knowledge. By 1784, for instance, O. F. Mentzel's *Life at the Cape in the Mid-Eighteenth Century*, originally published in German, had allowed the world a thorough view of the Cape's colonial society, as well as, once more, of the Hottentots. William Paterson's *Narrative of Four Journeys into the Country of the Hottentots and Caffraria* (1790) rounded out the picture while, as far as the *trekboers* were concerned, Robert Percival's *Account of the Cape of Good Hope* of 1804 would reveal that by 1790 these "African" farmers were commonly regarded as "a race entirely distinct from those of the more civilized parts of the colony" (204). Slightly earlier, in 1793, Johan Splinter Stavorinus, reporting on a visit to the Cape in the 1760s and 70s, had exposed excessive local cruelty in the treatment of slaves – breaking on the wheel and tearing off the live victim's flesh were common. Despite describing some Stellenbosch farmers in idyllic terms ("unoffending

children of nature" [1793, 2.71]), Stavorinus did not hesitate to claim that the inland farmers "more resembled Hottentots than the posterity of Europeans" (3.444). This had become the common view and allowed one anonymous reviewer of Le Vaillant's 1790 *Travels* to write: "These eastern settlers are a bold but cruel race: they are of a mixed breed, in general the sons of Hottentot women by European fathers" (*Critical Review* 1790, 70.40). To all this Le Vaillant could not or did not want to add much.

The last Dutch Governor, Abraham Sluysken, confronting the British occupying force in 1796, discovered that he had to rely on Hottentot levies (the "Pandouren") to attempt to defend the colony, rather than on the *trekboer* "rebels" of Swellendam and Graaff-Reinet, so alienated from Cape government had these "Africans" (i.e. proto-Afrikaners) by then become. Sluysken's *Verbaal* or report of 1797 reveals horrendous details of the demands made by the eastern Cape "national republicans," as they had come to call themselves, to have a free hand in hunting and enslaving "bosjesmans, hottentot en hottentottine" into perpetuity – "van geslagte tot geslagte" (1797, 129). Of all this, despite speaking darkly of the colony's hinterland as a place "where all the horrors invented in hell are committed" (141) and aware that the boers of the eastern Cape represented a force of some "ten thousand, all determined and skilful marksmen [. . .] almost all born and bred in the woods" (144), Le Vaillant provides scant detail, insisting instead that "I had but one harmless purpose: collecting objects to satisfy my tastes and advance my studies" (146). Is there more to the Le Vaillant story?

Suspicious about Le Vaillant's frankness and the true nature of his relationships with his sponsors arose early and lie behind the very negative depictions of the man and his *Travels* that soon emerged. The *Critical Review* (1790, 70.34-45) concurrently noticed James Bruce's *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* (1790) and Le Vaillant's *Travels*, much to the latter's disadvantage. Other negative reviews followed and by 1802 John Pinkerton's influential *Modern Geography* dismissed "the gasconades of Le Vaillant" (2.753), while concluding that "if the author's accounts be veracious, he has still the unhappy art of making them wear every appearance of fiction" (2.747). Louis Marie Degrandpré dismissed the *Travels* as "a charming novel" (1801, 2.126) while John Barrow's sustained depiction of Le Vaillant as a charlatan in his own *Account of Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa* (1801-1804) set the mood for decades to come.

The truth is that in the fraught atmosphere of revolutionary Europe and the early panics of Napoleon's ascendancy, Le Vaillant was widely suspected of being a French spy. Glenn's Introduction makes it clear that there was some mystery about how and why Le Vaillant gained access to the

Dutch colony – and, we may add, then managed to travel inland with a small armed posse and almost a wagon load of guns and ammunition at a time when the Cape government, according to Sluysken, faced insurrection among the frontier farmers. He was perhaps – indeed probably – completely innocent, lucky, and just a bit naïve, but the earliest English novelists writing on Cape themes thought otherwise.

Charles Dibdin's *Hannah Hewit; or, The Female Crusoe* (1792) offered the “story-in-a-trunk” plot that Glenn identifies as being initiated by a later, albeit pioneer, southern African novel, the anonymous and Le Vaillant-related *Makanna*, in 1834. Like the latter novel, *Hannah Hewit* is partly set in the Eastern Cape and inspired by the wreck of the *Grosvenor*, but, along the lines of *Tristram Shandy*, plays havoc with novelistic conventions, plots and counter-plots. Le Vaillant is not specifically mentioned, but the wholly chaotic and transgressive Eastern Cape that is the novel's setting gives us some idea of the sort of world in which readers of the 1790s might have imagined him to be operating. In L. F. Jauffret's *Travels of Orlando*, translated from French in 1804 and relying heavily on Le Vaillant's works, Le Vaillant himself figures as a colourful and exotic character on the eastern borders of the colony.

The text that fully develops the troubled image of both the man and the scene of his exploits towards which all of these works as well as the dismissals of Barrow and others tended, is *Makanna*. Glenn's reading of the novel must, however, be challenged. The protagonist, Paul Laroon, does indeed seem to have been inspired by Le Vaillant, but he is no hero. As his name indicates, he is intended to be identified as being of West-Indian *mestizo* origins (2.285), which Le Vaillant was not but which serves the author's purpose. Laroon is swarthy, a leader of mutineers, declared to be a French spy (2.10), and is plotting with the amaXhosa not only to overthrow the British but to annexe the Eastern Cape for France. His creole background allows him to pass for a Xhosa, Dushani, and he becomes the leader of “a sort of mercenary troop, formed of adventurers, runaway slaves, and deserters” (3.17). There is much more along these intriguing lines (see Van Wyk Smith 1997, 1999), but what must suffice here is that *Makanna* finally articulated what had been popularly suspected – justifiably or not – about Le Vaillant for decades.

None of this matters now. As Matthys Bokhorst remarked in 1973, “in the period from 1790 to 1814 Le Vaillant's books, for all their defects and shortcomings, did more to place the Cape on the world map than did the exploits of any statesman or general” (Quinton et al. 1973, 1.12). Le Vaillant's place in southern African literary history should be all the more

secure as a result of the new VRS edition. The outstanding enigmas will continue to add resonance to the “harmless purpose” of the *Travels*, now so splendidly brought before us again by Ian Glenn and his team.

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