

# ROBERT JACOB GORDON'S MEMOIR ON THE DEFENCE OF THE CAPE OF GOOD HOPE

*Ian Glenn*

---

Colonel Robert Jacob Gordon is, arguably, the major figure in South African colonial culture. Though he left no significant publications, his voyages of explorations, maps, illustrations in the field, scientific specimens, and his generosity to other explorers and naturalists made him a great enabler of colonial science and discovery.<sup>1</sup>

Gordon's suicide in 1795 and the events leading up to it, however, made him a divisive figure at the time and he remains a controversial figure.<sup>2</sup> Gordon was instrumental in surrendering the Cape to invading British forces, perhaps because he believed that they were acting on behalf of the exiled Prince William V of Orange rather than to seize the Cape for themselves. Many local citizens and troops under Gordon's command believed that Gordon should have allied himself with the pro-French, pro-Revolutionary Dutch government in control.

Arguments about Gordon's personal probity, motives and attitudes persist. Dan Sleigh, in particular, has pressed the case for the prosecution, both in his historical novel 1795, and in a section of a chapter on Gordon in a book linked to the 2017 Rijksmuseum exhibition on the Dutch influence on the Cape.<sup>3</sup> Gerrit Schutte has offered a defence of Gordon's behaviour, seeing him facing overwhelming odds and as a victim of geopolitical circumstances and his commitments as an officer, while Karel Schoeman and Patrick Cull-

---

<sup>1</sup>Patrick Cullinan, *Robert Jacob Gordon 1743-1795: The Man and His Travels at the Cape* (Cape Town: Struik Winchester, 1992); Ian Glenn, "François Le Vaillant: Resistant Botanist?" in *The Botany of Empire in the Long Eighteenth Century*, edited by Yota Batsaki, Sarah Burke Cahalan, and Anatole Tchikine (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2016); Ian Glenn, "Eighteenth-Century Natural History, Travel Writing and South African Literary Historiography" in *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, edited by David Attwell and Derek Attridge (Cambridge: CUP, 2012); Karel Schoeman, *Cape Lives of the Eighteenth Century*, 1st edition (Pretoria: Protea Book House, 2011).

<sup>2</sup>See "Obituary of Remarkable Persons; with Biographical Anecdotes" *The Gentleman's Magazine* 66 (May 1796); Gerrit Jan Schutte, "Een Vergeten Pamflet: De Apologie Van R. J. Gordon," *Historia* 15 (1970).

in an offer useful complementary accounts that provide context and nuance without attacking or defending Gordon explicitly.<sup>4</sup>



Figure 2-1. Portrait of Robert Jacob Gordon  
Source: Iziko William Fehr Collection, Wikimedia Commons

This article attempts to complicate any narrative about Gordon by arguing that, rather than seeing him as a closet Englishman and vain royalist on the one hand or principled opponent of revolutionary disorder on the other, Gordon should be seen as a proponent but perhaps also a victim of Enlightenment detachment. A major, hitherto undiscussed document in the French archives suggests that Gordon saw both the British and the officials and

---

<sup>3</sup>Dan Sleight, *1795* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2016); “Gordon and the End of Company Rule” in *Goede Hoop: Zuid-Afrika En Nederland Vanaf 1600*; edited by Martine Gosselink, Maria Holtrop, and Robert Ross (Nijmegen: Vanilt, 2017).

<sup>4</sup>Gerrit Jan Schutte, “Vragen Rondom Het Drama Op Schoonder Sigt: Een Nader Onderzoek Van De Zelfmoord Van Robert Jacob Gordon in 1795,” *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe* 52, 2 (2012); Schoeman, *Cape Lives*; Cullinan, Gordon.

burghers at the Cape with considerable detachment.<sup>5</sup> The presence of the French at the Cape to aid the Dutch defend the colony against the British from 1781-1784 meant that Gordon collaborated with the French and communicated with them.

How does this “memoire” (the first part of which is translated in an Appendix to this article)<sup>6</sup> help re-shape our sense of Gordon?

### *Gordon and the French*

It may well be that dealing with the French or writing in French allowed Gordon to avoid the simple opposition of being either a loyal Dutch company servant or a Scottish outsider. His own father was made to feel a Dutch outsider in the Scottish regiment in which Gordon himself finally served. In the document in question, Gordon is sharply critical of the Dutch officials, the local burghers, and the British, while presenting his views to the French as another detached outsider.

Gordon’s French connections were important and influential. He stimulated Diderot’s anti-colonial suspicions and led to a basic trope of suspicion of settler discourse.<sup>7</sup> Less known is the admiration his military prowess drew from Paul Barras, later to be head of the Directory, de facto ruler of France from 1795-1799 and facilitator of Napoleon’s rise to power, on his passage through the Cape.<sup>8</sup> Gordon’s conversational French must have been fluent and the letter, though not in his handwriting, suggests a lively, critical mind, capable of paradox and pithy observation and an astute military analyst, in keeping with Barras’s praise. An analysis of the letter also suggests that it was dictated by Gordon. There are places where it would be difficult to imagine the document originating from a bureaucratic translation.

---

<sup>5</sup>Robert Jacob Gordon, “Mémoire Sur La Défence Du Cap De Bonne Espérance” (Archives Nationales, Paris, 1781). C 5B / 3 (2)/ 29.

<sup>6</sup>A full transcript will be placed in both the South African and the Dutch archives.

<sup>7</sup>See Cullinan, *Gordon*, 22-24.

<sup>8</sup>Paul Barras, *Memoirs of Barras, Member of the Directorate*; translated by Charles E. Roche and edited by George Duruy. 4 volumes (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1895), volume 1, 36. I am grateful to the late Karel Schoeman for drawing this to my attention.

### *Gordon and the geopolitics of the Cape*

The memoir opens with a claim for the strategic importance of the Cape. It is difficult to know when this became the received wisdom of military planners, but there is a striking parallel with an almost exactly contemporaneous document of October 25, 1781, emanating from the English East India Company where they write: “That the Power possessing the Cape of Good Hope has the key to and from the East Indies, appears to us self-evident and unquestionable; indeed we must consider the Cape of Good Hope as the Gibraltar of India. . . . No fleet can possibly sail to or return from India, without touching at some proper place for refreshment, and, in time of war, it must be equally necessary for protection.”<sup>9</sup>

Gordon’s financial analysis of the relative costs and benefits of the American colonies and Indian possessions for the British show him as somebody interested in the global geopolitical picture and the difficult choices faced by the British.

### *Gordon and the British*

Early on in the memoir, Gordon produces a strange sentence. The French original reads: “Les Anglais n’ont cessé de frequenter le Cap de Bonne Espérance depuis cent ans; Ils y sont contraints, craints, et même regrettés, ils y ont beaucoup de Liaison de parenté et d’Intérêts.” [The English have not stopped coming to the Cape for a hundred years. They are compelled to be there, feared there and even missed there. They have many links of family and of interests.]

What is remarkable about this sentence is the switch of point of view from the British, forced to be at the Cape, to the fears they provoke in the locals, a fear then even mixed with regret when they are not there, a regret perhaps explained by a shared history, liaisons, common interests. The alliteration of “contraints, craints” suggests Gordon playing with French to express the complex local mix of attitudes and his ability to switch positions.

---

<sup>9</sup>Cited in Leonard Charles Frederick Turner, “The Cape of Good Hope and Anglo-French Rivalry 1778-1796,” *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand* 12, 46 (1966), 173.

In attacking the arrogance of British visitors a little later in the memoir, Gordon is able to switch cultural and national positions from the point of view of an outsider. His own childhood as the son of a Dutch-born officer shunned by many of his fellow officers in the Scots Brigade in Holland because he was too Dutch no doubt made Gordon very sensitive to British arrogance. The behaviour of several British military officers at the Cape in the 1770s and 1780s and military aggressions such as the attack on a French ship in Table Bay preceding the war may also have shaped Gordon's antagonism.

Gordon goes further in his triple critique of Dutch settlers, the VOC, and the British, by arguing that the settlers might actually welcome a British takeover, given the neglect of the Cape by the VOC and the political and military security that would ensue. Other observers at the time noted the willingness of local settlers to accept a British takeover. Schoeman cites the British visitor Munro in 1780 writing that the British could easily have taken the Cape, saying that "nor do I believe the inhabitants would have disliked the change, for from what I could learn, their liberty is much cramped by the Dutch."<sup>10</sup>

### *Gordon, the VOC and the burghers*

Part of Gordon's motivation for writing this memoir might have stemmed from his ongoing complaints about not having full military control of the troops at the Cape and thus of the necessary defences. Was this memoir an attempt to put pressure on Governor Van Plettenberg, the official who did have full military control, via the French military authorities at the Cape, or in France? The document is scathing about the lack of military urgency displayed by the authorities, with servants whitewashing walls or weeding gardens instead of improving fortifications. Duncan Bull claims that Gordon enjoyed excellent personal relations with Van Plettenberg, but this document suggests a very critical view of the governor as military leader.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>Karel Schoeman, *Swanesang: Die Einde Van Die Kompanjiestyd Aan Die Kaap, 1771-1795* (Pretoria: Protea, 2016), 172.

<sup>11</sup>Duncan Bull, "Two Visions on Colonel Robert Jacob Gordon," in *Goede Hoop: Zuid-Afrika En Nederland Vanaf 1600*; edited Martine Gosselink, Maria Holthrop, and Robert Ross (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2017), 162.

When it came to describing the burghers living in Cape Town, Gordon was similarly scathing. He sees them as “strangers to Holland,” no doubt because many of the VOC servants originally came from Germany and other European countries, but also because of their loss of contact with the Netherlands over time. For Gordon, they are a “nation of shopkeepers” and house-owners, whose major concern is that a few of their windows may be broken or some furniture destroyed. He senses a kind of national inferiority complex to the English and a willingness to be governed by them.

Though Gordon does not explicitly mention the frontier farmers in his memoir, Bull quotes a relevant 1778 letter written after one of Gordon’s exploratory trips into the interior: “These boers of ours are bad people, without virtue or philanthropy, and think nothing of shooting these people dead. In the course of time this will become a strange nation, that would be very dangerous were it to have a back door; but, luckily for the Company, nature has taken care to prevent that.”<sup>12</sup>

For Gordon, then, protecting the Cape from the British must have seemed a complex and quixotic notion, given his sense that many if not most of the inhabitants of the Cape would welcome an invasion. Perhaps his provision of a map with detailed census figures of the Cape along with the defences was an attempt to think through the complex balance of forces at the Cape.<sup>13</sup>

### *The military analysis*

A full consideration of Gordon’s recommendations for fortifications is beyond the scope of this article, particularly as so much of the memoir is omitted. Further analysis should, ideally, include a consideration of the maps produced in collaboration with the French. Andrew Smith, who has written on archaeological excavations of the defences, writes of this memoir: “This is a really good assessment of the defences at the Cape. The letter adds to what I included in my report on the French Fort at Constantia Nek in 1781 which was a signalling redoubt from Hout Bay to Wynberg.... It is interest-

---

<sup>12</sup>Bull, “Two Visions,” 162; surprisingly, perhaps, Le Vaillant was more prescient about an eventual Great Trek.

<sup>13</sup>Gordon’s warning may help explain his detailed analysis of local populations and thus the balance of forces in the 1786 Lafitte de Brassier map, see Ian Glenn, “Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Maps of Southern Africa in the Bibliothèque Nationale” *Bulletin of the National Library of South Africa* 69, 2 (2015).

ing that he talks of building a fort at Muizenberg, exactly where the British landed in 1795!”<sup>14</sup>

### *Conclusion*

A document drawn up 14 years before Gordon’s death can hardly resolve the debates about his final decisions and days. Nonetheless, this document suggests Gordon’s detachment from his VOC peers at the Cape, and from any Dutch or British claims to his allegiance. If he was hostile to the notion of a French-style independent colony at the Cape, it may have been from his hostility to the brutality of the frontier farmers on the one hand and the political indifference of the city burghers on the other, rather than from opposition to the ideals of the Enlightenment. When he seemed detached, in his final days, from military affairs and resisting the British, he may very well have thought, “I told you so,” given that he had predicted the weak points of the defence so accurately.

This document also fits into a larger picture of South African literature and culture where it was the military men and naturalists who provided a more disinterested, detached view, not only of the battles between European powers at the Cape, but of the battles between settlers and indigenous people, and provide an alternative to a literature and culture founded in settler self-interest.<sup>15</sup> Gordon’s writing scarcely provides a comforting national myth of origins, but it, along with Le Vaillant’s accounts, and the first South African novel *Makanna*, takes a larger geopolitical view of the Cape that is worth remembering.

And, if we want to consider writing about Africa more generally, Gordon’s memoir shows that Joseph Conrad’s Marlow was not the first company man who was also an outsider revealing the discrepancies between European rhetoric and local realities.

---

<sup>14</sup>Andrew B. Smith, “The French Period at the Cape, 1781-1783: A Report on Excavations at Conway Redoubt, Constantianek,” *Military History Journal* 5, 3 (1981); Andrew Smith, 12 November 2016.

<sup>15</sup>Glenn, “Eighteenth-Century Natural History, Travel Writing and South African Literary Historiography.”

## *Appendix*

A Memoir on the Defence of the Cape of Good Hope. 15th of September 1781. By Mr Gordon, the Colonel commanding the Dutch troops at the Cape.

The Cape of Good Hope is the granary of Mauritius and of Ceylon. It is the store house for the Molucca Islands and the only good stopping place to be found in crossing from Europe to India and from India to Europe. The English have not stopped coming to the Cape for a hundred years. They are compelled to be there, feared there and even missed there. They have many links of family and of interests. They have been allowed to sound all the bays, the whole coast, and to take away the plans. They are perfectly aware that the acquisition of the Cape would assure them their position in India and make it impossible for all the European powers to trouble them there. It is thus natural to believe that a nation that is so enterprising and clear about its interests, that supports with such opinionated strength the war against the Americans, France, and Spain, to keep certain provinces that have never brought them even in the most abundant years enough to cover the expenses of the administration of these places, it is thus I say normal and reasonable to believe that this nation which takes almost 80,000,000 a year from India will look to take itself a highway which puts out of reach of others this precious source of wealth. This highway we repeat is the Cape of Good Hope. Without the Cape, Mauritius must necessarily fall, without the Cape the Dutch can hardly hope to keep the Molucca islands. We are not saying anything new, but we cannot see without astonishment and without pain the few precautions that are taken, and the kind of inconceivable indifference that the heads of this colony seem to take to safeguard such an important possession. The attitude of the inhabitants is less surprising. The farmers are sure to sell the product of their land to the victorious power whatever that may be. The inhabitants of the Cape have no patriotic feelings. They are almost all strangers to Holland. They care nothing about the fate of the Cape other than their fear of having a few windows broken during an attack or of losing a few pieces of furniture. Besides that, they almost all wish to be under English domination. The insolence and the unpunished arrogance with which the British nation has always behaved in the Cape would have excited the indignation of any other nation. But the inhabitants of the Cape, accustomed from childhood to these humiliations and separating their interests



from those of the company, only care about the advantages of being able to sell and to buy. They regard the English as superior beings. They calculate that under British domination they would enjoy many more privileges, that their commerce, hampered by the rules that the Dutch company imposes on them, would be more active and more widespread. Finally in wartime, they would be more efficiently protected than they are at present by the Dutch company which seems to have forgotten them. According to these calculations which are quite reasonable given the feebleness of the government and the few means that they use, it is not surprising to see the inhabitants call the British to take over the Cape and one cannot doubt that they would do so as soon as circumstances permit it.

The Governor of the Cape, nonetheless, has in his hands the means of frustrating the project of his enemies.

He only has three points to safeguard: False Bay, Hout Bay, and Table Bay. We don't count the Anchorage behind Cape Town, between Lion's Head and Table Mountain, because that spot belongs to the defence of Table Bay and is included in that. We don't mention Saldanha Bay either because the enemy after three or four months of a crossing would certainly not want to lose sight of its fleet to undertake a march of a week in a landscape that is arid and difficult, where they would find neither water nor food and where they would encounter obstacles at each step. Let us thus limit ourselves to the three points of False Bay, Hout Bay and Table Bay.

To stop the enemy anchoring at Simon's Town, part of False Bay, to collect water there, and to seize our stores, we should build a fort there, or a kind of Battery to the right of the Government looking at the sea and on the heights where a White House is situated, but as time is precious, and as one can neither guess or foresee the moment of attack we should act more urgently, and dream of impeding the enemy in any attempt to get out of the valley leading towards Cape Town. The small cannons placed at regular distances in the valley which ends at Simon's Town from Muizenberg in no way accomplish this. These little batteries done in haste and with no solidity can only shoot about 40 or 50 toises in a direct line and to avoid or go around them one would only need a detachment of about 30 men who could march halfway up the mountain or even the length of the shore without being exposed to the cannons at all, cannons that could be placed far more usefully elsewhere.

The Hottentots that they propose throwing into the gorge could kill or wound a few men but that's all the service that one could reasonably expect from them and we should not fool ourselves that a few riflemen fleeing from rock to rock could stop the march of a column.

We think that to put a real obstacle to the enemy that we have to construct a kind of fort at Muizenberg and not an open battery. This fort could fire on the beach of Muizenberg where the enemy might try to land even though the fire on it would be very strong. Such a fort would absolutely prevent any progress through the valley that leads from Simon's Town to the Cape. This fort should be solidly constructed, with a wide and deep moat, tiger pits, or wells in a five star shape. The parapet should be very thick and in the interior one should construct a shed for the garrison, and underground storage place for the powder, and a store for rations. This fort defended by 100 white troops and as many Hottentots could hold out for a week or even longer against disembarking troops. These troops would be reduced to digging a trench in a terrain of rocks and sand without any horses or carts to pull their artillery and their munitions. If the enemy tried to leave this fort behind them, they would lose their communication with the fleet on which they depend for their rations and their munitions and they would be exposed to a complete loss in the case of a setback because they would no longer be able to get back to the vessels.

The French troops offer to build this fort in a short time if one would give them the use of black servants and of tools. It is shameful that the company Blacks are busy pulling up weeds, whitewashing walls and doing other useless work when their arms could be used for the good of the colony.