

FRENCH WRITING IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Introduction

Direct contact between France and the southern tip of Africa goes back more than four hundred years, and this article aims, by way of a general overview, to give some indication of the extent and nature of French writing in Southern Africa. This is not to suggest or foster any kind of cultural segregationism within the study of South African literature, but simply to serve as an introduction to one of the many semiotic practices in this field of study.

There is enough historical evidence to indicate that, as early as 1503, three French merchants from Normandy rounded the Cape on their way to India (Strangman, 1936:1). This was achieved only 15 years after the Portuguese and more than 60 years before the English and the Dutch, but these travellers left no written account of their impressions of the Cape. Although several references to the Cape are found in French logbooks of the subsequent 100 years, the first account of some substance, (which I also take to be the first French writing on South Africa as such), is given by general Augustin de Beaulieu who stayed at Table Bay for a month on his way to India in 1620, and again on his return in 1622. Although some of the French visitors came to South Africa with the intention to stay, (such as the Huguenots and the missionaries), the greater majority were passers-by, and their writing reflects this status. They were early travellers, scientists, hunters, explorers, shipwrecked sailors, and during the Anglo-Boer war, volunteers, whose stay in South Africa varied from a few days to a couple of years. The transition to the twentieth century however, signals a definite change in French interest (and writing) in South Africa: Where anglophobia and the claim of shared Huguenot ancestry had previously offered some common ground with the Dutch colonizers, the attraction of Africa as a hunter and adventurer's paradise faded with the socio-political changes of the twentieth century.

What follows is a brief chronological survey of some French writing to be considered within the context of South African literature, namely **travel writing** of the 17th and 18th centuries, (i.e. relatively brief accounts by traders, scientists, diplomats, shipwrecked sailors),

literary contributions by individuals such as Boniface, the writing of the missionaries, the extensive accounts of 19th century hunter-explorers, as well as Boer War writing.

Travel writing

A post-colonial reading of the early writing by French travellers clearly reveals the way in which the unfamiliar was 'othered' or reduced to silence in the text. Not only are the hunter-gatherers they encountered de-individualised by sweeping generalisations often repeated almost verbatim from one traveller's account to the next, but the visitors clearly only saw what they 'knew', or what their frame of reference had taught them to expect. This is strikingly confirmed by the elaborate engravings which often accompany the texts, (cf Tachard, 1688:74 and 75), where the Khoisan for example are depicted in the classic pose of Greek sculptures, (as was the trend during the Neo-Classical period of art in Europe at the time), thereby clearly illustrating the application of an unchallenged mind-set to all they encountered.

Close analysis and comparison of texts however also reveal a gradual change in attitude and perspective, such as the difference in accounts dating from before and after the French Revolution. By 1789 the Rousseauiste notion of the 'noble savage' was approximately thirty years old, and the stress placed by the early travellers on the Khoikhoi's so-called idleness, lack of hygiene and their 'offensive' eating habits gradually make way for the lyrical accounts which characterize the 19th century writings of Le Vaillant and Delegorgue.

One of the most substantial early accounts is that of Etienne de Flacourt, director-general of the *Compagnie française*, who dropped anchor in Saldanha Bay in October 1648 and again in March, 1655. He comments on the magnificent birdlife of the area, and like De Beaulieu before him, describes the Khoikhoi he encountered and to whom he proceeded to give religious instruction. He writes:

Monsieur Nacquard and I tried to explain to them something about the nature of God. We showed them the way to pray and how we looked upwards, when on our knees. They all marvelled at it and one aged man intimated to us that he was old, that he would soon die, and that he was not without some fear of death. That, at least, is what he seemed to say (De Flacourt, 1661:247).

This encounter between people from totally different cultures led to no satisfactory conclusion, as is evident from the following anecdote:

I asked them for two boys to come with me. I said I would make them brave and that I would bring them back. They would not listen to the suggestion. In order to interest them I showed them our two Madagascar negroes in their uniforms and wearing their swords. They only laughed at them, or perhaps they did not understand what we said (De Flacourt, 1661:562).

The then well-known diamond-expert and dealer of precious stones, Jean Tavernier, made three trips to India more or less at the same time as De Flacourt, and also stayed over at the Cape. An account of these travels published in Paris in 1676, entitled *Les Six Voyages de Jean Tavernier* contains seven pages describing the Khoikhoi. He is the first to comment on their remarkable knowledge of medicinal plants and herbs, and tells of 19 French sailors suffering from festering sores on their legs who were completely cured within 2 weeks of treatment (1679:562). He also refers to the medicinal use of the so-called 'snake stone' in the treatment of poisonous snake-bites, and claims it to be of Oriental origin (Forbes, 1965:321-322).

Although the French never founded a colony as such in Southern Africa they nevertheless occupied and annexed Saldanha Bay for a short period in 1666 (cf De Rennefort, 1710:306). The commander of this expedition, Monsieur Montevergue, was entertained at Table Bay by the Dutch commander Van Quaelberg, who was not informed about the annexation and who unwittingly and in all innocence gave a banquet at the Fort in honour of the French visitors. This was a lavish affair, during which the Fort's canons were fired for the first time, shattering every existing windowpane (De Rennefort, 1710:302-303). Once discovered, the beacon marking the annexation was removed by the Dutch, and nothing more came of this first and only attempt by the French to annex Saldanha Bay (Burman and Levin, 1974:34).

Louis XIV's decision in 1685 to establish diplomatic relations with the Siamese emperor resulted in a major source of 17th century French writing in South Africa. A number of the French delegations who stayed over at the Cape on their way to the East and back, wrote and published accounts of their stay. The delegation of Guy Tachard and the six Jesuit priests who accompanied him is one such example. As astronomers, they were granted permission by Van der Stel and Van Rheece in 1685 to set up an observatory in the Company Gardens (Tachard, 1687:73-74). Besides this scientific work Tachard also wrote extensively on the land and the people and had two works published in Paris. The following quote concerning the Khoikhoi, probably meant condescendingly, nevertheless suggests a shift in the earlier travellers' seeming incapacity to see beyond the European concept of 'idleness':

These people, convinced that there is no other sort of life worth living, only do what is strictly necessary to secure a gentle existence for themselves. According to them, even to such as are in service to earn a little bread, tobacco and brandy, the Dutch are slaves who cultivate the lands which really belong to them, and faint-hearted folk who take shelter from their enemies in forts and houses. They, on the contrary, fearlessly set up their encampments wherever they will, and disdain to plough the land. They maintain that this manner of life denotes that they are the owners of the country and the happiest of men, since they alone live in peace and freedom, and in that, they say, their happiness consists (Tachard, 1687:72).

L'abbé de Choisy, deputy ambassador to Siam, was the author of *Journal de Voyage de Siam* (Paris, 1687), a diary covering the events of his voyage to the East, with an entry made every day. While at the Cape he gave a fine description of the Company Gardens, clearly exposing his Eurocentric vision of all things encountered by commenting on how beautifully it would go in a corner of Versailles... (1687:70). Clearly a gourmet, he enthuses about the abundance encountered at the tables of the Dutch:

I doubt if anywhere in the world there is a better country to live in than the Cape of Good Hope. Everywhere there is excellent beef, mutton, poultry. The game is delicious. Of three kinds of partridges, white, red and grey, there are some as big as fattened chickens. They haven't the flavour of Auvergne partridges, but their meat is short, white and tender, and they are as tasty at least as Hazel-hens. The roe-buck, lambs and turtledoves are very good. I am mentioning only the ones that we have ourselves eaten. All the meats of Europe are found there in abundance besides an infinity of others that you do not know. And the surprising thing is that, in addition to all these creatures, the land teems with deer, wild boars, tigers, leopards, lions, elephants, wild asses, wild dogs without tails and ears which hunt in packs. The wine of the country is white, quite pleasant, has no taste of the soil, and is somewhat like 'genetin'. It improves with each vintage (1687:72).

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, in 1687, the new ambassador to Siam, Simon de la Loubère, also gave a report of his stay at the Cape. Published as *Royaume de Siam* in Paris in 1691, he explained the origin of the word 'Hottentot' as follows:

They are called 'Hottentots' because when they dance they sing nothing but the word 'Hottentot'. They can be made to dance as much as one desires, because of their love for the brandy and tobacco given to them by foreigners: that is to say, they stamp, now with one foot, now with the other, as if treading grapes, and say continually and energetically 'hotantot hotantot', but in quite a low voice, as if they were out of breath or feared to awaken someone. (Translated by Raven-Hart, Part I, 1971:319).

Another important source of French writing of the 17th and 18th centuries is to be found in the accounts of shipwrecked Frenchmen who, after their ordeal, either managed to make their

way to the Cape or were picked up by passing ships and taken back to Europe. One such account is that of the French Protestant Guillaume Chenu de Chalezak, whose ship, after being attacked by pirates, had to drop anchor and take in fresh water on the Transkei coast, near the Umzimvubu river. Chenu and seven other crew members went ashore to search for fresh water and food. All except Chenu were attacked and killed by a group of Xhosas, whose chief took a liking to the young Frenchman, and with whom Chenu stayed for almost a year before he was picked up by a passing ship and taken back to Europe. On his return he wrote down all that had happened to him, at the same time giving a very detailed account of 17th century Xhosa tribal life. This manuscript, entitled *Voyage a la Coste des Caffres 1686-1689* was published in reworked form by N. Weiss in the *Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire du Protestantisme Français LXXX*, (1921:40-45; 97-107). It provides invaluable information on the Xhosa rites of circumcision and marriage, on the differing economic roles of men and women within the tribe, on their diet, their religion, their laws, warfare and their hunting techniques.

Equally little-known is the official declaration made in 1752 to the Secretary of the Political Council at the Cape by two French shipwrecked sailors who had made their way there from Algoa Bay on foot - a distance of more than 700 km. This unpublished manuscript (today in the Cape Archives, catalogue number M.P.4), recounts the incredible hardship and misfortune experienced by Jacques Thomas Perrot and François Rubion, the only two survivors of a group of nine French sailors from a ship called *Le Nécessaire*. They had been sent ashore by their captain to get fresh water, but their rowing boat was smashed on the rocks, leaving them stranded. In the manuscript a vivid description is given of the many geographical obstacles they had to overcome, and of the way in which they were driven by constant hunger and fear. One of their comrades fell from a cliff in an epileptic fit, and another died after eating a dead fish (referred to as 'crapaud de mer' in the text) which they had found washed up on a beach. According to the surviving eye-witnesses the victim's body immediately turned black, and another who had also eaten of the poisonous fish became so deranged that he scared wild animals away with his terrible howling. The two survivors eventually individually came to the house of a certain Frederik Zeele who helped them reach the settlement at the Cape.

Numerous French scientists also left written testimonies of their stay at the Cape. Sent by the Académie des Sciences to do astrological research, Nicolas Louis Lacaille stayed at the

Cape from 1751 till 1753. His *Journal Historique du Voyage fait au Cap de Bonne-Espérance* (published in 1776) contains a wealth of cultural-historical material, revealing for example the Dutch community's incapacity to adapt to the land. He is struck by the colonists' preference for smoked or salted fish and meat in spite of the abundant supply of fresh fish and meat available in the area, and describes formal banquets where the main course would invariably be dry and yellowed 'stocfich' and half putrified hams from Europe, garnished with rancid yellow fat. Fresh meat would also be served, he says, but only to make the tables seem more heavily laden with food, and would generally go untouched.

A critical account of late 18th century conditions at the Cape is given by Joseph O'Hier Degrandpré in his *Le Voyage à la Côte Occidentale d'Afrique fait dans les années 1786-1787*. Degrandpré was a slave-trader who, after disembarking at Mauritius with slaves infected with small-pox, caused an epidemic on the island from which 4000 people died. A price was consequently put on his head by the authorities, and he went into hiding and spent ten months at the Cape in 1793. Obviously not much of a humanist himself, Degrandpré nevertheless comments on the way in which the Bushmen were hunted down 'like vermin' by the Dutch colonists, and how the Cape government chose to turn a blind eye to the matter (1801:108-123).

Another French scientist, the botanist Jacques Julien Houten de la Billardière, also gives a detailed account of his stay at the Cape in 1792. He tells, among other things, of a slave-trader's ship on its way from Mozambique to America, with 400 slaves on board, huddled into three small holds, most of them suffering from scurvy. According to De la Billardière they had come from a region where dogs were highly valued, and where the trader often succeeded in exchanging a good dog for two or three potential slaves ... (De la Billardière, 1799:78-79). Somewhat prudishly he comments on the love of luxury of the Dutch ladies at the Cape, adding that they go to as much trouble to be as fashionable as those in Europe. It is true that the Cape at this time had become a centre of international commerce. In fact, it was known as 'Le petit Paris' when, from 1781-1783, a strong French garrison was established there for the duration of the American War of Independence, to protect the Dutch colony (an ally of France) from possible British annexation. A section of the barracks was even transformed into a theatre, where the French soldiers performed *Le mariage de Figaro* in 1783, (a year earlier than its première in Paris), as well as *Le Barbier de Séville*.

Literary contributions

It is interesting to note that French theatre persisted well into the 19th century, and Charles Etienne Boniface was an important figure in this regard.

He arrived at the Cape in 1807 as a writer, journalist, and actor for the French Theatrical Company. After its disbandment he became a leading figure in the two subsequent companies, namely *Honni soit qui mal y pense* and *Vlijt en Kunst*. He even wrote a play, called *L'Enragé* which was produced three times, and translated many others, e.g. Molière's *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, which was produced several times.

As journalist he was editor of *De Zuid-Afrikaan*, and also wrote poetry, such as *Ode à la paix*, a long tirade against Napoleon, which was published in the *Cape Town Gazette and African Advertiser* in 1814. He also produced an historical novel, based on the accounts of survivors of the French ship which sank in 1829 on the Transkei coast, entitled *Relation du Naufrage du Navire Français l'Eole sur la Côte de la Caffrerie en avril 1829*. The novel recounts the eight survivors' trek to the Cape, where they acquire a (fictitious) guide by the name of Mordant. Through him, (his name suggests 'the one who speaks biting'), Boniface gets to express his own criticism and grievances concerning the place and its people. In spite of this personal flavour the book offers a powerful social commentary of the time.

Reputed to be a difficult person to get on with, (his personal motto was *nemo me impune lacessit*), Boniface went to live with a slave woman after the death of his own wife in 1835, and had several children with her. Ostracised by the Cape community, he went to live in Natal in 1844, where he worked as a journalist for *De Mediator* with C. Moll as editor. The relationship was strained, and after one year Boniface resigned. In the following year (1846) he published a series of lampoons entitled *Bluettes Franco-Nataliennes* in the *Natal Witness*. These were aimed at Moll and his successor, Arthur Walker. Six of these *bluettes* have survived, one in English, the rest in French. Mostly composed in verse, they were modelled on the fables of Aesop and La Fontaine. In each one of them the villain is clearly recognisable as Moll or Walker, with Boniface portrayed as innocent and long-suffering victim. It seems significant that lampoons were published *in French* in a Natal newspaper as recently as the mid-19th century, the implication being that a sufficient number of readers still knew the language.

In an attempt to earn a living Boniface gave lessons in French, dance, music and fencing, (the latter being advertised as 'the art of fighting in elegant style and killing à la française...').

Totally impoverished and isolated he composed and carved a sad, bitter sonnet in French onto a tree trunk in Albert Park, which can today be seen in the Voortrekker museum in Pietermaritzburg. Boniface committed suicide in 1853.

The writing of the missionaries

The writing of the French missionaries who came to Southern Africa contains a wealth of cultural-historical material. The French Catholics had great difficulty in gaining a foothold, as the Dutch East India company, being of Protestant denomination, did not employ Catholics or even permit Catholics to settle in the colony. In 1685 however, the already mentioned Guy Tachard signalled the presence of some Catholics at Table Bay. They were either slaves or European travellers who came to see the French priest and his Jesuit companions in the dead of night so as not to raise the suspicion of the authorities (Tachard, 1687:85-87). Only in the second half of the 19th century does one find Catholic missionaries openly active in the field, namely in Zululand, and like the Protestants, in Lesotho. The writing of one such missionary, Father Gérard, stands out: his unpublished diary written around 1856, as well as the personal correspondence to his family give a detailed and sometimes very moving account of the hardships and difficulties he encountered.

The first Protestant missionaries came from the *Mission Evangelique de Paris* to Lesotho as early as 1829. Eugène Casalis' *Les Bassoutos ou 23 années au sud de L'Afrique* (Paris, 1922), and the abundantly illustrated works of Frédéric Christol, namely *Au sud de L'Afrique* (1879), *Les Bassoutos* (1898) and *L'Art dans l'Afrique* (1930), are examples of this major source of French writing in South Africa. Casalis claims to have gained the friendship of King Mosjwesjwe, and his book focuses on Basotho life and culture. He also provides an account of the people's transition from orality to literacy, as in the following extract where he describes how the King's aged father was shown how 'words can become visible'. One of the best readers was namely made to withdraw while Mosjwesjwe told the old man to:

think of something, and tell it to this white man; he will draw some marks on the sand, and you will see. The marks being made, the village scholar was called, and very soon made public the thoughts of his Sovereign; the latter, more than stupefied, covered his mouth with his hand, and looked from one to another of those present, as if to assure himself that he had not been transported to an ideal world (Casalis, 1959:83).

This was the time of the Mfecane, and because of severe political pressure and the advance of the whites from the south west, many forced migrations took place and poverty was rife. The ensuing cannibalism, (Ricard - 1992:4- calls it 'stress induced pathology'), is a persistent motif throughout the writing of the missionaries. I will not attempt any detailed analysis of it here, but its persistent presence throughout their writing certainly invites interpretation (cf for example Ricard's - 1992:1-8 - classification of the cannibal motif as either rhetorical, theological or political device in the text).

The writing of 19th century hunter-explorers

Dating from more or less the same period, the many reports of hunters and explorers constitute a significant contribution to French writing in South Africa. A major example would be the rather flamboyant account of seven years' hunting and travelling in Southern Africa by Adulphe Delegorgue, published in Paris in 1847, and entitled *Voyage dans L'Afrique Australe, notamment dans le Territoire du Natal*. The writing of this adventurer is particularly interesting as it incarnates the ambiguous attitude towards Africa which many Europeans of the day seemed to hold. A scientist by his own account - two bird species carry his name, namely *Columba* and *Coturnix Delegorguei* - , he was also a merciless hunter who indulged in butchering game on a wide scale: He shot more than a thousand animals of the larger species within a period of eight months, once shooting a giraffe for the sole purpose of mending a shoe, and two rhinoceros on one day to provide a meal for his nine helpers (1847:480).

His attitude to the people he encountered is equally ambiguous. True to the Jean-Jaques Rousseau 'noble savage' concept of his time, the physical as well as moral attributes of the Zulu-people are described in the most flattering and admiring terms. The Basotho however, are denigratingly referred to as 'the Jews of the black race' (1847:323) and his black assistants are beaten and kicked because, Delegorgue says, 'it is the only treatment they understand' (1847:344). The information he gives on the socio-political, cultural and military life of the Zulus is nevertheless outstanding, and permits the reader an intimate insight into the reign of King Panda, whom Delegorgue befriended.

From 1780 to 1785 the Frenchman François le Vaillant undertook two trips of 16 months each to the north and to the east of the settlement in the Cape. He had three major works published on his return, of which some parts are fictitious, as for example some embellished

hunting tales, and vague or confusing accounts of the actual route followed, often with placenames which cannot be traced. A flamboyant and colourful figure, his writing makes for entertaining reading, and his love-affair with the Khoikhoi woman he called Nerine is well documented.

Le Vaillant's work was published shortly before the French Revolution, and the French exploited to the full his praises of the 'noble savage' as well as his resentment and criticism of European civilisation. Because of his sympathy for the Khoisan and his fearless criticism of the Cape Dutch administration, he was upheld by *Le Moniteur*, (a newspaper siding with the revolutionaries), as a defender of the people against the abuse of power by the authorities. The work of Delegorgue and Le Vaillant dominate French travel accounts of the 19th century, but there are some far-fetched tales of hunting and exploring which should be mentioned, such as Melchior Bourbon's *Deux Années à Natal: Souvenirs d'un Voyageur* (Paris, 1850) and Victor Meunier's *Les Grandes Chasses* (Paris, 1877). Paul Deléage's anglophobic account of the death of the French Imperial Prince in Zululand in 1879 (*Trois Mois chez les Zoulous et les Derniers Jours du Prince Impérial*, (Paris, 1879) also comes to mind, as well as the numerous idealised accounts of the Boers (e.g. De Hogendorp in *Mes Premières Armes*, Den Haag, 1881).

Boer War Writing

These texts prepare the way for the kind of French writing found at the turn of the century, and particularly for the wealth of material pertaining to the Boer War such as the *Carnet de Campagne*, (Paris, 1902) by a French volunteer in the Anglo-Boer War, De Villebois-Mareuil, whose writings make a significant contribution to the military history of the period.

Less well known but nevertheless abundant in volume, is the great collection of pro-Boer poems written and distributed as pamphlets in France between 1899 and 1902, and which is currently housed in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris. There is also a (more limited) number of these pamphlets in the Johannesburg *Strange* Collection, and some are also published in an illustrated limited edition by Phillippe Deschamps, entitled *Livre d'Or du Transvaal* (Paris, 1901). These texts are overwhelmingly anglophobic in nature, but reveal a seemingly intimate knowledge of the Boer leaders and also of the way in which the war was unfolding. Printed on very thin and inexpensive paper, the poems were distributed or sold to the public for a maximum of 25 centimes, but due to their fragility many were lost, and

the Bibliothèque Nationale does not allow the handling or photocopying of those it holds in stock. It is interesting to note that many of these poems were set to music and must have been sung in public or used as songs in cafes and brasseries at the time of the war.

The cult of Paul Kruger took on monumental proportions, and as illustrated by the poem title *La Marseillaise des Boërs*, French solidarity with the Boer cause seems overwhelming. This can partly be explained by the fact that the French considered the latter to strive for the same ideals of Freedom, Brotherhood and Equality as incarnated by the French Revolution. (See for example Botrel in *Hardi les Boers...* and Alby in *Vivent les Boers*). However, Imperialist England being the common enemy of both the French and the tiny Boer republics appears to have been the strongest incentive to solidarity, and consequently very strong anglophobia is the unifying element in all the poems.

I hope to have illustrated the extent (or abundance) of French writing in South Africa. These texts give *some* idea of the way the country was experienced by one set of visitors, namely the French. What remains to be understood is how contact with these foreigners was perceived by the people of Africa, and how it was taken up in their oral tradition of the time.

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