

# Francois Levallant and the Mapping of Southern Africa

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## Introduction

This paper uses some early maps of South Africa to raise a number of historical and theoretical issues—about power over nature, about representations of travel, of the role of hunting and safari in the European consciousness, and about the use of multi-media in representations of travel and nature. In doing this, the paper addresses issues raised by historians of animals in maps (George, 1969, Stone and Aberdeen University African Studies Group, 1988) and by post-colonial critics of cartographic traditions, particularly those focusing on the links between cartography and power (Bell *et al.* 1995; Stone and Aberdeen University African Studies Group 1988; Stone and Aberdeen University African Studies Group 1994; Stone 1995; Carruthers 2003; Penn 1993; Gregory 1994). As Jane Carruthers suggests, we have important reasons to examine the origins of our environmental cartographic tradition:

Partly because of the political repositioning of South Africa within Africa, but also because of a distinct interest in matters spatial in the social sciences, African space and place are becoming significant in South African environmental history. The new concern with cartographical history and demarcation of space is an emerging theme in African environmental history and is likely to grow together with an increasing attention to the visual dimension in general (Carruthers 2006:809; notes removed).

This article will argue that an examination of the maps of French explorer François Levaillant and their influence complicates and enriches our understanding of colonial mapping and its relation to power, particularly royal power. It contends that a, if not the, primary link of map is to narrative and that the role of the map is more open, more intellectual, more pleasurable, than many critics allow.

## Exhibit A



The line on the map traces the exploratory voyage of French ornithologist and man of letters François Levaillant (born Vaillant, often written Le Vaillant) in the Cape in the early 1780s (Rookmaaker *et al.* 2004; Le Vaillant *et al.* 2007; Le Vaillant 1790). The map formed a significant part of his representation of his travels. (This map and the map of the second voyage to the Orange River can be found in the first volume of the Parliamentary volumes on Le Vaillant [Quinton *et al.* 1973:66-67; 112-113].)

The map stands alone as a conventional map of Southern Africa, with mountain ranges and rivers and towns and villages. But it starts doing more: it refers to local farms, and to the narrative of Levaillant's *Voyages*. The dots on the line refer to temporary camps described in his

travels. For example, a dot marks the spot of the ‘*Camp des Puces*’, the Camp of Fleas, where the expedition spent only enough time to get infested. Elsewhere the annotation refers to a ‘*Pays plein de Lions et de Tigres*’—an area full of lions and leopards. Elsewhere, the map refers to particular hunting expeditions described in his travels. When Levaillant came to write his Second Voyage, he was paid almost as much for the map as for the text, showing the extent to which the map had come to be seen as a major element of the narrative.

When Levaillant’s Travels were first published, they were a best-selling sensation across Europe, translated into nine languages and drawing admirers for a variety of reasons. Yet at the outset, one of the most important reviews, by Joseph de Guignes, the well known sinologist, in the influential *Journal des Scavans* (later *Journal des Savants*) sounded some critical notes in a generally favourable review (de Guignes 1790). The review was the very first item in the 1790 volume and so would have been difficult for any of the learned readers of the day to miss. After complaining that Le Vaillant’s title led one to believe that he had penetrated into Central Africa rather than the fairly well-explored Dutch settlements of the Western and Eastern Cape, de Guignes attacked the text for what he saw as a major omission:

*Le voyage que nous annonçons n’est point accompagné, qui étoit absolument nécessaire pour entendre l’Auteur & le suivre dans ces contrées inconnues, carte que nous aurions préféré à ces planches qu’il a fait graver* (de Guignes 1790:4).

The expedition that we are reviewing is not accompanied by any map, which was absolutely necessary to understand the author and follow him in these unknown countries, and which we would have preferred to the engravings he had made....

This review provides a suggestive narrative and logical link to the next map. It seems quite likely that the criticism in the *Journal des Savants* may have led to a request that M. le Vaillant should indeed provide a map that would not only set his travels into the context of previous exploration, but also offer a coherent inter-text with his narrative and visual account (de Guignes had also complained that the lack of chapters made the text less coherently organised that it should have been [1790:4].)

Perhaps then, in order to remedy the lack that De Guignes has pointed out, one admirer of the written account was fortunate enough to receive a present of a map inspired by the Travels. (What this also suggests is that Exhibit B preceded Exhibit A and that the commissioned map provided some of the impetus for the maps in the later volume, something needing further scholarly attention.)

## **Exhibit B**



This copy scarcely begins to do justice to the original, measuring in at about 9 ft by 6 ft (2.67 m x 1.83 m). Details about the artists and the construction are available on the Gallica web-site (<http://gallica.bnf.fr/scripts/Notice.php?O=07759098>). The geographical part of the map was designed by Perrier, the five inset drawings and the animals by Van-Leen and the birds by Reinold. The

fauna and flora were in ‘62 *papillons collés sur la carte spécimens de la faune et de la flore*’—62 specimens of fauna and flora stuck on loose-leaf. If one looks closely, one can see that the paper on which they were drawn does not always match the background exactly. The five ornamental insets were of camps in various African groups, one showing the intrepid hunter bedecked in a hat and his pet baboon Kees resting contemplatively next to a tree. (The map has been republished as an end-map in the 2004 Brenthurst edition [Rookmaaker *et al.* 2004].)

If this map looks fit for a king that is because it was made for one—for Louis XVI of France, in 1790. As many of you will no doubt have observed, the large ‘*cartouche*’ at the top has the King’s coat of arms. The map was ‘*dressée pour le Roi sur les observations de M. Le Vaillant par M. de Laborde, ancien premier valet de chambre du Roi, gouverneur du Louvre, l’un des Fermiers généraux de Sa Majesté*’—constructed for the King, on the observations of Mr Le Vaillant, by M. de Laborde, former first valet of the King’s chamber, governor of the Louvre, one of the Farmers-general of his majesty—and the king’s former banker. A contemporary account tells us that Louis XVI, a keen hunter, had enjoyed Le Vaillant’s highly popular *Voyages dans l’interieur*, and de Laborde no doubt thought that this lavish present might cheer up the embattled sovereign.

The sheer size of the map gives it a kind of embodied physicality that suggests it was intended for prominent display. Did Louis XVI drop some tactful hints to the Marquis de Laborde that he’d like a map that combined reminders of text and showed the extent of Levaillant’s travels and placed animals in their proper geographical location? Did Louis XVI gaze longingly at the map while the French Revolution swirled around outside?

## Seeing the Map

The map is in the *Service Hydrographique* of the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, in a specialised area for hanging extremely large and rare maps. On a visit, I—probably the first or one of the first South Africans ever to see the map—was allowed in, past 37 other precious and unique maps, to see a map which I had studied at a distance, as virtual or textual object.

In its physicality, the map is striking. Published maps give the appearance of certainty and perfection and precision. Here, the impression is of creativity, innovation, uncertainty, invention. Cracks on the surface, a small ink blot at one spot or one of the papillons coming slightly unstuck—all these pay tribute to the manufactured reality and improvisation here. Then there are the details that no reproduction is ever going to match completely. One can see the meticulous care with which the animal patches have been blended with their background on the map. There are tiny annotations referring to Levaillant's narrative. In the Saldanha Bay area, there is a minute note fixing Malgas Island as the spot on which the Danish sea captain was buried. The reference to the *Camp de Puces* is there and there are also numerous other references to the narrative.

For the purists of accuracy there is a great deal to complain about. Levaillant portrays himself as having gone much further east and north than in reality. The animals and birds and plants are by no means to scale and the elephant is Indian or Asian, not African. If we wanted to accuse Levaillant—or somebody involved with the map—of being obsequious to royalty, we could point to the flower that has been named the 'Sceptre of Louis XVI'. (We might, on the contrary, point to the place named for the 'Republic of Birds' if we wanted to see the map as keeping ideological-biological possibilities open.)

But to be a purist is to miss and ignore the obvious achievements of the map. It reproduces, in amazing detail, a bio-geography of the country, giving very accurate portrayals of most of the iconic mammals and many of the iconic birds of the country—often placed in areas where Levaillant encountered them. For anybody interested in commenting on Levaillant's voyage or bird or animal discoveries in any detail, the map is an indispensable reference and needs much more detailed work as inter-textual reference than this article can provide.

To understand just how good and how important it was, we need to place it in its tradition, and also understand something of the likely motivation of the mapmakers and the king himself.

## Media-Historical Importance

How original was this map done for Louis XVI and on what existing traditions did it draw? The decorative features on earlier maps of Africa may have included animals—typically lions, elephants and camels—but

there was nothing of this sophistication (George 1969:146). When human figures are added, they often belong to political commentary or allegory—figures being sold into slavery or engaged in cannibalism. A map by the De Leths from 1730 includes in the cartouche an illustration of a rowing boat with rowers and a standing figure shooting at a seal, but this realistic portrayal is unusual (Norwich 1993:62f).

There were, of course, earlier maps of Africa designed by leading French cartographers for royal consumption. In 1722, Guillaume De L'Isle produced a map for Louis XIV and in 1740 Jean Baptiste Nolin junior one for Louis XV (Garson 1998:65f). While these elegant maps included decorative cartouches, they lacked the many details that characterise Levaillant's map.

Similarly, though Dutch maps of the Cape done during the 1780s, a fairly intense period of mapmaking, have been neglected because most of them were removed to archival storage in Holland in 1791 (Koeman 1952:73, 77), none of them had this kind of specific detail. The maps of Duminy, a sea captain's accurate coastline, or of Friderici (Commemoration Committee 1952:55-58, Plates VII and VIII) may have been more accurate in some respects than Levaillant's, but they lacked the richness of belonging to a larger conceptual and narrative universe.

Levaillant's map only makes full sense when seen as a multi-media construction acting as addendum to Levaillant's *Voyages*. For example, Levaillant was one of the last people ever to see a Bloubok or Blue Antelope and one of his hunters killed one of the last ever recorded specimens near Swellendam. On the map, we can see the Bloubok placed in the correct place. We have the map, in other words, as an illustrated and more or less personally verified expansion on Levaillant's *Voyages*, which themselves are hugely important as multi-media representations of travel and African nature. This is not to say that the map covers Levaillant's travels perfectly accurately, or that he travelled to the full extent of the map, but the map does recall major encounters with animals and birds, while the insets refer to the lengthy descriptions of indigenous groups he met. We thus have one of the first maps ever to indicate wildlife distribution linked to a specific voyage.

We can also see that in crucial ways Levaillant's map overcame some of the weaknesses of earlier attempts to map animal distribution as noted by George (1969:42). She points out that the size of drawings on earlier maps relative to the scale of the map simply meant that the

drawings overwhelmed any attempt to portray distribution. Here, the large size of the map and the elegant miniaturisation of the wonderfully accurate inserted '*papillons*' meant that the map could serve as two purposes: as a miniature animal compendium, but also as an attempt, accurate at least for some of the areas Levaillant traversed, to portray distribution.

For Levaillant, travel is verified by his appeal to other sources of authenticity: the illustrations in the plates, which he repeatedly insists were done under his supervision and based on his drawings '*sur place*'. If readers did not believe a creature such as a giraffe existed, even if drawn, they could visit the King's zoo to see the specimen he had brought back from Africa. If they did not believe his account of birds, they could come and see the specimens.

In key ways, the gift to the King accepts this multi-media construction of the reality of the hunting-voyage and builds on it. Where Levaillant and his publishers placed the drawings in the original text as close to the relevant passage as possible—and often the text cross-references the illustration—the map takes this logic a step further by transposing the space of the journey across pages into the placement of events on a map. The hunting safari or voyage narrative is only complete when mixed with map, picture and text—the conventions that govern the *National Geographic* form to this day. In this form, the verisimilitude of the voyage is guaranteed and given form by the map and the drawing—or photograph.

What is also worth insisting on is that the map is a multi-media multi-handed construction, itself forming part of the reference text. The artists, working on those transportable butterflies, veritable hyper-texts to be placed, perhaps shifted, then stuck, suggest that multi-media is not a twenty-first century invention or idea. One of Marshall McLuhan's most fruitful aperçus is that new media take their content from old ones (McLuhan 1964:8) and this map incorporates lots of older conventions and material into a new and influential model.

Histories of maps do not address this influential development. Earlier maps of the Cape might show fixed elements like rivers, mountain ranges, and even farms, but the idea of the map as recording where animals were found—and shot—was new here. This novelty depends on the combination of several new technologies that change the way in which nature and travel could be recorded and represented. (Bialas's turgidly theoretical claim that Levaillant was simply interested



in marking his presence in the colonies by inscribing his name by writing it on the Heerenlogement rocks could not be more fatuous [Bialas 1997:45].) Levallant was personally heavily involved in the development of a new form of arsenic-based material for use in taxidermy to preserve animals (Rookmaaker *et al.* 2006:146-58), but he also benefited from better rifles, increased sophistication in map-making and the skills of the artists. These technologies combine to turn the hunting expedition from a killing for meat and skins into a scientific—and commercial—voyage of recording, discovering and preserving. The map becomes one way of cross-referencing to shot and preserved specimens or to bird books. Many of the vividly accurate portrayals of birds here pre-date their appearance in Levallant's later illustrated volumes on the birds of Africa.

The King comes to own the voyage or this unique version of it, as he ended up owning the giraffe. He put the giraffe on display and may very well have done the same with the map. He is the first major consumer of this hunting-voyage-as-text-as illustrated reality. A hundred years later, rulers of the European or American world would come to Africa to replicate the voyage and bring trophies home to be admired, decimating wildlife en passant. Now, thankfully, we have Discovery Channel and National Geographic and Animal Planet.

But there are some problems in this version, particularly as the map was, as far as we know, never displayed. What was Louis XVI's likely motivation in wanting the map, if we assume that his wishes were part of the process of construction? To answer this, we can look at revisionist historical work which tries to re-assess Louis XVI as a monarch with a particular education that was likely to have shaped his interest in maps and travel (Girault de Coursac 1995).

In short, Louis XVI was very much an educational child of his times, in many ways reared on Enlightenment and even Rousseauistic principles that involved a mix of manual and intellectual labour and, in particular, an interest in a range of languages and intellectual disciplines, including geography. A recent article points, in particular, to his love of the sea and interest in voyages (Zysberg 2002:60-65). On the scaffold, he is reported to have inquired if there were any news of the La Perouse expedition.

What we then have to add is that while the King might have been keen to rival the British in wanting to see French exploration and French influence expand, he was also intellectually and perhaps even

emotionally involved. Details like the Danish captain's tomb, if they were inspired by a hint that the King had found this passage particularly interesting, would suggest that it was the power and curiosity of the narrative, rather than a wish for an instrument of power, that was the driving force in the King's use of the map.

What this map suggests is that the motive for using maps, even by the most powerful, might always have been mixed and multiple and that the pleasure of imaginary travel, curiosity, wishful thinking and a wish to learn more probably weighed more heavily than any strategic interest.

If we were to see Levaillant's text as an instrument of malign power, then we would probably have to say that insofar as he provided the model for the hunting narrative, which was to be the dominant form of literary product from South Africa during the nineteenth century, then his narrative was a powerful influence, but the map, which remained unknown because of bad historical timing, can scarcely stand indicted of that (Glenn 2005:64-70).

## **Influence**

Levaillant's fate in Southern African culture, in which he is undoubtedly the single most important influence, is to have been imitated and systematically censored. Two maps, produced a few years later than Levaillant's, make the nature and extent of this double action comically clear.

Pisani's map (Norwich, 1993:78-79), probably one of the most fraudulent documents in a military archive anywhere, shows all sorts of details taken from Levaillant and it only makes sense when seen as based shamelessly on his repute and on his travels. In the upper right, the writing next to the shipwreck of the Grosvenor (at least 500 km out of place) reads: 'Former travellers arrived to this apels in service of the Grosvenor's people'. The former traveller who claimed to have tried to go the help of the survivors was Levaillant and his Voyages were often bound with accounts of the survivors of the Grosvenor (Glenn 1996:1-18).

## Exhibit C

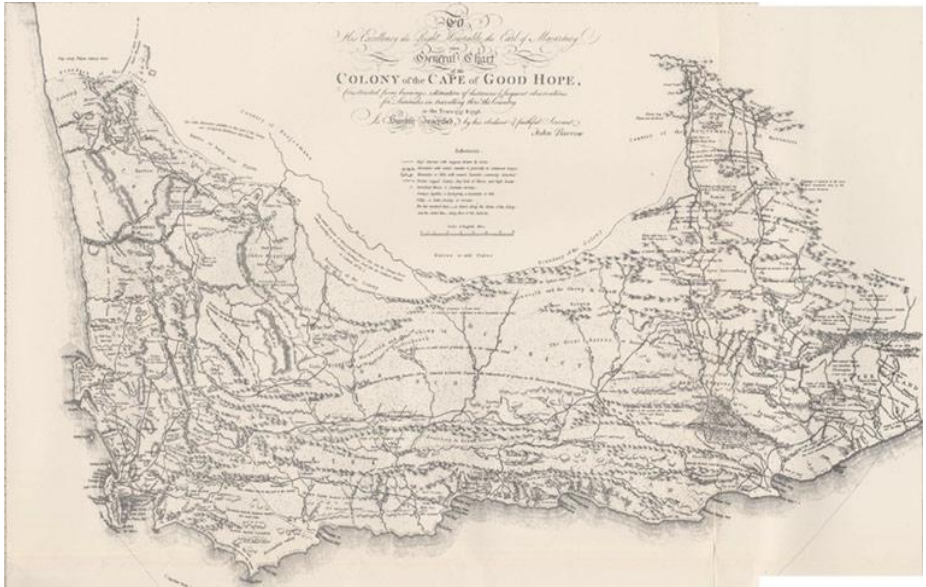


What we see too in Pisani's map is how influential the style of the King's map has been in a few years, though the map has none of the complex attempt to place animals and birds accurately into the landscape. What is surprising is that Pisani's map is in a book of historical maps of Southern Africa that makes no mention of Levallant—an omission that continues in the Stanford collection (Jacobson, 2004) based largely on the Norwich collection.

John Barrow is usually represented as the sober accurate land-surveyor compared to the flighty French voyager (Pratt 1992:90; Penn 1993:20-43). Yet when we look at Barrow's 1801 map, we see that it is full of unacknowledged traces of Levaillant.

Regions are marked by the game found on them in some cases, while elsewhere they are marked as good for corn or pasture. Already, it seems, we have moved to seeing the wild animals as a natural resource to be exploited. In two cases at least, Levallant is marked by absence. Where his Bloubok stood, Barrow notes simply: 'Blue antelope once in this part of the country'.

## Exhibit D



And, where Levaillant flirted with Narina, Barrow notes only: ‘Well watered plains once inhabited by the Ghonaquas, a race now extinct’ (Barrow 1806: map in frontispiece). That trace where the plains are still marked by the presence of someone who is extinct, suggests the power of Levaillant’s accounts and imaginative geography over his contemporaries and much of the nineteenth century.

## Conclusion

Levaillant’s map marks a key moment where the map changes our relation to a text. A map pushes us between various realities, out of any notion of the autonomous and autotelic literary text. The experience of reading changes as a result of a cross-referenced map and many of the eighteenth-century battles about the difference between fictional and non-fictional texts turn on maps, particularly a map that insists on a reality that trumps the fictional.

There is also a theoretical question at stake here. As many post-modern critics have observed, maps have undoubtedly been used as agents of imperial power, ways of dividing and ruling, of imposing various kinds

of fictitious order. What this map suggests is that the map always had other powers, even for kings: powers of imaginative transport, narrative supplement, discovery, and private spectacle.

I also want to suggest that the elements of a hugely influential multi-media genre that persists as a media staple today—the travel account or the *National Geographic* article—are in place here. And they came in part because Levaillant's account drew the eyes of the King and much of France irresistibly to look from Paris, not West, or East, not even in curiosity to where La Pérouse might be, but South.

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