

# Levaillant's Bird Books and the Origins of a Genre

Ian Glenn

## Abstract

François Levaillant (or Le Vaillant) has not had due recognition for his role in originating a new genre: the lavishly illustrated guide to the birds of a particular region. This article places Levaillant's role as formal innovator in historical context by showing how he drew on new technologies and influenced the form and content of ornithology. In particular, a comparison of Levaillant with Audubon suggests that Levaillant has been unjustly marginalised in the history of natural history and its forms.

**Keywords:** Levaillant; Audubon; Stresemann; Daudin; history of ornithology.

## Introduction

The latest huge Roberts VII includes 'A brief history of Southern African ornithology' that pays a typically back-handed tribute to François Levaillant: 'The first systematic collections of birds were made by François Levaillant in the early 1780s; some 20 years later he published his lavishly illustrated *Oiseaux d'Afrique*, but this work included several debatable renditions of local birds' (Hockey, Dean & Ryan 2005:10). A few sentences later, the authors add insult to injury by classifying Layard's 1867 *Birds of South Africa* as 'the first genuine African bird book' (10). This article will argue that this neglects how important a role Levaillant played, for South Africa

and internationally, as the creator of a new genre in naturalism—the bird book. What is undeniable is that Levaillant’s bird books look and feel much more like the current Roberts and other influential bird books since than Layard’s does, so that the editors are in the odd position of denying their own obvious generic genealogy. To prefer the Layard, an accurate and worthy compendium without any innovation or illustration, over Levaillant is to strip ornithology of its origin in excitement, adventure, wonder, and speculation.

This article adds to a critical re-evaluation of Levaillant’s legacy as the founder of South African ornithology (Rookmaaker, Mundy, Glenn & Spary 2004), a discovery given added importance by my tracing of the fate of his collection and its importance in the founding of the new bird collections in the Natural History Museum in Paris (Rookmaaker et al. 2004), and as a crucial figure in the history of bird preservation (Rookmaaker, Morris, Glenn, & Mundy 2006). Levaillant was far more than an ornithologist, as I have argued both in a critical edition and re-evaluation of his importance as early travel writer and social commentator (Le Vaillant, Glenn, Farlam, & Lauga Du Plessis 2007) and in articles on Levaillant’s important role as a creator of new narrative genres like the safari (Glenn 2005) and as originator of maps showing animal distribution (Glenn 2007). We could certainly argue that we do not yet have an adequate recent account of his aquarelles, which form a more substantial artistic record than most cultural historians have recorded (Quinton, Lewin Robinson & Sellicks 1973).

Media scholars have not yet produced an adequate history of the development of the media surrounding nature, from early nature writing to the Discovery Channel and Animal Planet (Glenn 2008). What this article argues is that Levaillant’s bird books, along with his other contributions, played a key role in these developments.

## **Levaillant as Ornithologist**

Levaillant’s formal developments rested on and preserved his genius as an ornithologist. In his magisterial account of the history of ornithology, Erwin Stresemann devotes his first chapter on a single ornithologist to Levaillant (Stresemann 1975). Stresemann (1975:97) writes that,

Levaillant was really an excellent observer of birds and an understanding interpreter of their behaviour, and in fact gifted as few others have been in communicating his ideas not only vividly but attractively.

Stresemann bases his tribute on a thorough knowledge of Levaillant's work, and he points out, for example, that Levaillant observed during his travels, 90 years before anybody else, that the Rosy-faced Lovebird (*Agapornis roseicollis*) nests in Sociable Weaver (*Philetairus socius*) nests (1975:97).

In the multi-author Brehm volume on Levaillant, Peter Mundy provides the fullest and most detailed account, since Sundevall, of Levaillant's achievements as an ornithologist. For Mundy, Levaillant's insights into the behaviour of shrikes ('the raptors of the undergrowth'), his achievements in being the first ornithologist to note reverse sexual dimorphism in raptors, and his deep knowledge of bird behaviour make him the undoubted original and founding figure of South African ornithology (Rookmaaker et al 2004:163-450). Mundy also notes the curiosity that marked the restless inquirer and the experimental innovation in, for example, Levaillant keeping vultures alive to see how long they can go without food. What this suggests is that Levaillant's errors or deliberate deception (and a consideration of this issue is beyond the scope of this article) have prevented him from getting his due as an ornithologist.

## **Developing the Bird Book**

When Levaillant produced his bird books, he used technologies enabling qualities of reproduction never possible before:

Levaillant was in the forefront of those who used the new printing techniques being developed in Paris. His connection with flower artist and professor of iconography at the Muséum, Gérard Vanspaendonck, possibly indicates an early source of information from one who was known to be experimenting in this field. It is generally thought that these techniques were first used in one of Audebert's works, either in 1801 or in 1802. This in turn has led to the belief that Audebert, known inventor of new colour-printing

techniques, was responsible for the artistic supervision of the first part of Levaillant's *Oiseaux d'Afrique*. These first parts, however, appeared as early as 1796, clearly predating Audebert's own publications. One thing is certain: among the enthusiasts for these new methods, Levaillant was the first fully to exploit their possibilities. His works should therefore, at the very least, rank alongside those of Audebert in the history of superb natural history publication in France (Rookmaaker et al. 2004:131).

Levaillant was thus in crucial ways the originator of this new form that would in turn lead to the work of Audubon and others. The ability to have highly accurate colouring in plates meant that artists could portray bird plumage far more vividly than ever before.

In other ways, too, Levaillant was at once typical of his time but also a restless formal innovator. In producing his works in different format with different pricings and in exploring various possibilities of subscription and sales of fairly short sections at a time, he at once showed himself constrained by the costs of the new genre and able to find ways of benefiting from it.

## Descriptions

In his volumes, Levaillant strives to find new ways of representing nature, always insisting on the importance of fieldwork and observation in nature. One way in which he shaped the genre was by copying onto his illustrations something he had been more or less the first to put into practice with his mounted specimens—namely, the striking of a lifelike pose with the bird in its natural setting. At the time, his displays were seen as revolutionary because formerly birds had, for the most part, simply been placed flat in a case.

Here we see how closely Levaillant's innovations were linked to one another. Because he felt confident in the power of arsenic-based soap to preserve specimens, he did not have to keep them in closed boxes but could make the effort of mounting them in display. As he was one of the best taxidermists of his age, he could put the birds into striking poses, dramatising their effect. And he could then reach a public outside the museums through the illustrations. For Levaillant, the illustrations were also ways to show

information about bird behaviour by indicating typical prey. He portrays the Common Fiscal (*Lanius collaris*), for example, with an insect impaled on a thorn next to it. This innovation has been widely imitated by Audubon and others and here, too, the Roberts volume does not admit how much more it owes to Levaillant than to Layard. Their plates of cuckoos with caterpillars in the beak or other birds eating berries or perching in their natural habitat stand in a direct line from Levaillant.

Levaillant was also an innovator in many other ways that do not seem to have had due recognition. He is certainly one of the first authors to use musical annotation for bird song. (On the history of attempts to annotate bird song, see Trevor 1970). But his books also appealed to a generation of European ornithologists because of their vivid descriptions of bird behaviour. Sundevall, in what remains the most critical assessment of Levaillant, pays tribute to Levaillant's descriptions of the Secretary Bird (Sundevall 1865). Peter Mundy calls Levaillant a wordsmith because of his ability to seize on a telling quality, and these words—for example, Bateleur (*Terathopius ecaudatus*) is French for tight-rope walker, which brings to mind someone balancing with a pole from side to side, a motion that echoes the bird's characteristic flight motion; and Vocifer, from the Latin for voice, alludes to the African Fish-Eagle's (*Haliaeetus vocifer*) tendency, unique among the species worldwide, to throw their head back and 'yelp'—have remained in common usage or in the scientific names.

## **Influence of Levaillant**

Levaillant has inspired not only a new idea of scientific vocation as ornithologist-explorer, but has also helped the (then-new) impetus to produce avian classifications and compendiums of birds. While most ornithological treatises refer to Daudin's descriptions as the original for many South African species, Daudin himself dedicates his work to Levaillant and other travellers:

C'est aux amateurs d'Histoire Naturelles et aux Voyageurs que j'offre cet ouvrage sur l'Ornithologie: il contient l'exposé fidèle des principales recherches faites jusqu'à présent sur l'Histoire Naturelle des Oiseaux (1800: v).

It is to lovers of natural history and the travellers that I offer this work on ornithology. It contains the faithful account of the major research done till now on the natural history of birds.

Daudin, who was confined for much of his life to a wheel chair or bed, admired and was almost in awe of Levaillant, as can be seen in the echoing, in his own work, of Levaillant's titles and in the frequent, laudatory, and knowledgeable references to him. He produced accurate summaries of Levaillant which are, in truth, the most interesting parts of the work. Daudin, though he benefited from the scientific rule that Linnaean binomial terminology won the battle and that Levaillant, in sticking to Buffon's side of a scientific quarrel, lost naming rights on dozens of species, clearly saw himself as an admiring propagator of Levaillant's work and someone benefiting from his expertise and generosity.

In South Africa too, Sir Andrew Smith, explorer and first Director of the South African Museum, saw himself not as supplanting but as supplementing Levaillant (Smith & Macleay 1838). By the time of Layard, however, the founding genius had been supplanted by an accurate compendium. Levaillant's fraudulent specimens (which he may have produced but may also have been duped into believing were genuine) have enabled many later ornithologists to ignore his founding role.

While the response of the authors of Roberts is justifiable, albeit (I believe) erroneous, other historians of ornithology are guilty, at best, of simply omitting somebody who clearly was a far more influential figure than any of the authors they consider (Tate 1986) or, at worst, of revealing a strong streak of Anglo-Saxon suspicion about the French. In Walters' recent history, for example, we get a short description (Walters 2003:83-86) that includes the following stereotypes: For Walters, the 'flamboyant, charismatic, ladykiller' Levaillant was 'drunk with success' but then, according to him, suffered the all-too-likely consequence of the French addiction to women and drink and, 'living in an attic. . . . died in poverty'. Though this rumour has a long genealogy, and though Levaillant may have been short of cash at times, he never lived in an attic and at his death he left a substantial country estate at Lanoue near Sezanne. Despite these *ad hominem* attacks, even Walters (2003:86) admits that, '[i]n many ways, Levaillant was a man before his time'.

## **Levaillant and Audubon**

There are strong parallels between the lives and achievements of Levaillant and Audubon. Both were born outside of France (Levaillant in Surinam, Audubon in Haiti), both returned to France and were educated there, and both then moved between France and another country whose birds they would chronicle as fully as possible. Each benefited from his persona as a Rousseauistic child of nature to impress Europe with his observations: Levaillant named one of his sons after Rousseau and while he may have railed against the authority of the theorist at points, was clearly under his influence (Boisacq 1993; Glenn 2006); while Audubon chose the buckskin and long hair of native Americans to suggest his distance from stuffy academic science.

When the young Audubon was first inspired to record birds in the early 1800s and visited Paris, the inspiration for creating a national guide to birds can only have been Levaillant. Though most American commentators on, and biographers of, Audubon have neglected Levaillant and his importance as a source (Ford 1988; Rhodes 2004), more detailed work on Audubon's antecedents and the influences on him suggest that this connection deserves further investigation. In her work on Audubon's debts to earlier traditions of ornithological illustration, for example, Linda Partridge points out that Audubon had a copy of Levaillant's *Birds* in his library (Partridge 1996:297) and shows ways in which Audubon may have drawn on the earlier author, such as in his decision to try to portray life-size images. Recently, too, evidence has emerged that Audubon took over, without acknowledgement, observations from Levaillant on egg translocation in nightjars (Jackson 2007). Jackson's article is intriguing precisely because the claim that nightjars move their eggs in their beaks to another location if they know they have been handled, though plausible, is almost certainly mistaken. Yet we do not know how much of the correct information or observation in Audubon relied, without acknowledgement, on Levaillant. Nor is Audubon the only author guilty of claiming this (erroneous) observation as his or her own. The article in *Roberts VII* on the Fiery-necked Nightjar (*Caprimulgus pectoralis*) by Vernon and Dean claims that the female 'moves eggs up to 5m if disturbed on nest, but this probably rare' (Vernon & Dean 2005:265); the note (53, suppressed) for this claim directs us to Vernon's unpublished data (2005:266)! Literary and cultural scholars have grown used to Harold

Bloom's notion of the *Anxiety of Influence* whereby those poets following a major figure have to deny his (almost always his rather than her) influence even while manifesting it (Bloom 1973). It seems as though ornithologists sometimes have this anxiety, too.

Jackson's careful tracing of this influential error raises the prospect that more of Audubon's personal myth-making may have depended on Levaillant than his American biographers have recognised. Anybody coming to Audubon's biography after reading Levaillant will be struck by a series of parallels: Levaillant's pet monkey demolishes his collection while Audubon's monkey kills the pet parrot; Levaillant's ship is attacked by British privateers and Audubon's boarded by British privateers; Levaillant has a striking moment of erotic temptation from a forward Gonaqua maiden, but remains chaste, while Audubon's veiled lady offers what Christoph Irmscher calls his 'testosterone-powered potboiler with generous references to female nudity' where he similarly is tempted but remains chaste (Irmscher 1999:68).

Audubon's personal myth-making, from his role in creating the myth that he was the Dauphin of France to embellishments about his family and upbringing, were certainly far more dishonest than anything in Levaillant. As Alice Ford notes, an early 'life sketch [of Audubon] is marred by distortions, if not by so many as the later more prideful, self-conscious versions' (1998:117), yet it is striking how forgiving, if not simply hagiographical, recent biographies such as Richard Rhodes' are. Rhodes' sub-title, *The Making of an American*, suggests a crucial difference in the critical view and reception given to Levaillant, still seen as a foreign outsider, and to Audubon, forgiven and embraced because he settled.

If we leave out national myth-making, we have to conclude that Levaillant was in many ways the greater and more original figure. There is not much point in belittling Audubon to try to change our estimation of Levaillant or his place in South African ornithology, but it is certain that Audubon's errors have been genially forgiven and Levaillant's contributions tragically forgotten. As Robert Mengel notes:

Although the present author [John Chancellor] edges in the right direction, no major biographer seems to have grasped how relatively slight, considering his fame, was Audubon's contribution to the



factual, let alone interpretive, aspect of ornithology. His nearest analog Francois LeVaillant (1753-1824), also a charismatic, shared Audubon's penchant for exceeding truth; yet his calculated fabrications, guided by ecological perceptions more penetrating than Audubon's, are often closer to fact than the latter's flights of romantic fancy. And who remembers LeVaillant? (Mengel 1980:353).

Levaillant's importance in South African culture, whether as social observer, explorer, sexual romancer, cartographer, anthropologist, or critic of colonialism, can hardly be exaggerated. He is, in many ways, the unacknowledged founding figure of South African colonial culture (Glenn, 2005, Glenn, 2007, Le Vaillant et al., 2007, Rookmaaker et al., 2004). This article has argued further that Levaillant has been a prophet without honour in the country where he did the fieldwork that in many ways founded modern ornithology. South Africans should remember Levaillant and should claim for him the pride of place that Stresemann gave him—not only as ornithologist, but also as inventor of a new form of natural history.

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Centre for Film and Media Studies  
University of Cape Town  
[Ian.Glenn@uct.ac.za](mailto:Ian.Glenn@uct.ac.za)