TLS

Call that a tail?

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FRANÇOIS LEVAILLANT AND THE BIRDS OF AFRICA

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Brooke Bond did not do much for the Bateleur. For any small boy collecting tea cards in 1961 there was a mostly backside view of this, the grumpiest eagle in the then so desirable Tropical Bird series, bulging-eyed, brutal-beaked and bristling with black and orange resentment. The Bateleur was also Number One in the pack. It set a certain tone. Afterwards came the no less mean-looking tree-climber, the Levaillant's Barbet, again with its back to the artist, tail feathers spread in an inverted V-sign – or so it seemed. And later the African Sea Eagle which, while deigning to face its child captor, looked as though it might eat it too.

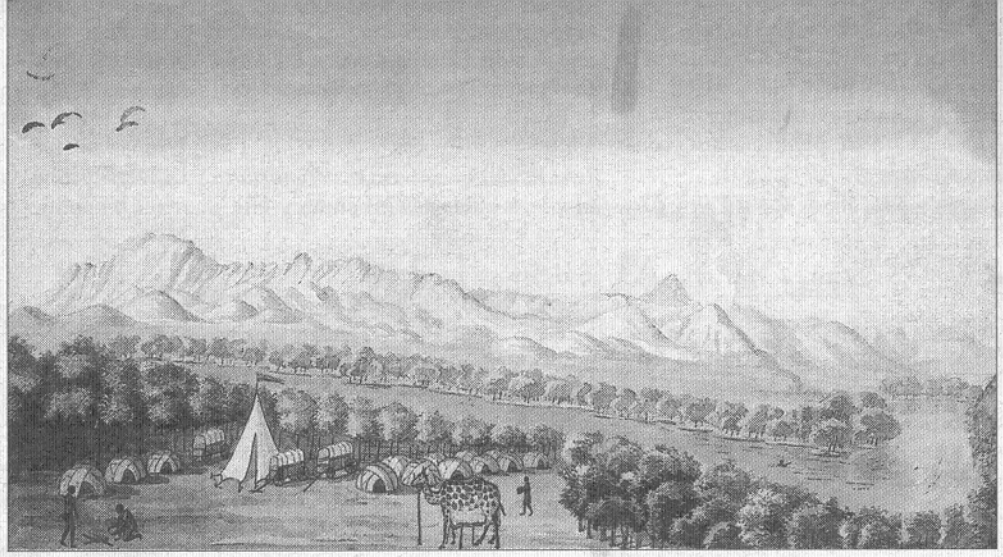
The Frenchman who gave the Bateleur its name and the Barbet his own name was an eighteenth-century explorer, naturalist and early recognizer of the commercial power of bird pictures. François Levaillant (1753–1824) saw his prey in a more submissive light than the creator of the tea cards. He arranged his subjects in surprised, almost plaintive, positions. But, across the centuries, he can still be recognized as a bird lover who motivated millions of other lovers of birds. Although he killed his subjects in the scientific and decorative spirit of his own time, he saw their behaviour too in the more empathizing spirit of ours.

The original editions of his books can be collected now only by those who have moved far beyond the free gifts from cigarettes or tea. With £100,000 one might make a modest start – which makes this latest volume from the Brenthurst Press of South Africa, priced at a mere £225 for the standard edition (£625 for the deluxe), almost a bargain. Within its heavy pages we can make vivid acquaintance with this maverick adventurer whose main works straddled the French Revolutionary years. Levaillant has long been seen as controversial, unorthodox, not above a little raffish deception (particularly about his Paris prison experiences during the Terror), occasionally deceived by showmen even more imaginative than himself: but his reputation has risen in the past fifty years and is ripe, the authors believe, for further rehabilitation.

This is Levaillant's own story – from the salons of the *ancien régime*, the training of an entrepreneur ornithologist in an age when birds were for hats, the journey to the Cape, the loss of shipmates (and, more importantly, specimens) in Europe's African naval wars. Then come the great African birds themselves – in the full-page plates with contemporary and modern commentaries which fill the book's final 280 pages. The writing team – a historian of science, an expert on vultures, a literary and a cultural critic – have created a spectacular volume to have and to hold.

Among the stranger subjects are birds which Levaillant could not have seen: Le Caffre, a vulturine black eagle whose expression almost gives away its mythical status, and L'Acoli, an indignant grey hybrid of Harrier and Goshawk, never before or since detected by anyone else. Also here are birds which he may have seen but not in the "interior of Africa", like L'engoulevent à queue fourchue, the fork-tailed nightjar or South American Great Potoo. Levaillant missed one of the many great wonders of the Great Potoo, being able to see through slit eyelids without opening one's eyes, a failure explicable perhaps by the limitations of looking too much at corpses. But there is also much that Levaillant did certainly see, the birds like his which draws attention to one of the most dramatic aspects of this bird, its sound, the conversational cries between mates, high treble for the male and contralto for the female. While the Swede Linnaeus was happy to stay in his museums putting taxonomic order on natural life, Levaillant tramped the banks of faraway rivers (or probably did) and had unsuitable liaisons with native Gonaqua maidens (almost certainly), one of whom, the fair Narina, became a heroine of one of his best-sellers and, accolade of accolades, had a bird named after her.

Like Marco Polo, Levaillant had critics who even dared to doubt whether he had been to his much-vaunted destinations at all: he misses many common birds which anyone on the Cape in the 1780s would have seen. But the authors here sift enough evidence to be sure, mostly sure, of where he travelled and when – a flat, oval, trek east from Cape Town, close to what is now known as the Garden Route, probably not further than the Great Fish River, and northwest as far as the Orange River. He may have exaggerated his role in the occasional leopard hunt: he may have worn silk knee britches with as much pleasure as desert kit; he was a showman artist and a free-booting scientist who would have approved of Brooke Bond cards, and even more so if he had



"The camp of the giraffe", from the book reviewed here

"bateleur", the juggler eagle, which he boasted he would "give to the whole of Europe".

The French name for the bird was Levaillant's invention, designed to represent what it looked like in flight, tilting its outstretched wings one way and another to maintain balance as though above it were a stream of coloured balls. The Bateleur has a distinctive short tail – which is maybe why the Brooke Bond artist took the back view. But it is most distinctive in its juggling wings or, as others have said, its tight-rope walking (though not in its similarity to rowing, a flat-footed error which entered the text books by a misreading of bateleur for batelier, the boatman).

A classic ornithological name war followed late into the nineteenth century, deploying doggerel Greek and Latin, praise for its wonderful-looking face as well as its aerodynamically challenged rear end. Should it be *ecaudatus* or *terathopius* or *helotarsus*? Levaillant would not have minded this argument at all. It was important, he thought, what birds were called. Description trumped classification – and successfully, in this case, for the Bateleur now graces many a tourist poster and postage stamp.

He called the Sea Eagle the "vocifer", a tag provided the artwork. He was a skilled taxidermist – but that was not the only way in which he reached under his subjects' skins.

François Levaillant saw early the problems of the European place in Africa; he saw living things under threat, sensed that they were threatened, painted them and arranged for others to paint them in that light. In addition to the querulous birds, the authors have assembled a mass of other memorable images – from a sketch of the shimmering "blue antelope" (now extinct) to a watercolour, assumed to be by the explorer himself, of a giraffe skin, stretched over a taxidermist's scaffold, while a military tent, three lines of native huts and the winding Orange River stretch out to the mountains behind.