

fierce, as it was today, that blotch hovered a few centimetres above the horizon as though it were liquid" ("Trains"). Even more memorably, there is the alcoholic father in "Joshua" who rides off on his bicycle "with the chain creaking, the blackened man who worked on the blackened trains."

And in "The Resurrection of Olive" – a tribute to the resident genius of Olive Schreiner in the landscape, not without irony – the great writer is a presence on Buffelskop, watching over renewed conflicts of race and conscience.

There are two stories of war – "My Cuban" and "My Afrikaner" – which are, perhaps, intended to balance each other in their intense focus upon identity and suffering. Here the note of hallucination and weariness typical of prolonged tension is immediately struck: "I have a Cuban on a leash. The loop is slung loosely over my left wrist, just the way they taught us at the SADF Dog and Horse School at Voortrekkerhoogte, where the red powdery

dust has been trodden flat." There is, too a strain of self-disgust – as if the immense and immensely dead pressure of history – which reveals what happened in the minds of a generation of Afrikaners forced into a combat that revolted them.

It is, perhaps, in a story less directly concerned with 'the conflict' – "Jan Spierewit" – that this revulsion is even more completely expressed: "'Where is South?' I ask. No one answers, they avoid me. They are weary, I can see that: women with shawls, men on disappointed crutches. The street stretches on endlessly. The gates to the houses hang rusted in disuse, the sidewalks are overgrown. There is no one in the fields. I walk a kilometre or so and sit down listlessly at the side of the road."

The physical and spiritual condition of the narrator – and his responses to the vainglorious but empty presence of an unnamed Leader and a violent incursion into the alien terrain of Angola – are in one sense pitiable. But I would

not wish to suggest that Van Heerden's imagery and position arise merely out of despondency and alienation; the genuinely successful stories – "Mad Dog", "Joshua", "My Cuban", "The Resurrection of Olive" – perfectly bridge the gap between the teller of tales around the fireside and modernism. They break free of the cliché not only of the Afrikaner – most grotesquely apparent in the cinema, with its sodden, brutal hulks opposed to shining revolutionary heroes – but also of the liberal idea of the Afrikaans writer as a combination of oppressor, victim and dissident, which fits few of the facts.

Van Heerden is an important writer because he fills the terrible emptiness of our physical and moral landscape with human figures drawn on human scale, preoccupied with the past, dreaming of the future, incapable of breaking free of the violence of the present. ■

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## GETTING HIS MEASURE

NIGEL PENN

*Robert Jacob Gordon 1743–1795:  
The Man and his Travels at the Cape,  
Patrick Cullinan (Struik Winchester, 1992)*

The eighteenth century seems to offer very little to engage the attention of the casual student of South African history. In school text books neither characters nor events enliven the featureless expanse of time between the demise of Willem Adriaan van der Stel and the onset of interminable and indistinguishable (except by number) frontier wars. It is as though the processes and people involved in the expansion of the Cape colony were somehow as void and boring as the Karoo is to the uninitiated eye. This is, needless to say, an impression based on the deficiencies of our historiography rather than on the realities of our past. The eighteenth century was the crucible of modern South Africa. During this period vast areas of the African interior either came under direct colonial control or became an object of knowledge for the expanding consciousness of the European mind. The ways in which the sub-continent became 'known' deserve serious consideration for they have shaped perceptions of reality in this country up until the present day. For this reason alone a study of Robert Jacob Gordon, "that paragon of the Age of the Enlightenment" (to quote his biographer), is most welcome. But, as will become clear, there are many other reasons to celebrate the publication of Patrick Cullinan's path-breaking book.

During the last three decades of the eighteenth century a number of energetic, enquiring and educated men journeyed deep into the somnolent obscurity of the Cape interior. Stimulated by the illuminative brilliance of the Enlightenment these journal-keeping travellers believed that by recording their observations in a spirit of scientific, empirical, rationality they would be adding greatly to the advancement of universal knowledge. They were all, to a greater or lesser extent, disciples of the Swedish natural-

ist, Carl Linne, or to give him his better known Latin name, Linnaeus. Their intellectual debt to Linnaeus was not only manifest in their enthusiastic botanising but also in their utilization of the master's methodological approach. Linnaeus' *Systema Naturae* (1735) had established a classification system whereby all plants, known or unknown, could be characterised according to their reproductive parts. This conceptual grid, which enabled order to appear out of chaos, became a paradigm for sciences other than botany. The idea that the productions of nature could be observed, measured, and placed within a global system of knowledge took hold and coincided with a new phase in the expansion of Europe.

Unfortunately, 'mapping' the world in the name of science was often the prelude to occupying it in the name of Empire. Information was valuable. Knowledge was power. The creators of systems of knowledge helped to capture reality in ways which were not always neutral. The seemingly innocent discourse of natural history did indeed 'naturalize' vast areas of the globe but it also reduced it, in the words of Foucault, to a system of visible variables whose values could be determined by their relationship to other parts of the system. This ostensibly objective process of representation masked the fact that the narratives of naturalists were ideological systems of great power and the double-edged nature of Enlightenment knowledge has to be recognized when studying the writings of eighteenth century Cape

travellers. It should be remembered that Gordon himself was one of these travellers and that his own life and work, though in many ways unique, is best appreciated in a comparative context.

Between 1777 and 1786 Gordon undertook a series of journeys into the Cape interior. This was not unique. Thunberg (1772–1775), Masson (1772–1774 and 1786–1795), Sparrman (1772 and 1775–1776) Paterson (1777–1779), Le Vaillant (1781–1784) and Barrow (1797–1799) all made extensive journeys within or beyond the colonial boundaries.

What was unique about Gordon was that he travelled further and more thoroughly than any of his contemporaries. As an employee of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) resident at the Cape he knew the colony more intimately than the other writers. His Dutch birth also provided him with insights unavailable to foreign visitors and his observations were consequently better informed. His cartographical productions were superior to all but Barrow's and his illustrations of unsurpassed value. Paradoxically, despite these virtues, Gordon was, until recently, the least well known of eighteenth century Cape travellers. How does one account for this obscurity?

The answer is that it was only in 1988, over two hundred years after they were first written, that Gordon's journals were finally published. The two volume edition brought out by the Brenthurst Press (edited by Peter Raper and Maurice Boucher) was magnificent and contained an excellent biographical introduction which did much to rescue Gordon from oblivion. It was, however, a very expensive production and it is unlikely that there were many outside the ranks of serious bibliophiles or specialist scholars who benefited from the newly available information. There was obviously place for a more accessible study of



Gordon which, without duplicating the journals, would convey to a wider audience something of the man's character and achievements. Such a work would have to combine biographical art with scholarly analysis and be written by someone who had spent years of sympathetic study on the Gordon manuscripts. The book has now been written, and by the ideal author.

Before Patrick Cullinan's major biography the outlines of Gordon's life had already been traced by authors like Vernon Forbes (*Pioneer Travellers in South Africa*, 1965), C J Barnard (*Archives Year Book for S.A. History*, 1950) and Maurice Boucher (1988).

Gordon was born in the Dutch province of Gelderland in 1743. His great-grandfather was a Scotsman from Aberdeen who had served as an officer of the Scots Brigade in the service of the Netherlands before the middle of the seventeenth century. Gordon's grandfather and father were both born in the Netherlands, distinguishing themselves, respectively, by their civil and military achievements.

In 1758 Gordon, like his father, accepted a commission in the Scots Brigade and attained the rank of captain in 1774. Despite his military calling in 1759 he enrolled at the University of Hardewijk, the institution from which Linnaeus had received his degree, where he doubtless gained some of his linguistic proficiency and skills as a natural scientist.

The foundations of Gordon's character were thus well set before he first visited the Cape in April 1773: both soldier and scholar, a loyal Dutchman but proud of his British heritage. No sooner had Gordon set foot at the Cape than he began to explore his surroundings, happily falling in with the Swedish botanist, Carl Peter Thunberg, and the Scottish plant collector, Francis Masson, as they botanized in the vicinity of the Peninsula.

It is probable that Gordon travelled even further inland at this stage for it is known that he undertook six protracted journeys into the interior of the colony, whereas only four travel manuscripts survive. Whatever the true details of his first stay at the Cape may be, it is beyond question that he fell in love with Africa, for, when he sailed home nearly ten months later in February 1774, he arranged to be transferred to the VOC's military branch at the Cape. In June 1777 he returned.

The information which Cullinan is able to add to this brief picture of Gordon's life before 1777 constitutes one of the most interesting sections of his book for he is able to trace the close connections which existed between Gordon and certain luminaries of the Enlightenment.

The most important of these, as far as Gordon was concerned, was J N S Allamand, professor of natural history at Leyden University. Gordon supplied this worthy scholar with a great deal of information which Allamand subsequently published, with due acknowledgements, in Buffon's monumental *Histoire Naturelle*. The two men were to continue their scientific collaboration in the future. Typically, Gordon did

not feel threatened by sharing his knowledge with others, but this modest generosity may have been one of the reasons his own work was never published separately during his lifetime. Another who benefited from Gordon's knowledge was the famous philosopher, Denis Diderot, who met Gordon in the Hague in 1774. It is fascinating to read how sensible and sympathetic Gordon's views on the Khoikhoi were (and on the subject of the "Hottentot apron" in particular), in marked contrast to the prevalent negative stereotype of the people whose name had already become a byword for depravity. Diderot was most favourably impressed by Gordon and subsequently wrote of the Khoikhoi in terms which approached the genre of "noble savagery".

Although Gordon did not go this far in his comments concerning the Khoikhoi it is important to note that of all eighteenth century writers on these people he was the most balanced in his appraisals. The fact that he could speak their language no doubt contributed to his understanding of Khoikhoi customs and throughout his journals there is an unforced acknowledgement of their humanity.

Gordon's journeys were made between 1777 and 1786. It is not the intention of this reviewer to follow the course of each of the lengthy expeditions. Suffice it to say that the journeys are Gordon's greatest achievement and a large part of Cullinan's book is concerned with explicating their story and significance.

The original journals are often utterly factual and laconic for Gordon, unlike other pioneer travellers, never published his observations. His writing thus lacks the embellishments and stylistic flourishes which enliven, for instance, Le Vaillant's travels. Nor does Gordon take pains to introduce himself as a narrator whose pleasant character and attributes are designed to win over his readers. There are times when the journals read like field-notes, and though they might gain in authenticity as a result it is, in many cases, a pleasure to have Patrick Cullinan to act as a guide for an extraordinary sympathy exists between him and his subject. He shows us the human being who is often obscured beneath the bland journal entries.

Gordon is usually extremely reticent about his motives for undertaking a specific course of action. His journals were not designed to explain himself to his readers or to enlarge upon his personal impressions. Modesty and soldierly self-denial peep through an austere, factual prose. Courage is taken for granted and hardship is seldom commented on. There are moments of emotion and enthusiasm (usually when a scientific objective is reached) as well as glimmers of humour. Most remarkable of all, however, is the ever present respect and genuine fondness of Gordon for the indigenous people of the Cape interior. These qualities distinguish Gordon from his contemporaries and suggest that the discourse of the Enlightenment did not always efface the humanity of those who were objects of observation.

In other respects, however, Gordon was a

typical Enlightenment man. Besides being a skilled artist he was also an adroit manipulator of the scientific instruments of his era and his obsession with measurement mark him as a true product of the Age of Reason.

With him on his travels went a quadrant, an astrolabe, a thermometer, a microscope, compasses and barometers. Indeed, the most tedious parts of his journal (though doubtless essential for his scientific and cartographic purposes) are the daily – sometimes thrice daily! – readings of latitude and longitude, of distance, bearing, temperature, wind direction and the height above sea level.

Throughout his journeys Gordon collected plant and animal specimens as well as a great deal of geographical, topographical and meteorological information. By meticulously recording the Khoikhoi, Xhosa or Tswana names for places or things Gordon often preserved from extinction the imprint of the indigenous people on the landscape. It is a sad irony, however, that it was Gordon who, with characteristic loyalty, replaced the name "Gariiep" (or Great River) with "Orange River".

Gordon's journeys did not occupy all his time or abilities and Cullinan adds substantially to our knowledge of his career as commander of the Cape garrison. Gordon succeeded to this post in 1780 and was promoted to the rank of colonel in 1782. He married Susanne Nicolet of Switzerland in 1780 and six sons and a daughter were born to them. Until 1795 Gordon's duties consisted mainly in preparing the weak Cape garrison for defence against a possible attack. Though Britain and the Netherlands found themselves at war between 1780 and 1783 the Cape was not attacked.

The major battles fought by Gordon during this period seemed to be to establish his precedence in command over visiting officers of Dutch, French or mercenary units. These squabbles, exacerbated by an unsympathetic Governor, were both enervating and time consuming.

It has to be confessed that Gordon does not emerge from these events with his reputation unsullied but Cullinan speculates that ill health, brought on by the rigours of his travels, was behind some of his uncharacteristic behaviour. All of this helps to explain why Gordon did not bring his journals to the state of publication but one should not underestimate his other accomplishments at this time. In 1793 he carried out tests which convinced the garrison that it was possible to fire heated shots from cannons and in 1789 he established southern Africa's first flock of pure bred Spanish merino sheep.

Cullinan is excellent in describing the divided loyalties and complex events which led to Gordon committing suicide on 25 October 1795. When the French Republic declared war on Britain and the Netherlands in 1793 it seemed as though there would be no contradiction between Gordon's Dutch and British allegiances. But when the Dutch capitulated in 1795 and the Netherlands came under the rule



of the pro-Republican Dutch Patriots the royalist in Gordon was in a quandary. William V, the Dutch Stadholder, fled to Britain and authorised a British takeover of the Cape in his name.

It was the unfortunate Gordon who was left with the impossible decision: to permit the pro-Orange British invasion of the Cape or to resist it in the name of the government of the Netherlands. In the end Gordon's compromise led to his death. He offered a token resistance and felt deeply shamed when his own troops demonstrated how they despised his actions. He was accused of treachery and the aloof condescension of the British conquerors showed that they did not regard Gordon as an ally. The ex-commander retired to his beautiful garden and put an end to both his moral dilemma and his humiliation with a bullet through his brains.

Thus ended the life of a remarkable man. The real tragedy was that his papers remained unpublished for so long. Had his journals been in circulation earlier generations of readers would have gained a far more favourable impression of the indigenous peoples of southern Africa and of the Enlightenment project as a whole. It is not the least of Cullinan's achievements to account for the non-publication of the Gordon papers. Some impressive detective work enabled him to follow their fate, from the hands of Gordon's widow in 1795 to their rediscovery in the Staffordshire Record Office in 1964. But the story only really ends happily in 1992 with the publication of the book under review and it is probably as well, in conclusion, to explain why this is such an exceptional publication.

It is, to begin with, that rarest of creations: a book which is – simultaneously – beautifully produced, copiously illustrated, meticulously researched and finely written. It is almost unique in being the biography of an eighteenth century South African (I challenge the reader to name a comparable study) and I would argue that, in Cullinan's pages, an historical era comes to life alongside the detailed, complex individual character of Gordon. It is both a masterly biography and, in the best sense of the word, popular history. By illuminating a previously obscure past Cullinan has enriched our present and Gordon, at last, can take his rightful place in history. ■

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## COLUMN

# LIONEL ABRAHAMS

## THE VERBAL ENVIRONMENT

When I arrived at Wits as a rather belated under-graduate in 1949, I started acquiring some new vocabulary, including new meaning for several old words. For example: *level, theme, context, suggest, imply, infer, connote, denote, objective, subjective, emotive, tone, archetype*... I took it for granted that the English Department's vision and terminology belonged to the canon of knowledge which it was the business of schools and universities to impart, and mine for the moment to get. Nevertheless, the new terms troubled me at first. My thrilling induction, a little earlier, into the world of literature at the hands of H C Bosman had been unorthodox, emphasising rather different values couched in different language. But if I was to profit by my studentship, I calculated that I must bend to the discipline of the academy, explore its categories, employ its instruments, despite my uneasiness.



So, by usage, I came to appreciate that most of those new terms *were* demonstrably instruments, with distinct and useful functions. That they might be the spawn of sheer fashion did not occur to me until fairly recently, when I read a contemptuous reference (by an editor of *The English Academy Review*, as it happens) to "the language of close reading" – *connote, suggest, level, emotive* and all that, eh? – as the paraphernalia of an outmoded and politically rather pernicious intellectual vogue! And there I had been, making a virtual equation between 'close reading' and honesty.

This makes me wonder whether many, possibly most, of us spend a deal of our thinking, speaking and writing time penned, unsuspectingly, in a 'language cell'. While each person's cell – having been erected out of odd slabs of language material from dif-

ferent areas of experience – has a large resemblance to many others, each is as personal to its inhabitant as his or her 'body language'. 'Body language' arises from our involvement with space, but one's 'language cell' mainly concerns one's place in time. It consists largely of one's vocabulary of vogue expressions, especially of those whose vogue-status one does not recognise. Thus, how we perceive reality may well be skewed by the language-cell chinks we squint through, and that distortion may go a long way in accounting for 'natural' sympathies and antipathies, understandings and misunderstandings between us – to say nothing of suspicions. In the main a bad state of affairs.

I don't know whether my own particular language cell is to blame, but over the years I have developed a quirky antipathy to most other people's vogueish expressions. They tend to discompose me and queer the trust I give to what is being said. Examples of my irritants are: *structure, impact, head up, privilege* and *foreground* as verbs, *structures* as a euphemism for 'bosses', *marginalise, contextualise, subtext, conscientise, white middle-class male-dominated, sexist, lifestyle, prioritise, pressurise, problem area, corporate culture, package deal, input, meet up/with, bottom line*, the way critics use *locate* and *site*, the way executives and politicians use *address*, the way enthusiasts use *into*... A casual sampling, but there ought to be some logic to it – and there isn't. Is it just that these usages have crept in late in 'my day'? Perhaps this defensive prejudice of mine against expressions many people are happy with indicates in me a degree of conservatism that is reactionary, or a shakiness of confidence that amounts to neurosis.

Or perhaps bits of shamefaced ignorance sometimes underlie my embarrassment vis-à-vis newish currency. I don't know, for instance, precisely what a *subtext* is, and may be quite wrong in suspecting that a perfectly good older expression for that idea exists in the language ('underlying meaning' probably forfeits precision, but there must be something...). And *signifier, signified* and co. have passed me by entirely. Going back, I recall that I never quite got a comfortable grip on T S Eliot's evidently indispensable coinages, *objective correlative* and *dissociation of sensibility* which were offered to me during English II or III. But this possibly suggests something less culpable yet more shaming than ignorance or curmudgeonly fear of change.

On the other hand, I have been on the



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## MYTH AND MAKE-BELIEVE

DAMON GALGUT

*Playland... and other words*, Athol Fugard  
(Witwatersrand University Press, 1992)

The 'other words' of the title comprise a number of brief pieces that come as an addition to Athol Fugard's newest play. The first is an introduction by Mannie Manim, who has worked with Fugard as producer and lighting designer since the late 1960s.

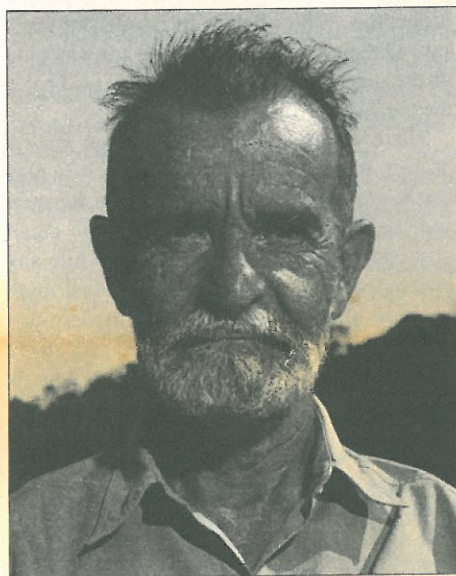
Then there are the transcripts of the playwright's address to graduates at the Arts Faculty Graduation Ceremony at the University of the Witwatersrand (March 1990) and a talk to students at Rhodes University (1991). The thoughts expressed in these are not particularly fresh or illuminating to anybody familiar with his *Notebooks*, but they are interesting enough and serve to contextualize the play itself.

Playland is the name of a travelling amusement park encamped on the outskirts of a Karoo town. Here, on New Year's Eve 1989, a black and a white man encounter each other by chance. The black man – Martinus Zoeloe – is the "night and day watchman" for Playland. The white man, Gideon le Roux, has returned (10 months before) from the border. The only other 'character' is an off-stage voice: that of 'Barking Barney' Barkhuizen, owner of and announcer for Playland.

The action is tight. The play is written in five scenes, two of which are really brief flashes of Playland in full swing, with lights, music and the disembodied voice of 'Barking Barney'. Only in the three remaining scenes is the focus on Martinus Zoeloe and Gideon le Roux. The setting is "the night-watchman's camp. A broken car from one of the rides with a square of canvas stretched over it to provide shelter from sun and rain, and a paraffin tin brazier." Here, on the literal and figurative edge of human settlement, a drama of deepening intensity is played out.

Since his return from the border, Gideon has been unable to function. He's come to Playland to usher in the New Year and "get things going again." While waiting for the amusement park to start up, he meets Martinus Zoeloe and they talk. Martinus is a Christian, holding forth with calm serenity on Hell and the Day of Judgement and the Ten Commandments. "Number Six," he says, "is the big one... 'Thou shalt not kill' ...Not even your enemy... If you steal something you can always give it back. If you tell a lie you can always tell the truth. But when you kill a man you take his life and you can't give

time the darkness between them erupts and they part in rage. But later again, after the New Year has arrived and Playland has closed for the night, he returns once more, this time to travel through that darkness:



FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY JAC DE VILLIERS

that back."

It is upon exactly this issue that the weight of the play rests, for both Gideon and Martinus have broken "number six". Prefacing the play is a photograph taken during the border war, which Fugard says was a "catalyst in the writing"; it shows a pit in the featureless bush into which two men are unloading a pile of naked black corpses from the back of a truck. Gideon le Roux has killed many black men on the border, but it was on just such a burial detail as the one depicted in the photograph that a sudden and searing understanding of what he was doing came to him; it was that understanding that caused his 'breakdown' and the ten months of nothing that have led up to this night. Martinus, too, has killed someone: a white man who raped his lover. For this he has spent fifteen years in prison.

The revelation of their separate pasts comes only well into the play. The first encounter of the two men takes place in the late afternoon and is pleasant but superficial. Later, however, fuelled by "brandy and desperation", Gideon returns to seek out the nightwatchman. This

MARTINUS: ...I tell you Playland is finished for tonight.

GIDEON: Fuck Playland! I'm talking about you and me. That's what it's all about now. You and me... There's things to settle between us...

MARTINUS: There is nothing between you and me.

But there is a great deal between them. Only when they have both made their mutual confessions does Martinus finally understand: "So that is it. That is why you keep coming back tonight. Forgiveness." Forgiveness – redemption for the past – is the central theme both of their lives and of the play. In the first scene the two men watch the sun go down redly over the Karoo and it looks to Martinus like "Hell Fires on the Day of Judgement"; this is the day of judgement for both of them. But God is not presiding. In the world of Fugard, which is the one we live in, judgement and forgiveness are not handed down from on high, but are human transactions made by human hearts. As Gideon says: "(God's) forgotten about us. It's me and you tonight. The whole world is me and you."

It's interesting that Fugard has chosen to locate his drama at a specific point in history. Although the passing of time has always been a strong concern in his work, nowhere else has he so definitely placed his characters against a day and a year: the end of 1989, and the dawn of 1990. There is a scene devoted to the arrival of the New Year: "voices singing, voices cheering, motor car hooters, sirens, fireworks... a cacophony that imperceptibly begins to suggest the sound of battle." 1990, of course, is a significant year in South Africa's history; it marks the advent of a new and critical era in which black and white have had to confront "the other" for the first time. Clearly, then, the confrontation of Gideon and Martinus is a much larger, allegorical one, and so is their quest for redemption. Certainly the themes of judgement and forgiveness are the salient ones of our time, as even a passing glance at the political stage will indicate. By setting the play at the moment he does – the edge of two