

## **ROBERT JACOB GORDON (1743-1795): EXPLORER, SOLDIER AND NATURALIST**

***BY ANDREW. B. SMITH***

Robert Jacob Gordon remains one of the least heralded of South Africa's early explorers. This is in part due to his journal not being edited and published until almost 200 years after his death, and possibly to his untimely demise by his own hand, which might have been unseemly within the mores of earlier generations. Gordon's contribution to the opening up of the hinterland to the European gaze thus only became public in 1988, at a time when the Europeans were being denigrated as colonists and exploiters of Africa's people and resources. In this modern post-colonial world it is no longer politically correct to look at Europeans as being important influences in Africa's history and heritage.

Gordon's importance in Africa's history, however, will not be diminished by the limitations of current history directions. His abilities to see South Africa's geography, natural history and people with a clear eye, unhindered by contemporary 18<sup>th</sup> century ideas and prejudices, is all too apparent to the reader of his journal, and can be seen in his critique of the writings of Anders Spaarman (Smith 1990).

The ostensible reason for Gordon's journeys into the interior has never been explicitly stated. However, the long letter written to his mentor in Holland, Griffier Hendrik Fagel, in 1779 (Smith & Pheiffer 1994), gives a detailed summary of the natural history, people and possible economic value of the places he visited. All this information is in keeping with the idea that he was really making observations of a military nature that could be used to hold the Cape against possible foreign intruders. This has been suggested by Forbes (1972:2) when he states that the worrying appearance of the British ship's company from the *Pigot*, on the coast of South Africa while they recovered from scurvy at St Francis Bay in May 1785: "...caused the Council of Policy to consider establishing military posts on the coast of the Eastern Cape, and it would have been Gordon's duty to investigate this matter". As Gordon was the head of the garrison at the Castle in Cape Town, it was presumably under this guise that he visited the Eastern Cape in 1786, probably as part of his "confidential mission" for the Dutch East India Company (Cullinan 1992:25).

It was during these trips that Gordon's clear vision of how the climate and environment operated was formed. He is the first person to state formally of the relationship between the south-east winds of the Cape, and rains up country. He was also able to recognize the role of humans in forming shell middens on the coast, and to ask himself about the difference between those shell accumulations, which might be human-derived, or natural, particularly those in the mountains, high above the modern coastline. Thus we see an inkling of an understanding of geology and geological processes at the same time James Hutton's ideas of uniformitarianism were being formed (1785), or long before Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830), which had such influence on Charles Darwin while he was on the *Beagle* when it visited the Cape in 1836.

Gordon met research scientists and philosophers when he was in Europe in 1774, before coming out to the Cape to assume his post at the Castle. Buffon, the author of *Histoire Naturelle* (1771) was indebted to Gordon for the giraffe, hippo and rhino skeletons he included in the Supplement (1781). Gordon's contact with European scholars allowed them to benefit from his experiences in South Africa. His meeting with Denis Diderot in 1774 was later played out in the philosopher's ideas on the Khoekhoen ("Hottentots"), that placed greater emphasis on them as capable and rational human beings, rather than the 'savage' image that was prevalent in the published literature of the time (Cullinan 1989).

Gordon's impact on European thought would no doubt have been far greater had he published his own journal and been fêted in his lifetime. With the power of time and history behind us we can see that in many ways he was ahead of his time. He was able to extrapolate ideas, and not allow the prejudices of others to colour his vision. His empirical observations were seen as an important database on which he could build a rational and scientific picture of South African climatology, natural history and cultural studies. In his letter to Fagel he suggests setting up reference points to measure changes in the environment that might be used to form "a firm judgement over a few hundred years".

He lived long before Anthropology existed as a science, but he would have relished in the idea of participant observation as the key to understanding other cultures. His observations on the Khoekhoen (Smith & Pfeiffer 1992) leave no doubt that he recognized their way of life as important, and just as valid as his own (although some of their beliefs he was a bit skeptical about). This was probably due to his realization that they were competent and rational in what they did, and, because they had been in Southern Africa long before the European colonists, he was willing to accept that their knowledge of the land and resources was more complete than that of the Dutch farmers (cf. Cullinan 1989).

### **Introduction to Gordon website**

The website was created to give scholars and interested public access to the raw data of Gordon's Journal. Since few people have the opportunity to travel to the Brenthurst Library in Johannesburg to view the original documents, we have here reproduced the first transcription of the original Dutch. We have also included Patrick Cullinan's translation of the Journal, which was produced from a photographic copy made while the diary was still in the Stafford County Library, U.K., before it was acquired by the Brenthurst Library in 1979. No attempt has been made at providing the reader with comments on places, people or events mentioned by Gordon. The reader should consult Raper & Boucher (1988) for this. Equally, to situate Gordon's Journal within its time-frame, the reader is encouraged to refer to Cullinan (1992) for a full biography.

Gordon drew, or had drawn, 456 sketches in full colour, which were meant to accompany his journal. Of these, 157 have appeared in various forms in Raper &

Boucher (1988), Cullinan (1992), Rookmaaker (1979) and Forbes (1965). The drawings are owned by the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, who retain full copyright for publication (see their web-site at [www.rijksmuseum.nl](http://www.rijksmuseum.nl)).

### **Acknowledgements**

We are very grateful to the Ernest Oppenheimer Memorial Trust for a grant to transcribe the journal into electronic form. Mrs. Marcelle Weiner, Librarian of the Brenthurst Library, was most helpful in giving access to the original journal in Johannesburg, and work in the library was facilitated by her always-helpful staff.

The plant drawings linked in this collection were reproduced by the Photographic Dept. of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, and we are indebted to Drs. J.F. Heijbroek and Ms. C. Greven for their help.

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