

PENNY OLSEN DISCOVERS THAT THE AUTHOR OF AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FOLIO OF PARROTS WAS AS COLOURFUL AS HIS SUBJECTS

The  
INDEPENDENT  
*Ornithologist*



ABOVE  
Jacques Barraband  
(1767?–1809)  
*Perruche onnicolore*  
(Many-coloured Parakeet)  
reproduced from *Histoire naturelle des perroquets* by François le Vaillant (Paris: chez Levrault, Schoell etc., 1805), plate 28  
Courtesy State Library of New South Wales

BELOW  
J. Bailly  
François le Vaillant 1820  
reproduced from *François le Vaillant, Traveller in South Africa, and His Collection of 165 Water-colour Paintings 1781–1784*, vol. 1 (Cape Town: Library of Parliament, 1973)



IN 2007, thanks to a donation from The Ian Potter Foundation, the National Library of Australia received a copy of *Natural History of Parrots*, a 'new and improved' 1989 edition of François le Vaillant's *Histoire naturelle des perroquets* (1801–1805). The original publication was a magnificent work for its day and among the first of a series of large format, illustrated nineteenth-century

folios featuring the exotic birds of newly explored lands. It was also among the first to include Australian parrots.

That the work was donated in 2007 is appropriate because the world was celebrating the 300th anniversary of the birth of Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778). Linnaeus introduced the binomial system of scientific nomenclature, still in use today, whereby all life forms are given a generic name aligning them with their closest relatives, and a specific name that applies only to that species. Le Vaillant was vehemently opposed to the newly introduced, standardised Linnaean system. Instead, the fierce individualist invented his own French epithets.

Born in Dutch Guiana (today the Republic of Suriname) in 1753 as François Vaillant, he improved his own name too, changing it to the more imposing François le Vaillant (Francis the Valiant). Until he was ten, his father, the French consul, took him on journeys into the tropical interior. After that, he was sent to France where he grew up without formal education, but with a passion for nature, a mastery of the gun and a familiarity with the ornithological collections and cabinets

of the wealthy. The study of natural history was becoming a fashionable pursuit, major museums were being established and had need of specimens, and the public was keen for tales of people and productions from far-off places.

At the end of 1780, le Vaillant left his young wife (with whom he had eloped) in the Netherlands and set off to explore South Africa. The Netherlands was at war with England and his ship was attacked en route, arriving at Cape Town early in 1781. He had been at the Cape for three weeks when it was decided to secure the ships by moving them to Saldanha Bay, where he collected specimens for about two months. There his ship was blown up and his gear and collections were lost.

Returning to Cape Town, his base from late 1781 to 1784, he undertook a series of explorations into the interior. During that time, he met military commander Robert Jacob Gordon (1743–1795), who told him about his travels and his collection of watercolours of natural history subjects, scenes and artefacts. These explorations, and his meeting with Gordon, were to fuel le Vaillant's future endeavours.

Le Vaillant returned to Europe with extensive collections of birds, wildlife and other collectables. Two thousand natural history specimens went to his financier, Coenraad Jacob Temminck (1778–1858), a leading collector who was later to become director of the new Natural History Museum in Leiden, the Netherlands.

The 32 year old settled in Paris and began to write travel books (edited by his father, by then based in the French capital). The first, *Voyage dans l'intérieur de l'Afrique* (*Travels into the Interior Parts of Africa*) came out in 1790. The public loved the book's informal, journalistic style, the spicy tales of exotic people, lands and beasts, the hardships suffered and the courage

of the author. An equally successful second volume, *New Travels* (as the English version was titled), came out a few years later. The adventure books were translated into several languages, making le Vaillant a celebrity. They were the most popular and influential volumes on Africa in the eighteenth century.

Le Vaillant's first ornithological work, *Histoire naturelle des oiseaux d'Afrique* (*Natural History of the Birds of Africa*), began to appear in 1796. It was the earliest substantial work on the ornithology of that continent. The parts were distributed to subscribers over a period of 11 years and bound together as two volumes at a later date. But, before the century closed, doubts were being raised about the veracity of the accounts of le Vaillant's African adventures, even allowing for his fondness for enthusiastic exaggeration. Historian Vernon Forbes, among others, has concluded: 'the long journey that he claims to have made into what is now South West Africa, to which he devotes 370 pages, can only be regarded as imaginary'. There were numerous contradictions and his maps and illustrations of homes and artefacts were careless. His few defenders argued that his books were primarily intended to entertain, with the result that historians and anthropologists have largely rejected le Vaillant's travel books. His contributions to ornithology were not to be fully embraced either.

Many agreed with an early reviewer of *Histoire naturelle des oiseaux d'Afrique*, Swedish ornithologist Carl Jacob Sundevall (1801–1875), who roundly dismissed the work as 'a

monument of deception. An infinity of detail is given of the habits of the various species and of the circumstances under which the specimens ... were secured by the author, but many of these species do not inhabit any part of that continent'; further, the 'errors of previous authors have been perpetuated'. Le Vaillant described some 134 South African species, another 50 recognisable species that he claimed occurred there but do not, ten species that 'have no existence in nature at all' and 110 that are unrecognisable.

Despite le Vaillant's disdain for the formal aspects of science, when *Histoire naturelle des perroquets* was completed in 1805, it was dedicated to 'B.G.E.L. Lascépède' of the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle (Museum of Natural History), Paris, in 'esteem and gratitude'. It was the third of six folios on birds produced by le Vaillant in collaboration with well-known artists and engravers. This and his next work on the birds of paradise, both illustrated by Jacques Barraband (1767?–1809), are regarded as his finest artistically. Engravings of Barraband's watercolours, based on specimens in collections and in captivity, some possibly initially sketched by le Vaillant himself, accompany essays on many of the parrot species known at the time.

*Histoire naturelle des perroquets* covered about 130 parrot species. It was started in 1801, 13 years after the colony of New South Wales was established. Le Vaillant missed several of the 19 species that had already been recognised by that time. It was his intention to cover the

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BELOW FROM LEFT  
*La Perruche Edwards*  
(The Edwards Parakeet)  
reproduced from *Histoire naturelle des perroquets* by François le Vaillant (Paris: chez Levrault, Schoell etc., 1805), plate 68  
Courtesy State Library of New South Wales

*Femelle de lag. de Perruche à collier et croupion bleu* (The Female Great Blue-collared Blue-rumped Parakeet)  
reproduced from *Histoire naturelle des perroquets* by François le Vaillant (Paris: chez Levrault, Schoell etc., 1805), plate 56  
Courtesy State Library of New South Wales

*La Perruche Banks*  
(The Banks Parakeet)  
reproduced from *Histoire naturelle des perroquets* by François le Vaillant (Paris: chez Levrault, Schoell etc., 1805), plate 50  
Courtesy State Library of New South Wales



cockatoos in a subsequent publication, but other authors were to continue the work.

*Perroquets* included nine species collected in Australia but viewed by le Vaillant in captivity in the Netherlands and, mostly, the skin collection of Temminck. Included were eastern, crimson and green rosellas (*Many-coloured Parakeet*, *the Broad-tailed Parakeet* and *the First Variety of Broad-tailed Parakeet*), the Australian king parrot (*the Female Great Blue-collared Blue-rumped Parakeet*), the ground parrot (*the Nimble Parakeet*), the swift parrot (*the Banks Parakeet*), the musk lorikeet (*the Red-fronted Parakeet*), the little lorikeet (*the Red-faced Parakeet*) and the orange-bellied parrot or, alternatively, turquoise parrot (*the Edwards Parakeet*).

Four other species were included that occur in Australia but, at the time, were known only from islands to the north: the palm cockatoo (*Trunked Black Ara and Trunked Grey Ara*) from Batavia (now Jakarta); the rainbow lorikeet (*the Blue-headed Parakeet*) and the Eclectus parrot (*the Great Lory Parrot*), from the Moluccas and thereabouts; and the red-cheeked parrot (*the Geoproy Parrot*), probably from Timor.

The Edwards parakeet has long been considered to be a turquoise parrot, but the description in particular indicates that this may be incorrect. The bird could equally be an orange-bellied parrot, which, like the turquoise parrot, was already known to science. Le Vaillant described it as being

‘characterised by the soft blue of the top of its head and the front of its cheeks, that is to say, the part between the eyes and the bill’ and, most tellingly, with the belly ‘marked with an orange patch’—clearly suggestive of the orange-bellied parrot. In the illustration, however, the extent of blue on the crown and below the bill may have caused it to be identified as a turquoise parrot, the female of which can be lightly washed with orange in the centre of the abdomen. Perhaps le Vaillant conflated the two closely related species.

In many ways le Vaillant was a modern man. His prose was less grandiloquent and more accessible than most at that time and his enthusiasm shone through. The natural history devotee was in touch with a lot of scientists. Yet, he was critical not only of the modern approach to naming, but of scientific method. He must have ‘ruffled feathers’ with remarks such as that in the preface to *Perroquets* in which he scoffed that observations from a lofty position were bound to be erroneous because of their remote perspective, ‘whereas one who descended into the valley would make new discoveries’.

Indeed, although he was often critical of other ornithologists, he also made the same mistakes. In his account of the Edwards parakeet, for example, he wrote that ‘Edwards had the good sense to describe only those objects he had under his eyes, an example too rarely imitated’. It was a pity le Vaillant didn’t take that advice himself. *Perroquets* contains some eight unidentifiable species—poorly remembered or fabricated. Art historian Matthys Bokhorst was not alone in his assessment that le Vaillant’s ‘books indicate keen powers of observation on the one hand and a lively imagination on the other’.

Although the Frenchman had serious defects as an ornithologist, his contributions were not without merit or influence. His books were among the handful of precursors to John Gould’s *Birds of Australia* (1848, supplement 1869) and other lavishly illustrated works. Because le Vaillant did not adhere to the ground rules of scientific nomenclature, the many new species he described were formally named by, and hence credited to, other ornithologists. Still, although no parrot bears his name, several species, such as Levaillant’s cuckoo, Levaillant’s woodpecker and Levaillant’s cisticola, do. Ironically, he is also commemorated in the binomials he so resisted, such as the African species *Francolinus levaillantii* (red-winged Francolin) and *Trachyphonus vaillantii* (crested barbet).

PENNY OLSEN was awarded a Harold White Fellowship in 2004 to research *Glimpses of Paradise: The Quest for the Beautiful Parakeet*, published by the National Library in 2007. She is a Visiting Fellow at the School of Botany and Zoology, The Australian National University, and editor of *Wingspan*, the membership magazine of Birds Australia

Jacques Barraband (1767?–1809)  
*Tere Variété de la Perruche à large queue (The First Variety of the Broad-tailed Parakeet)* reproduced from *Histoire naturelle des perroquets by François le Vaillant* (Paris: chez Levraut, Schoell etc., 1805), plate 80  
Courtesy State Library of New South Wales

