

### A “forgotten book” on the Cape’s cultural history

**C.E. Boniface, *Narrative of the Shipwreck of the French Vessel the Eole on the coast of Kaffraria in April 1829* (translated with an Introduction and Notes by D.J. Culpin)**

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The back cover of the *Narrative of the Shipwreck of the French Vessel the Eoleon the coast of Kaffraria in April 1829* by C.E. Boniface informs us that it “is a forgotten book about a forgotten shipwreck (...) [which] makes strong claims on the interest of the modern reader”. David Culpin’s translation of Boniface’s text, complete with a comprehensive introduction and notes, aims to set the record straight by bringing alive a little-known and fascinating moment in South Africa’s cultural history.

This new edition of Boniface’s *Narrative* is important for several reasons. Firstly, it constitutes additional scholarship on the role of that author in the early nineteenth-century cultural life of Cape Town. In the introduction to the translation, Culpin provides the reader with absorbing insights into Boniface’s life and activities in the capital city of the colony of the Cape of Good Hope. Charles Etienne Boniface, who was born in Paris in 1787 and fled France with his family at the age of 12, settled in the Cape Colony in 1807. There he became a leading light in the cultural life of Cape Town. A teacher of singing and the Spanish guitar, he also furnished the local amateur French and Dutch theatre companies with numerous plays, including *De Nieuwe Ridderorde*, of *De Temperantisten*, a landmark text in that it was one of the very earliest attempts to use Khoi-Afrikaans in written form. A few months after the French vessel the *Eole* was wrecked on the Wild Coast, during her return journey from Calcutta to Bordeaux, Boniface met the shipwreck survivors. They had by then been transported by ship to Cape Town. Boniface agreed to tell their story. Published in November 1829, the *Narrative* is, then, the author’s account of material provided by the survivors themselves. The longest piece to have flowed from Boniface’s pen, it constitutes the only example of travel writing by him.

Secondly, in terms of book history, the new edition of the *Narrative* makes an important contribution to existing knowledge of travel writing. Although one earlier French work had been published in Cape Town before the *Narrative* (the *Remarques générale sur le Cap de Bonne Espérance* by Baron A. van Pallandt, published in 1803), as Culpin indicates in the Introduction, that work did not have the authorisation of the governor and was, furthermore, a brochure which ran to only 30 printed pages. Boniface’s *Narrative* can therefore claim to be the first French book and travel narrative published in South Africa.

Publication of the translation of Boniface’s text is also of consequence in increasing our knowledge of travel writing. Although the genre was a very

popular form of literature in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, approximately only 7 percent of travel narratives dealt with Africa. As Culpin points out, “there are comparatively few descriptions of encounters between Europeans and the indigenous populations of sub-Saharan Africa” (p xxi). In this case, the eight cold, hungry, exhausted and frightened survivors of the *Eole* shipwreck walked barefoot and injured for six and a half days over 150km of inhospitable terrain. They made their perilous way from the site of the wreck, close to present-day East London, to the eastern frontier of the colony, establishing along the way contact with the Xhosa. Those first-hand encounters form the substance of Part II of the *Narrative* in which early nineteenth-century Xhosa customs, clothing, dwellings, food and agriculture are described in illuminating detail.

Of equal significance in this new edition of Boniface’s work are the descriptions of settlements the survivors passed through (Grahamstown, Port Elizabeth and Plettenberg Bay). It is noteworthy that these descriptions provide essential information on those communities only a few years after they had been established. Also of historical interest are the insights into the government and administration of Cape Town and the Cape Colony in the late 1820s. When the survivors arrived in Cape Town, which is described in the text as “the capital of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope, ... perhaps not the largest and richest, [but] certainly the cleanest and the best laid-out city in the southern hemisphere” (p 127), Boniface showed them, amongst other attractions, the Company Gardens, various churches, the Grand Parade, the Supreme Court of Justice, the Commercial Exchange and the theatre. The account of those visits includes information on, among other aspects, the replacement of Dutch by English in the legal system; and the introduction of English currency into the Cape Colony. The list of those persons who subscribed for the original printing of the *Narrative*, “at the rate of three Rix-dollars for each copy”, makes for particularly fascinating reading, providing evidence of the active members of the Cape Town cultural community at the time.

Culpin’s translation into English of this original early nineteenth-century French text thus makes accessible to an Anglophone readership important information for our understanding of the cultural life of the Cape Colony. The translation itself is well rendered. The translator has made every attempt to respect the length and complexity of the sentence structure of the original. Coupled with judicious lexical choices, this makes for a narrative which captures the essence of the age. Furthermore, the humour with which Boniface enlivens many of the descriptions and his occasional recourse to satire, including a particularly challenging piece of doggerel, have all been skilfully captured.

The new edition of Boniface’s *Narrative of the Shipwreck of the French Vessel the Eole on the Coast of Kaffraria in April 1829* can now stand alongside other celebrated narratives of shipwreck and survival in South Africa, such as that of the *Grosvenor*. It complements the studies previously undertaken on Boniface which have focused on his contributions to cultural life in the Cape and Natal in the fields of music, drama, and

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journalism. In addition, the *Narrative* provides a rare account of an encounter between Europeans and the indigenous populations of southern Africa and an even rarer topographical description of the eastern frontier regions. The publication of this “forgotten book” by Charles Etienne Boniface; the carefully researched introduction and footnotes; and the well-chosen illustrations, certainly make an important contribution to our knowledge of cultural history of the Cape Colony.

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