

ANDREW B. SMITH and ROY H. PHEIFFER (eds.)  
Col. Robert Jacob Gordon's notes on the Khoikhoi 1779-1780  
*Annals of the South African Cultural History Museum* 5(1)  
Cape Town: South African Cultural History Museum  
1992  
56 pp.  
R6,00  
ISSN 1010-9226

The history of man and his contact with his environment during the eighteenth century in South Africa is covered extensively by the journals of travellers, and the drawings of "Africana artists". Someone who fell into both categories, and who certainly was one of the most travelled of any of the early colonial people into the interior of South Africa, was Robert Jacob Gordon. Born in the Netherlands in

1743, he was of Scottish origin, and followed in his father's footsteps by joining the army. He visited the Cape in 1773, and in 1777 was transferred permanently to this outpost of the Dutch mercantile empire. In 1782 he became commander-in-chief of the Dutch armed forces at the Cape. His life ended tragically, when he committed suicide on 25 October 1795 shortly after the British invasion.

Gordon made at least four long journeys into the interior between 1777 and 1786. It was on his third journey between June 1779 and January 1780, that he recorded specific information on the Khoikhoi ("Hottentots"). This journey went to the Orange River mouth, the Aughrabies Falls, today's Prieska and Pella, and via the Copper Mountains back to Cape Town.

Gordon's manuscript with his observations of the Khoikhoi is now in the Brenthurst Library in Johannesburg (file MS 107/6 entitled: "Particularités relatives á quelques hordes Hottentottes" - Specific information on some Khoikhoi bands). In Volume 5(1) of the *Annals of the South African Cultural History Museum* they are published for the first time. The editors are Andrew B. Smith (associate Professor of Archaeology) and Roy H. Pfeiffer (Professor of Afrikaans en Nederlands), both at the University of Cape Town.

The publication contains a short introduction, dealing with the life of Gordon, his journeys and the type and quality of his information on the Khoikhoi. Two points of interest might be worth mentioning here. The one is from a medical point of view, and deals with Gordon's use of a barometer. Apparently he continually exposed himself to the free mercury in setting up this instrument on his travels, and this would explain his ill health during his last years and the mental state which could have led to his suicide. The other point of interest is of an anthropological nature, stating that Gordon had empathy for the people among which he travelled and which he observed, as shown in his notes. He seemed to accept that the beliefs of his informants were valuable in their own right, and did not make ethnocentric value judgements.

The introduction is followed by the transcription of Gordon's notes on the Khoikhoi. The English translation is presented on the left pages, with the original Dutch text on the facing pages. The English text is annotated with no less than 135 notes, giving background information and more details such as plants mentioned, and references to contemporary travellers, in particular Peter Kolb. The latter was regarded as the published authority on 18th century Khoikhoi, and some of Gordon's notes show an amount of scepticism of what had become accepted "truth" by his European contemporaries.

The text is interspersed with appropriate reproductions of some of Gordon's own illustrations of the Khoikhoi. The originals, some 25, are in the Rijksprentenkabinet of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

At the end of the publication is a useful list of references. The publication is technically well presented. A map showing the route of Gordon's third journey would have been handy, but otherwise the publication is a valuable addition to published scientific sources on eighteenth century South Africa. Gordon's notes are probably even more unique, in that they are among the last to be recorded before the independent way of life of the Namaqua Khoikhoi disappeared.