

FLEUR MARIE WEBB (1930–2019) AND THE ART OF TRANSLATION

by *Michael Lambert*

DOYENNE of French teachers, Fleur Webb inspired many francophiles in Pietermaritzburg, who admired her love for French literature and culture, respected her formidable knowledge of French grammar, and often enjoyed her elegant soirées, characterised by the music of Chopin and the clink of flutes, sparkling with champagne. It was, however, her ability as a fine translator which made her contribution to Pietermaritzburg's intellectual and cultural life so unique.

Inspired by her French-speaking grandmother, Fleur studied French at Durban Girls' High School, where she matriculated, and at the University of Natal in Durban, where she graduated in French and English in 1951. The award of a scholarship by the French embassy enabled her to spend a year of postgraduate study in Paris from 1952 to 1953.

During this year, she lived on the left bank of the Seine in the Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris in the 14th *arrondissement*, which includes Montparnasse, long associated with famous literary figures; and obtained diplomas from the Sorbonne in contemporary French literature, and colloquial French usage and pronunciation.

Post-war Paris was an exciting place for a young South African. As pre-eminent intellectuals, Sartre, De Beauvoir and Camus dominated both philosophy and literature. Nadia Boulanger was teaching piano and composition at Fontainebleau and Edith Piaf was performing at venues like La Coupole. Fleur is the only South African I know who



heard Piaf perform live in Paris in the early 1950s. Camus went on to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957, in the very year that Fleur was appointed to the staff of the University of Natal.

Her teaching career in Durban at the University of Natal (1957–1959), in Cape Town at Springfield Convent and Herschel, when her husband was King George V Professor of History at the University of Cape Town (1976–1984), and in Pietermaritzburg, at schools such as Epworth, Wykeham Collegiate and St John's, was sporadic, as she juggled family responsibilities and the demands of teaching with moves from Durban to Pietermaritzburg, Cape Town and back again, but she was a memorable communicator, who understood how to marry enthusiasm for her subject with rigorous standards.

In the mid-nineties, I was fortunate to be a student in her French honours translation class at the University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg) and was delighted to be introduced by Fleur to the witty literary creations of Les Précieuses, a group of intellectual women in the seventeenth century, who met in the kind of salon over which, I always imagined, Fleur might have presided.

Fleur's first major published project, undertaken at the suggestion of her husband, then vice-principal at the University of Natal, was her translation from French to English of the first volume of Adulphe Delegorgue's *Travels in Southern Africa*.¹ The second volume, dedicated to the memory of her husband, who did not live to see the work completed, appeared in 1997.² The two volumes make up almost 600 pages of meticulous, exacting translation, the result of years of hard work.

In her 'translator's note' at the beginning of volume one, Fleur sets out her philosophy of translation: to convey the humour, intelligence and exuberance of the author, as well as the text's readability, which involves being faithful to the spirit, if not always to the letter, of the original. As she frequently said, translation involves translating ideas, not merely words, and has to include interpretation.

Fleur's scrupulous attention to the nuances of nineteenth century French and English words and expressions extends even to retaining Delegorgue's Gallic versions of Zulu names, which require enunciation aloud (with a French accent!) for decipherment: Om-Guinée [Umgeni], Om-Philos, and Om-Vooty are some of the well-known KwaZulu-Natal river names one meets in the entertaining text.

Delegorgue (1814–1850), a young French adventurer, hunter and self-proclaimed natural scientist, spent seven crucial years in the Colony of Natal, from 1838 until 1844, both recording, collecting (and denuding) our flora and fauna, and commenting on the tensions, battles and treaties between the Boers, Zulus and British, as each group fought, murdered, and negotiated over land and frontiers.

As an eyewitness to several Boer delegations and expeditions in the wake of the battle of Blood River (1838), his work, which had not been translated into English before, is an important source for historians interested in the events that resulted in the establishment of the short-lived Republic of Natalia and subsequent British annexation.

In addition, his accounts of the landscape, birds, insects, mammals, diseases and their remedies, together with his forays into Zulu ethnography, in the early years of Mpande, as well as the Zulu language, are of inestimable value to botanists, zoologists, entomologists, anthropologists, linguists, and anyone interested in preserving our wildlife from the murderous predations of hunters and poachers.

As a young man with a large ego and a gift for exaggeration, which makes reading his work good training in historiography, Delegorgue has an engaging *tourne de phrase* which extends to his impressions of the 'stocked camp' and 'crude shanties' of early Pietermaritzburg (1839):

The wretched shelters swarmed with bugs and remarkably vigorous rats, which each night ate our candles and carried off our handkerchiefs and stockings. Frequently, when we awoke in the morning even our shoes were missing because the rats had dragged them to the far corners of the room

or even next door. Outside there was yet another scourge. A mass of dogs, twenty times more numerous than the population itself, rendered the thoroughfares impassable.³

In addition to the quality of the translation, the contributions of many scholars in Pietermaritzburg, and further afield, enhance the *Travels* and highlight the collaborative nature of the project. Volume one contains thoughtful introductions by Colin Webb and Stephanie Alexander, who, along with Bill Guest, introduce the second volume, and contribute superb natural history indices. In the second volume, there are contributions from, *inter alios*, Professors Ewer of Rhodes University and Adrian Koopman of University of KwaZulu-Natal. Margery Moberly of the University of Natal Press is thanked in both volumes for her encouragement, professionalism and advice.

Important to historians as well is the work of another youthful Frenchman, Paul Deléage, a journalist for France's oldest daily newspaper, *Le Figaro*, who arrived in Durban in April 1879 to report on the Prince Imperial's sojourn in Africa in the wake of the Zulu victory over the British at Isandhlwana.

Attached to the British forces in Natal as a special observer, the last of the Napoleons was also in Durban when Deléage arrived. His accounts of meetings and conversations with the Prince Imperial on his journey from Durban via Pietermaritzburg to Dundee, and of the Prince's death, as well as his account of the court martial of Lieutenant Carey, provide essential non-British evidence for anyone interested in interpreting this well-publicised incident during the Anglo-Zulu War.

The fact that a French reporter was in the party that found the Prince's body in a donga, that he closed the Prince's eyes in death, covered him with a blanket, and accompanied the body back to Pietermaritzburg where he attended his civic funeral, make this section of his account especially moving.

Deléage's work was published in Paris in 1879.⁴ Fleur Webb's very readable translation, again prompted by her husband, retained the second part of his title.⁵ Bill Guest again provides an introduction and contributes helpful notes throughout the 200-page volume. If Deleorgue's description of Pietermaritzburg was not exactly encouraging, Deléage's impressions, some 40 years later, were markedly different:

Pietermaritzburg ... is certainly one of the most delightful towns that one could possibly find on the arid and sandy soil of southern Africa. Situated in the hollow of a shallow valley, the capital of Natal may, without contradiction, be considered as the resort town of the colony. If its strategic situation in the interior has determined its choice as capital of the colonial government, the mildness of its climate and the engaging aspect of its natural surroundings make it a desirable place to settle for colonials who, once they have made their fortune, have lost all desire to return to the motherland.⁶

Of all Fleur's major translation projects, her contribution to the beautifully illustrated *François Levaillant and the Birds of Africa* was perhaps the most technically demanding. Levaillant, yet another young, flamboyant Frenchman, who undertook three journeys to southern Africa in the years 1781 to 1784, was a distinguished ornithologist whose six-volume *Oiseaux d'Afrique* (Birds of Africa) was a bestseller in

Europe. Fleur's old friend, Delegorgue, was acquainted with Levaillant's work when he visited southern Africa some 60 years later, and often disagrees with the veracity of Levaillant's descriptions.

Brenthurst Library, which already owned several editions of Levaillant's ornithological and travel writings, had acquired two volumes of original watercolour paintings, probably by Johann Lebrecht Reinold, and monochrome engravings of southern African birds, based on Levaillant's fieldwork sketches and his plunder – he apparently returned to Europe with more than 2 000 specimens of birds and insects.

In keeping with Harry Oppenheimer's wishes to produce a scholarly edition of these fine art works, Brenthurst Press commissioned scholars such as Kees Rookmaaker, Peter Mundy, Ian Glenn and Emma Spary to contribute interpretative chapters which situate Levaillant's work in its historical, cultural, literary and scientific contexts, and Fleur Webb to translate Levaillant's detailed descriptions of the birds in the paintings which had hitherto not been translated into English.

These translations, which involve, for example, finding English equivalents for the measurement system of pre-revolutionary France, are in turn accompanied by contemporary analyses of Levaillant's descriptions by the scholarly team. Fleur was justifiably proud of her role in the production of this impressive collector's volume and was flown to London for the book launch.⁷

Among Fleur's other projects, which demonstrate the range of her qualities as a translator, were a translation of a monograph by Serge Ménéger that analyses the role of the theatre with

respect to the roles and fates of Proust's main characters in his *Remembrance of Things Past*; and her contribution to Glenn Flanagan's *The French Prince*.⁸

For those of us who were busy teachers and have sunk into the drowsy arms of a post-retirement lethargy, it is salutary to be reminded that Fleur Webb's major academic projects, as she refined the art (and science) of translation, were accomplished in the last 25 years of her long and memorable life.

NOTES

- 1 Adulphe Delegorgue, *Travels in Southern Africa: Volume I* translated by Fleur Webb and introduced and indexed by Stephanie J. Alexander and Colin de B. Webb (Durban and Pietermaritzburg, Killie Campbell Africana Library and University of Natal Press, 1990) [359 pages plus indices].
- 2 Adulphe Delegorgue, *Travels in Southern Africa: Volume II* translated by Fleur Webb and introduced and annotated by Stephanie J. Alexander and Bill Guest (Durban and Pietermaritzburg, Killie Campbell Africana Library and University of Natal Press, 1997) [401 pages plus indices].
- 3 Delegorgue, *Travels in Southern Africa: Volume I*, p. 96.
- 4 Paul Deléage, *Trois Mois Chez les Zoulous et les Derniers Jours du Prince Impérial = Three Months Amongst the Zulu and the Last Days of the Prince Imperial* (Paris, E. Dentu, 1879).
- 5 Paul Deléage, *End of a Dynasty: The Last Days of the Prince Imperial, Zululand 1879* translated by Fleur Webb with introduction and notes by Bill Guest (Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008) [212 pages plus indices].
- 6 Deléage, *End of a Dynasty*, p. 61.
- 7 L.C. Rookmaaker, P.J. Mundy, I.E. Glenn and E.C. Spary, *François Levaillant and the Birds of Africa* translated by Fleur Webb (Johannesburg: Brenthurst Press, 2004) [484 pages plus indices].
- 8 Serge-Dominique Ménéger, 'On stage with Marcel Proust' translated by Fleur Webb (Unpublished) [52 pages]; Glenn Flanagan, *The French Prince: From Tragedy to Transformation* (Pietermaritzburg, Otterley Press, 2017).