SOUTH AFRICAN ORNITHOLOGISTS.

Le Vaillant.

I propose now to recall to your minds a few of our more illustrious predecessors, to whom we chiefly owe what knowledge we now possess of South African ornithology.

The first of these is undoubtedly the Frenchman, François le Vaillant (1753–1824); this celebrated sportsman and naturalist was born at Paramaribo, in Dutch Guiana, in 1753. His father was a wealthy merchant of that place, who originally came from Metz, then in France, and was the Acting French Consul. When only ten years old, Le Vaillant was sent to Holland, and from there returned to France, and rejoined his parents there. He early evinced a great taste for natural history, and employed a great deal of his time hunting and collecting birds. Finally he determined to go to Africa for this same purpose. He embarked from Texel, in Holland, at the end of 1779, and did not reach the Cape till early in 1781, having been more than a year making the voyage. He spent three months at the Cape, and made a celebrated journey to Saldanha Bay, where he stayed on board the 'Middelburg,' one of the ships of the Dutch fleet, which was ordered in that year to retire there to avoid the English expedition under Commodore Johnston. The English squadron, however, appeared, and all the Dutch fleet was captured except the 'Middelburg,' which was fired by her skipper, Van Glennep, and sunk in the shallow water of the bay. Poor Le Vaillant made his way back to Capetown on foot, having lost his collections and most of his possessions. However, he found some friends, who assisted him, and after equipping himself with a wagon and all the necessary paraphernalia for an extended journey, he started off on his eastern trip towards Kaffirland, which lasted for sixteen months; he travelled along the south coast of the Colony, not far from the coast, but apparently did not get much further east than the Great Fish River; on his return

he took a more northerly course through what is now the Somerset East district and the Karroo.

In 1783 he went another journey into the interior, this time travelling northwards towards the Orange River: he does not appear to have gone much beyond that point, but he obtained a giraffe, of which he was very proud, and which finally found a resting-place in the Paris Museum.

Le Vaillant returned to France in 1784, and prepared accounts of his travels and of his collections; the travels were published in 1790, and went through many editions, besides being translated into several other languages. The book, however, that chiefly concerns us here is the celebrated 'Histoire Naturelle des Oiseaux d'Afrique,' in six quarto volumes, published in Paris between 1799 and 1808. This sumptuous work, illustrated by 300 coloured plates prepared under the author's eye by the celebrated French artist, Barraband, contains descriptions of 284 birds. Unfortunately, whether owing to loss of part of his collections or of his notes, or, perhaps, owing to his trusting too much to information imparted to him by untrustworthy people, his statements as regards some of his birds are by no means reliable. A valuable commentary and criticism on Le Vaillant was published by Sundevall in 1857. He divides the 284 species as follows:—

Birds accurately described by Le Vaillant and easily recognisable as from South Africa	134
Birds probably from South Africa, but with faulty descriptions	9
Doubtful birds, not recognisable from the descriptions given	10
Birds stated by Le Vaillant to have been obtained in South Africa, but which almost certainly come from elsewhere	50
Birds described by Le Vaillant and stated by him to have been obtained in countries other than South Africa	71
Birds almost certainly artificially made up and not existing in nature	10
	284

Notwithstanding, however, Le Vaillant's obvious errors and misapprehensions, many, if not most, of his observations, especially on the habits of Cape birds, have been confirmed by subsequent observers, and there is no reason to reject his whole work as unworthy of credence because he fell into a certain number of errors.

Burchell.

The next visitor to South Africa who devoted special attention to birds was William John Burchell (1782–1863). The son of a nurseryman at Fulham, he received as a young man an appointment of schoolmaster in the island of St. Helena; while there he prepared himself assiduously for his proposed journey to the interior of South Africa. He landed in Table Bay in 1810, and shortly afterwards started for the interior. Crossing the Orange River near its junction with the Vaal, he reached Klaar water, now called Griquatown, and subsequently Old Lattakun, not very far from Kuruman. The published account of his travels ends here; but he spent three more years in Africa, and did not return to England till 1817. He brought back with him a very large collection of animals and plants; the former were deposited in the British Museum, where, however, they were not taken very good care of or appreciated. The account of his travels in two quarto volumes, beautifully illustrated by drawings made by himself, was published in 1822 and 1824, and is, perhaps, the most accurate and painstaking record ever produced dealing with South Africa. Burchell did not devote special attention to birds, though he must have brought back a good many specimens with him; he mentions a good many in his book, and describes a certain number as new, while others were described by Sir William Jardine and other ornithologists of the period. Burchell subsequently travelled in South America, between the years 1825 and 1829, and finally died at Fulham in 1863.

Burchell's merits never seem to have met with the appreciation they deserved; the only recognition of his genius was the bestowal of an honorary degree of D.C.L. by the