

BOOK REVIEW: BURCHELL'S AFRICAN ODYSSEY

REVEALING THE RETURN JOURNEY 1812-1815 by Roger Stewart and Marion Whitehead. (Struik Nature, 2022. ISBN 978 1 77584 815 8) Review by Sue Gordon

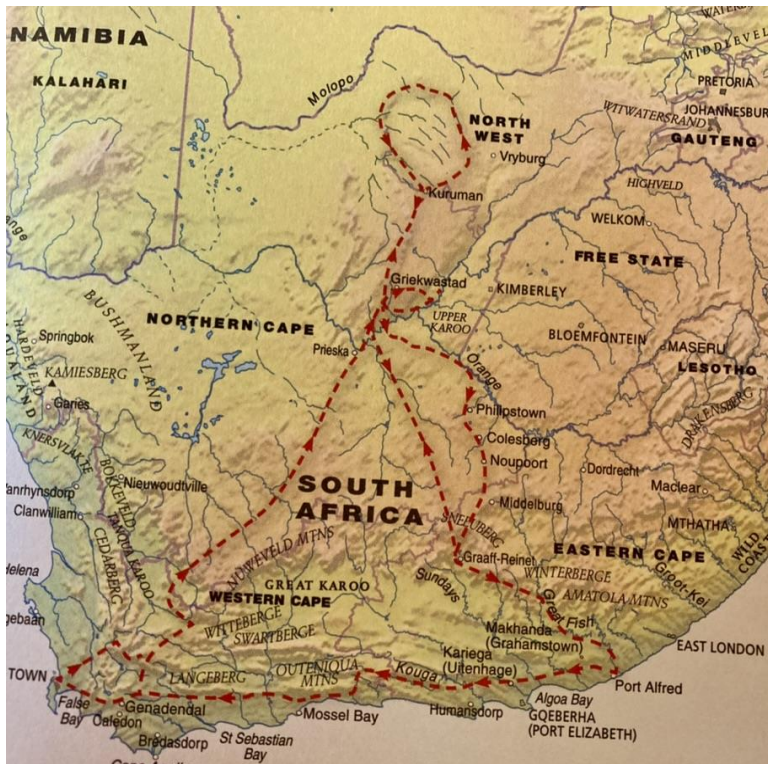
When spring arrives in Lower Albany, we delight in the orange blaze of clivias in our gardens, among them the special *clivia nobilis*. Along the road towards Bathurst or Makhandia the winter *aloe ferox*es make way for flowers of the wild pomegranate shrub (*burcellia bubalina*) and in the beach bush an occasional *haemanthus albiflos* may be seen. For just these three local floral beauties – not to mention a host of other indigenous plants, mammals, reptiles and insects - we thank the extraordinary 19th century naturalist-explorer William Burchell for first bringing them to our attention and indeed, that of science.

But his exploration, collection and identification of species has until recently been an incomplete one. *Burchell's African Odyssey: revealing the return journey 1812-1815*, a recently published 248-page, generously illustrated book by Roger Stewart and Marion Whitehead, fleshes out the undocumented end journey Burchell undertook between 1812 and 1815.

This is no dry academic handbook, however: the book appeals because it tells a story, and an engaging one at that. The good pace of the narrative belies Burchell's arduous progress in overloaded albeit customised ox wagons, through swollen rivers, impassable kloofs and skirting unfriendly tribes. He used the stars, a compass and sextant but was otherwise an intuitive adventurer. If there is such a thing, this is an explorer-naturalist's page-turner.

Burchell and his party had reached Litakun (near today's Dithakong, north of Kuruman) and faced their return journey: 7000km, mostly into the unknown, from the Kalahari to the Great Fish River, westwards to the south-eastern coast and back to Cape Town. This would take him four years but would yield 63,000 specimens, many of them new to science.

The authors have included copious visual content to break up the text. I liked very much the helpful synopses of each chapter; the boxed Botanical Highlights and Timeline Highlights; Burchell's botanical notes and plant pressings - and most important, his pioneering map.



Above: Updated view of the route taken by Burchell [with reviewer's imagined 'stick man']. reproduced with permission

Did the authors notice as I did, in both the original and updated complete maps (p 12, 13) that the red dotted lines resemble a red 'stick man' carrying a waggoner's whip and striding determinedly eastwards? I return to this observation later.

The map segments are finely detailed, sometimes difficult to read, because Burchell dates and names each station passed or stayed at (cryptic yet evocative titles like Robber Station, Last Water Station); occasional hosts (farms or military posts), and co-ordinates, rivers, mountains, etc. Most appealing are Burchell's exquisite sketches or water colours of crew members, landscapes, settlements and river crossings - what treasures these are!

The book has excellent introductory material, a glossary and chart of locations, comprehensive end notes, acknowledgments, image credits, and an index arranged by species.

Throughout the odyssey, Burchell and his entourage suffered extremes of both heat and cold, a lack of dietary variety, water and essential resources. Over forbidding distances and terrain there were accidents, cattle thefts, disloyalty, dangers, great physical hardship, deprivation. Despite the negativity in the Cape Colony, Burchell encountered friendly San and Bachapin (the Batswana clan near Botswana) and he attempted to master the rudiments of their languages. Though he was relieved to re-enter the Cape Colony near Colesberg, for safety reasons he kept to the string of military posts as he proceeded along the Eastern Frontier. And then - such are the rich pickings in our Albany region (where seven of the country's biomes converge; Burchell was first to suggest these bio-regions) - he took six months to complete the Grahamstown-Fish River-Uitenhage loop. Along the southern Cape coast he would gather up to 50 animal and plant specimens each day, being particularly drawn to the botanical bounty of the Langeberg, Swellendam and George mountains.

The postscript: back in Cape Town, and later from the family's Fulham Nursery in London, Burchell announced his intention to publish the third part to his two-volume Travels. (His publishers were against this.) But Burchell had become so engrossed in horticulture - the planting of seeds and the propagation of South African plants for sale - that procrastination set in. Then an opportunity to travel to Brazil for five years presented itself and this became the nail in the coffin of his African project. Burchell had aged, became overwhelmed and found himself in a depressive decline. In 1863 at the age of 83 he took his own life.

Burchell may have accumulated an unprecedented wealth of new knowledge and natural history specimens (now housed at Kew Gardens, Oxford University's Museum of Natural History, and Museum Africa) but the four years of his return journey left their mark on him and drew out conclusions. He wrote about the interconnectedness, the holism, of the natural world, and became one of the first ecologists. As the authors conclude: 'Burchell had evolved from a romantic 29-year-old naturalist ... to a natural philosopher.'

Roger Stewart and Marion Whitehead are to be congratulated for helping to redress the inadequate recognition Burchell received during his lifetime. Their research gathered much fragmentary and unpublished material, and the result is a powerful, occasionally moving, reconstruction of Burchell's 'lost years' exploring our region. Given today's global climate crisis and the decreasing biodiversity in nature, Burchell's legacy deserves revisiting: *African Odyssey* is timely and topical.

I return to the red 'stick man' striding so purposefully across Burchell's map, and am reminded

'...he doth bestride the narrow world
Like a Colossus, and we petty men
Walk under his huge legs and peep about...'
(W Shakespeare, Julius Caesar Act I Sc II)