

A Life in Shadow: Aimé Bonpland in Southern South America, 1817-1858

Stephen Bell, Stanford University Press 2010

Leo Corry, Tel-Aviv University. Forthcoming in *EIAL* (2011)

In his 2006 world best-seller, *Measuring the World*, German author Daniel Kehlmann confronts two main characters: mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauss and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt. Aimé Bonpland (1773-1858), Humboldt's companion throughout the famous journey to equinoctial America, is portrayed as his sidekick, at best. In the 1974 emblematic novel *Yo, el Supremo*, by Paraguayan Augusto Roa Bastos, Bonpland, who had been imprisoned for most of the decade of the 1820s by the despotic Dr. Francia, plays an important role in the plot, as he does in numerous books, plays, and even films, originating in Latin America. This difference is indicative of how Bonpland's memory has been preserved in various ways in the Latin American context, and has been essentially forgotten, or at least highly underestimated, in other contexts.

One recent reaction to this situation has come in the way of a recently published novel, *Mémoires d'un mort, le voyage sans retour d'Aimé Bonpland, explorateur rochelais*, by Eric Courthes, where the dead Bonpland retells the story of his own life. Born himself in La Rochelle area, Courthes complains about the continued oblivion into which Bonpland fell in his native Europe: "Pese a que hubiera sido amante y jardinero de Joséphine de Beauharnais, a pesar de todas las plantas que descubrió y que mandó al Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle en Francia, hasta el final de su vida, de su famosísima expedición del Orinoco al Amazonas con Alejandro de Humboldt, de su intromisión en todos los asuntos políticos y bélicos de la Guerra Grande en la Argentina, de sus innumerables amores, viajes, empresas, de su dedicación filantrópica al prójimo y sobre todo a sus pacientes, a lo largo de su vida, Amado Bonpland en La Rochela queda olvidado."¹

Stephen Bell has been motivated perhaps by a similar concern about the way in which the figure of Bonpland has passed into history, especially in circles outside Latin America, but his way to deal with this concern in the book under review here is strictly scholarly: "However great the temptations and appeal of creative writing, to say nothing of film – he states – this study is confined to things seen in the archives." And indeed, as the title of the book has it, the life and scientific contribution of Aimé Bonpland has too often been seen in the shadows of the much more famous German naturalist whom Bonpland accompanied between 1799 and 1804. Scholarly accounts of his life after the trip have been scant and incomplete, and indeed highly misguided. As Bell indicates, the leading theme in the existing literature is that Bonpland, who in 1816 set sail from Le Havre to Argentina never to return to Europe, "met a tragic fate in South America". While it is true that the decade of the 1820s was tough for Bonpland, as he spent most of it as a prisoner in Paraguay, referring to the more than forty years in the Southern part of the continent in these terms alone reflects a mainly Eurocentric perspective which, when abandoned, helps shedding a completely different light on an intriguing story full of turns and surprises. Bonpland was by all

¹ Erich Courtes, "Amado Bonpland, generador de re-escrituras transgenéricas", *Ateliers du Séminaire Amérique Latine de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne* (2008-2009), n°4. (<http://www.crimic.paris-sorbonne.fr/actes/sal4/courthes.pdf>)

means a famous and respected person in America ever since his arrival. He either corresponded or met with prominent politicians, intellectuals and administrators. He continued to come up with important scientific work, and to send plant specimens to Europe, and was involved in important activity related to farming and land conservation. His extended journeys in the continent offered him a broad view that allowed him comparisons that few other contemporary observers could afford. His fame as an explorer was widespread and his company and advice was sought by younger people with an interest in science.

Bell's book is a praiseworthy, highly readable, and most welcome account of Bonpland's last forty years of life, spent in various places and in different activities in the southern part of the continent. This account is based on a thorough effort to collect and systematically analyze, from an original perspective, a wealth of documents that had remained partially and poorly explored or unattended to thus far.

The six chapters of the book evolve along biographical lines, starting from the background to Bonpland's decision to leave Europe and up until the final, still very active decade of his life. Since returning from his first journey, Bonpland had kept a lively interest in South-American matters. He was, for instance, an enthusiastic supporter of Bolívar's project. The idea of returning was never foreign to his mind, but the actual decision was precipitated by the circumstances of European politics. The death in 1814 of Empress Joséphine, under whose sponsorship he had been working for several years, was a crucial turning point for him, even though it is likely that when he left Europe in 1816 he did not envision to stay in South America for good. Bonpland arrived in Buenos Aires with plans for intense scientific activity, but in the end, the unstable political situation in the region did not allow such plans to materialize. This led him make new personal connections and to explore new directions, among which of paramount importance was his visit to the former Jesuit missions in the Northern part of Argentina by 1921, from which the rest of the story continues to unfold.

It had been customary in the literature to present Bonpland in his later years (strongly contrasting them to Humboldt's) as being spent in "quiet inaction, in the enjoyment of a life of contemplation". With Bells' book in mind, this image cannot be held anymore. One learns here about how active Bonpland was until the last decade of his life, and about the wide variety of fields in which he found himself working: pharmacy, medicine, farming, ranching, advice to politicians, museum development, collecting plant specimens, etc. Bell presents an intriguing portrait of a bold personality always willing to cross boundaries: geographical, temporal, social, institutional, and professional. Although timing was never favorable to him and the vicissitudes of history always got in his way to fulfilling ambitious plans, the image of Bonpland that emerges from this account is one of a person ahead of his time in issues such as the development of sustainable agriculture in its specific geographical context as well as in more generalized conservational practices.

Bells' interesting book certainly drags the figure of Bonpland away from the shadows of history and into the full daylight of historians' attention. But an additional merit of the book that must be stressed is that, in doing so, it also illuminates often overlooked, but highly significant aspects of the social and economic dimensions of the life in various regions of the Southern part of the continent during the first half of the nineteenth century. Thus, the book makes recommended reading for an audience that goes well-beyond those with an interest in the biographical dimensions of a unique

European intellectual with broad domains of activity and deep involvement in American life, or in the early history of scientific activities in the continent.