

## 'Blue ostriches' captured

SIR — The 'blue ostriches', a famous portrayal of a supposed rock painting, is very probably a forgery based upon an engraving (see top figure) in Moffat's *Missionary Labour* (1842)<sup>1</sup>. The 'copy' of the mysterious painting (middle figure) was made by G. W. Stow, who was born in England in 1822 and migrated to South Africa in 1843<sup>2</sup>. In 1867 he began copying rock paintings and engravings in the Cape Colony and Orange Free State, while preparing a book on the peoples of southern Africa. He died in 1882 before it was completed.

Stow's widow sold the manuscript and rock art copies to Lucy Lloyd, who was studying the Bushmen. In 1904, Lloyd passed the manuscript to the historian G. M. Theal, who published it<sup>3</sup>. At her death, Lloyd left the copies to Dorothea Bleek who published 74 of them<sup>4</sup>. The rest were published in 1953<sup>5</sup>. The volume edited by Theal described Bushmen disguising themselves as ostriches for the hunt. Opposite page 82 there is what purports to be a copy of a remarkable rock painting (middle figure). It shows five ostriches looking to the right. They are approached from the right by an 'ostrich' with human legs and an arm holding a bow protruding from its chest. Four birds (including the disguised hunter) are in black and white, as in male ostriches, while two presumed females are blue-grey. Bleek republished the 'blue ostriches' in her selection of Stow's copies<sup>4</sup>.

An original 'blue ostriches' rock painting has long been sought. Notes on the cartoon read, "From rocks in the Witte Bergen, Colonial Native Reserve". A map shows a site near Hershel<sup>4</sup>. In the 1905 book<sup>3</sup>, the caption reads, "From Caves in the Herschel District, Cape Colony . . .". Although Bleek found the sites of 60 other cartoons, an original 'blue ostriches' painting has never been located. It remains "a perpetual challenge"<sup>6</sup> and "one of the most tantalising mysteries of Bushman art"<sup>7</sup>.

In 1976, P.V.T. acquired a copy of Moffat's *Missionary Labours*<sup>1</sup>. Leafing through it he found a virtual mirror image of the 'blue ostriches' painting facing page 64, and immediately suspected that a fraud had been perpetrated. Independently, T.A.D., in 1989,

1. Moffat, R. *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa* (John Snow, London, 1842).
2. Young, R. B. *The Life and Work of George William Stow* (Longmans, Green, London, 1908).
3. Stow, G. W. *The Native Races of South Africa* (ed. Theal, G. M.) (Swan Sonnenschein, London, 1905).
4. Stow, G. W. & Bleek, D. F. *Rock-Paintings in South Africa from Parts of the Eastern Province and Orange Free State* (Methuen, London, 1930).
5. Rosenthal, E. & Goodwin, A. J. H. *Cave Artists of South Africa* (Balkema, Cape Town, 1953).
6. Woodhouse, H. C. *Rock Art* (Purnell, Cape Town, 1978).
7. Woodhouse, H. C. Location mystery (*The Sunday Star Review*, Johannesburg, p. 22, June 29, 1986).

made the same discovery. In Moffat's engraving, described as a sketch of a Bushman stratagem in hunting, five ostriches form the main group, four looking to the left, while the fifth looks towards the artist. Two have black and white plumage (males), two have grey plumage (females); the fifth is of indeterminate coloration. Approaching from the left is a male 'ostrich' with human lower limbs and, protruding from the chest, a bow held by a hand, the bowstring drawn taut, an arrow tip in position, pointing towards the five ostriches. Apart from mirror imaging, the near identity between Moffat's illustration and the Stow painting is overwhelming (compare the middle and bottom figures).

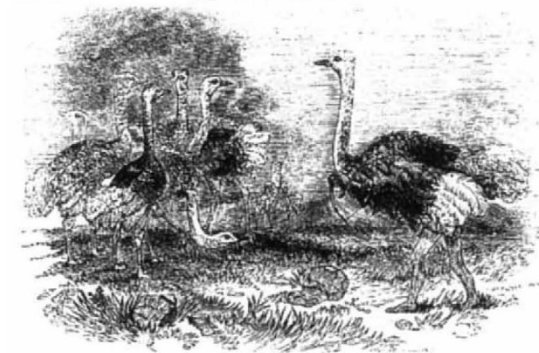
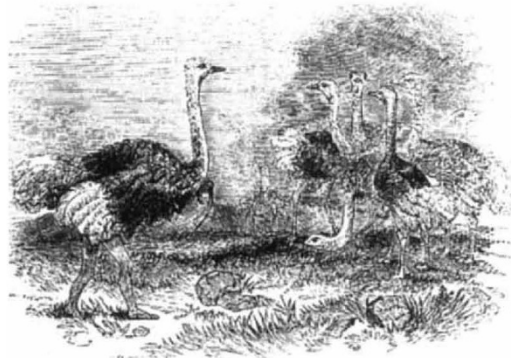
A chance mention revealed P.V.T.'s and T.A.D.'s independent discovery. Meantime, J.D.L.-W. had been studying the Stow archives in the South African Public Library and the South African Museum, to which we are indebted. This is the first joint announcement of what we conclude was a forgery.

Our case rests on two principal points: (1) Stow's picture is nearly identical with a mirror-image of Moffat's previously published wood engraving; (2) an original 'blue ostriches' painting has never been discovered despite searches.

Three supporting points are: (3) the descriptions of the locality are vague (4) Moffat's *Missionary Labours* appeared in 1842; Stow sailed from London in September 1843. It is conceivable and likely that Moffat's book accompanied him. (5) The blue colour of the female ostriches in the cartoon is decidedly unusual in southern African rock art.

Taken together, the evidence leads us to conclude that Stow's 'copy' was fraudulently based upon a mirror image of the engraving in Moffat<sup>1</sup>.

There is no evidence that Stow's wife, his three daughters, his friend C. S. Orpen, Lloyd or Bleek had the opportunity, knowledge, artistic skill or motive to have perpetrated the hoax. The evidence from the paper of the cartoon, the style and technique, and the handwriting giving the vague locality points strongly to Stow as the one who faked the 'copy'.



Top, Illustration from R. Moffat's *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa* (1842). Middle, G. W. Stow's 'copy' of a supposed rock painting illustrating the Bushman practice of stalking in an ostrich disguise. Bottom, Moffat's illustration reversed.

He had opportunity, knowledge and artistic talent<sup>2</sup>. We find compelling motives. First, the biography<sup>2</sup> and Stow's letters reveal him as boastful, ambitious and resentful that he had not received sufficient recognition. In Stow's mind, the 'blue ostriches' would assuredly have enhanced his claim to fame. A second possible motive was to provide a 'rock painting' that verified Stow's conviction that rock art constituted "a history of the manners and customs of the Bushmen, as depicted by themselves"<sup>2</sup>.

Our more detailed treatment will appear elsewhere.

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