

Pierre Dénys de Montfort (c.1768-c.1820) and his connection with the Netherlands

L.B. HOLTHUIS

Nationaal Natuurhistorisch Museum, P.O. Box 9517, 2300 RA Leiden, the Netherlands

Description of De Montfort's 1807 visit to the Netherlands, where he expected to become a naturalist to Daendels, the newly appointed Governor-General of the East Indies, and the miserable failure of this project. Mention of some data on the life of this peculiar zoologist, who is best known by two handbooks on Mollusca that he published between 1802 and 1810.

Key words: Dénys de Montfort, history of malacology.

Pierre Dénys de Montfort was born in Paris around 1768 and died in the same town in 1820 or 1821. There is remarkably little known about his life, even though he wrote two fundamental works on Mollusca, his 1802 "Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière des Mollusques" vols. I-IV, and his "Conchyliologie systématique" vols. I (1808) and II (1810). This is well demonstrated by the fact that neither the exact date of his birth, nor that of his death is known. Quérard (1828: 480) says of him "né à Paris, vers 1768" and subsequent authors do not add anything more specific to his birth date. As to his position in life, Quérard described him as "naturaliste, ancien aide-géologue au Muséum d'Histoire naturelle". Dance (1986: 87) says of him "a strange and little known figure who styled himself a 'former chief naturalist to the King of Holland' ". This last qualification is based on the title which Dénys de Montfort gave himself on the title pages of his Conchyliologie: "Ancien Naturaliste en chef de S.M. le Roi de Hollande, pour les Indes Orientales". This title was not entirely imaginary as will be explained below.

Dénys de Montfort was in his early thirties when he published the first four volumes on Mollusca in C.S. Sonnini's series "Suite aux Oeuvres de Leclerc de Buffon". The following volumes (5 and 6), however, were written by a different author, Félix de Roissy. The reason why Dénys de Montfort did not continue the work is given by Sonnini in the introduction to vol. 5 (p. v): "L'auteur, M. Denys Montfort, qui avoit rassemblé les matériaux pour compléter un travail si heureusement commencé, employoit toute son activité à les mettre en ordre, lorsqu'un événement fâcheux a arraché ce savant à ses occupations chéries, et peut-être à sa patrie". One wonders what the ill-fated event was that tore him away from his cherished occupations and perhaps even from his country. This event must have happened between 1802 and 1805 (when vol. 5 was published). Could it be his involvement with an impostor who claimed to be a Persian prince, and who evidently convinced Dénys de Montfort of his bona fides to such an extent that the latter in 1801 published a pamphlet "La vie et les aventures politiques de Nadir-Mirza Schah, prince de Perse, actuellement à Paris, etc.; recueillis et publiés pour la défense de ce prince" (Paris, 1801). Dénys de Montfort was not the only one who was duped (Quérard mentions also a M. de Varenne). The hoax may have exploded between 1802 and 1805, but it is difficult to

imagine that as a consequence Dénys de Montfort might have been jailed and threatened with exile as one could conclude from Sonnini's words. This, again, is one of the many enigmas that punctuate Dénys de Montfort's life story. Anyhow, it is almost certain that Sonnini's words have nothing to do with Dénys de Montfort's Dutch adventure.

In 1806 Emperor Napoleon's youngest brother, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, was made King of Holland at the instigation of his imperial brother. Louis was quite active in protecting and furthering the interests of his new country and even became quite popular there; so much so that in 1810 he was relieved of his post by Napoleon, who then annexed the Netherlands to France. Soon after his accession to the throne, King Louis decided to send the general H.W. Daendels to the Netherlands East Indies as its Governor-General. Daendels suggested that in his retinue there should be some naturalists to study and collect the animals and plants of the colony. At that time the secretary of the King was the French botanist Charles François Brisseau de Mirbel (born in Paris 27 March 1776 — died in Paris, 12 September 1854), who was appointed to that position in the end of 1806. On 4 February 1807 De Mirbel was invited by Daendels to suggest to the King one or more naturalists to accompany him to the East Indies. De Mirbel, in his letter of the same day to the King, referred to the famous natural history collection of the former Stadtholder of the Netherlands, Willem V, Prince of Orange. This collection, as De Mirbel wrote was "le plus riche cabinet d'histoire naturelle, pour la Zoologie, qu'il y eut en Europe". This collection was confiscated by the French troops that invaded the Netherlands in 1794, and brought to Paris in 1795 to be incorporated in the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle. De Mirbel continued "Le G^{al} Daendels croit qu'il peut former une nouvelle collection non moins riche que la première si votre Majesté veut lui permettre d'emmener le Sieur Dénys Montfort et deux jeunes gens instruits dans l'histoire naturelle. J'ai connu au Jardin des Plantes, à Paris, le Sieur Montfort et je puis certifier à votre Majesté, qu'il a beaucoup d'instruction, qu'il est doué d'une prodigieuse activité, et qu'enfin, il existe peu de personnes qui conviennent autant que lui pour l'expédition proposée".

De Mirbel suggested an annual salary for Dénys de Montfort of 3.000.- Dutch guilders, and for his assistants each 1200.-; for equipment a sum of Hfl. 1000.- for De Montfort, Hfl. 400.- for each of the assistants. Furthermore, Hfl. 1.500.- was required for scientific instruments and books. In an 'arrêt' (Lett. K. Secret) of 9 February 1807, signed by Louis personally in the Royal Palace at The Hague, all De Mirbel's suggestions were accepted including the financial ones.

So far it seems smooth sailing, but then something went very wrong. Dénys de Montfort came to Holland and evidently went on board the ship "De Hersteller" (= the repairer) at Den Helder. It is not clear whether this was the ship that was to sail him to the East Indies, but that seems most likely, especially so as it was visited then by the King in person. It is certain that Daendels did not go with this ship. In order to avoid the British blockade of the European waters, he went overland via Paris to Lisbon, where he boarded the ship that brought him to Java, arriving there in January 1808. No naturalists accompanied him, and none joined him later. In the National Archives in The Hague there is a petition to the King written by Dénys de Montfort on board "De Hersteller", shortly after the King's visit to Den Helder. This document, which gives some interesting information, but leaves several questions unanswered, is too interesting not to be cited in full:

“Sire! A l’époque où Votre Majesté ordonna une Expédition pour les Indes, je jouissais d’un bonheur domestique que ne troublait aucun nuage. Livré à mes travaux scientifiques, ma situation était digne d’envie.

Le Gouverneur-Général Daendels, de qui j’ai l’honneur d’être connu individuellement, me fait appeler, m’électrise, m’offre une carrière nouvelle et de nouvelles découvertes à faire pour augmenter le domaine des connaissances humaines: Java, Borneo à explorer, des pays à parcourir où nul naturaliste n’a encor pu pénétrer, tout ce qui pouvait enfin flatter un ami de l’histoire naturelle. Je balançais cependant encor un instant, malgré ce gout inné chez moi pour les découvertes: Je devais quitter ce qui me restait encor de cher au monde. Sire! J’ai abandonné des objets tendrement chéris, dans l’espérance de les revoir un jour, avec de nouveaux titres pour la postérité: et dès lors les sacrifices pécuniaires ne me coutèrent plus rien. Mon ménage lui même n’existe plus.

Le Gouverneur Général Daendels avait su me décider en me prenant par l’honneur, qui pour moi est tout; l’argent entrant en général pour peu de choses dans mes calculs; il m’assura de sa bienveillance particulière et m’offrit sous le bon plaisir de Votre Majesté le titre de Naturaliste en chef des Indes, le rang de Colonel hors de ligne dans l’Inde, par ce que le titre militaire seul y est respecté; d’ailleurs il voulait m’employer comme ingénieur, comme militaire, ainsi que sous une foule d’autres rapports. Satisfait de ce côté, ces conditions furent rigoureusement celles qui présidèrent à mes engagemens; alors, moi même j’ai fixé mes modiques appointemens; et tout le monde convient qu’on ne peut être plus modéré, et qu’ils pourraient à peine m’y suffire: ces faits sont tous à la connaissance de Monsieur de Mirbel; Sire! dans l’Inde ces appointemens ne sont même point suffisans.

Maintenant, Sire, Votre arrivée à bord du vaisseau le *Hersteller*, dont tous nous nous faisons un jour de fête, en est un de régret pour moi seul — on m’a trompé — ah Sire!

Serais-je en but, et peut être victime de quelques calomnies; Sire, l’expérience de toute ma vie, m’apprit à les mépriser.

Je prends la liberté de recommander à la Personne auguste de Votre Majesté, mon aide-naturaliste, Mr. Le Rebours, à qui Sire, vous avez daigné parler avec tout de bonté, et qui mérite Votre Royale bienveillance par son zèle et par sa moralité.

J’invoque maintenant la justice, la générosité si connus de Votre Majesté, Seule dans sa toute-puissance Royale, Elle peut réparer ce qui se trouverait manquer à ma nomination. Si elle me refuse cette faveur, qu’elle daigne donc me rendre à moi-même à mon indépendance, à mes travaux solitaires; qu’Elle daigne me permettre de me rendre au sein de ma famille. Mes vœux inaltérables, comme mes sentimens, seront constans pour Sa gloire et la prospérité d’un règne restaurateur, à l’illustration duquel mon Roi ne m’aurait plus permis de contribuer.

J’ai l’honneur d’être Sire! de Votre Majesté. Le très humble, très obéissant, très soumis, très fidèle sujet. [signed] Dénys de Montfort. En rade du Helder, à bord du vaisseau de Sa Majesté le *Hersteller* le 26 avril 1807.” (figs. 1-2)

Judging by the documents attached to this petition, it was referred by the King (on 19 May 1807) to the minister of the colonies, who on 23 May passed it on to the head

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Denis de Montfort

Fig. 1. Signature of Dénys de Montfort on his letter to King Louis Napoléon of 26 April 1807 (National Archives, The Hague, actual size).

of the division for "de Zaken van de Oost" [= matters dealing with the East (Indies)] for advice. Evidently it has never been acted upon.

It is very clear from this petition that by 26 April 1807 Dénys de Montfort had lost the position of naturalist for the East Indies, which was given to him by the arrest of

In vue de l'Acte, à bord du
Païsseau de Sa Majesté le
Hersteller le 26 avril 1807.

Fig. 2. Conclusion of the letter from Dénys de Montfort to King Louis Napoléon (National Archives, The Hague, actual size).

9 February signed by the King. Something must have happened between 9 February and 26 April which made the King change his views. The actual reason is not made clear by the petition, and one gets the impression that it was unknown to De Montfort. It might have to do with the finances. Notwithstanding De Montfort's assertion that money is not important to him and that the salaries requested are very moderate and will hardly be sufficient, the government may have had a quite opposite view. An annual salary of Hfl. 3000.- in a time when the Dutch economy was in a disastrous condition, seems more than extravagant, especially so when that salary is compared to the Hfl. 1200.- allotted in 1822 to the naturalists sent out by the post-Napoleonic Dutch government to the Indies at a time when the country was more prosperous. Or was it the "évènement fâcheux", which coming to the ears of the king made him decide not to employ De Montfort after all? The reference to calumnies in the petition might point in that direction.

However this may be, De Montfort did not go to the Indies and evidently neither did his assistants. His claim that he was the chief naturalist to His Majesty the King of Holland evidently rests on the few months between his appointment and his dismissal. He evidently did not get a salary at all. One of his assistants, Gerard van de Graaff, was paid an advance on his salary to the amount of fl. 800.- on the authority of De Montfort. But a document in the National Archives dated 10 December 1807 indicates that this money was erroneously paid and had to be refunded by Van de Graaff. I have not been able to obtain any more information about Van de Graaff. It is clear that he was Dutch, De Montfort's second assistant was as clearly French. In his petition De Montfort named him as "Le Rebours". One wonders if this young man could not be Nicolas Marie Paymal Lerebours, who was born in 1794 and in 1842 and 1846 published some books on microscopy. He may have been a pupil of De Mirbel, who was one of the pioneers in France of microscopical plant anatomy. This Lerebours would have been 13 years old in 1807 and certainly could be ranged then among the "jeunes gens". We probably will never know.

The relation between De Montfort and De Mirbel is quite clear. As De Mirbel said, they knew each other from the "Jardin des Plantes" in Paris. De Mirbel was appointed to the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle (which resorted under the Jardin des Plantes) in 1798, and, according to Quérard, De Montfort had been aide-

géologue there. Both contributed to Sonnini's Suites aux œuvres de Buffon, De Montfort with four volumes on Mollusca, De Mirbel to some of the 18 volumes on botany.

De Montfort, in his petition, remarked that he knew Daendels personally, before being asked to join him as a naturalist to his staff. Daendels lived in exile in northern France from 1787 to 1794, when he returned to the Netherlands with the French revolutionary troops. He may have met De Montfort during his exile, although he stayed mostly in St. Omer and Dunkirk. After 1794 Daendels was mostly in the Netherlands, but may have made visits to Paris.

After his sad Dutch adventure, De Montfort returned to Paris, where in 1808 and 1810 he published the two volumes of his Conchyliologie.

In later years, although still interested in malacology, De Montfort did not publish any more on Mollusca. In 1815 he produced a "Petit vocabulaire à l'usage des Français et des Alliés", being a dictionary of the names of the most essential objects in about 18 European languages (including dialects). Vaillant (1911), who discussed it, was not greatly impressed by it, it being rather primitive and incomplete. Quérard (1828) informs us that "M. Denys de Montfort a aussi fourni plusieurs articles ou dissertations à la Bibliothèque physico-économique, depuis 1802-1816".

The end of De Montfort's life was very sad and depressing. He had become an alcoholic, lived in a small, hardly furnished, attic room in Paris and made a pittance by identifying shells for natural history dealers, which money was mostly used for drink. A vivid picture of the life of De Montfort in that period is given by Vaillant (1911), who tells about a chance meeting by G.P. Deshayes with De Montfort in the shop of a dealer, who paid De Montfort 40 sous for the identification of about 20 shells. The day of his tragic death is unknown. Cuvier (1830: 393) stated that De Montfort died "de misère dans une rue à Paris, en 1820 ou 1821".

It is very difficult to obtain a correct picture of the personality of Dénys de Montfort, as so little information is available. Cuvier's (1830) characterization "un homme singulier" fits the other information and must be correct. According to De Mirbel De Montfort had enjoyed a good education and was very hard working. De Montfort himself admitted that he sought fame and distinction more than anything else. He must have had a high opinion of himself, judging by the high salary that he requested (unless this was suggested by De Mirbel). The episode with Nadir-Mirza Shah shows De Montfort to be rather gullible, although other people also fell victim to this impostor. An unexpected feature is his thoughtfulness of others. In his petition to the king in which he fights for his job, he finds the time to insert a paragraph defending the interests of his assistant Lerebours.

De Montfort is one of those eccentric hard working naturalists of the beginning of the 19th century (Rafinesque is another of those), who notwithstanding their hard work and their intelligence were not kindly treated by Fate, although as a rule their difficult personality assisted Fate in this respect.

It is likewise difficult to form an opinion of his domestic circumstances. In his petition he drew a rosy picture of his domestic life, intimating that it could not be happier, without a cloud on the clear sky. Then he stated that he had left his tenderly loved ones, in the hope to see them again. And then suddenly his statement that his household did not exist any more. This seems unexplicable, unless he meant with "des objets tendrement chéris" not his wife and children, but his collection of molluscs. De Mirbel, in his letter of 4 February, does not mention that De Montfort had a family, but indicated that half of De Montfort's salary should go to "un enfant qu'il a adopté et qu'il soutient".

Dénys De Montfort will live on his malacological work and his name will not be forgotten. He is the author of many new taxa, and also was one of the first authors who assigned type species to molluscan genera. On those two accounts his books will continue to be consulted. The quality of his work is not entirely satisfactory. Nissen (1976: 381), in discussing De Montfort's *Conchyliologie*, stated: "Ihm ist unverdienterweise dabei der Ruhm als Autor seinerzeit schlecht begründeter Gattungen geblieben". De Blainville (1825: 216) said of De Montfort's (1802) *Histoire naturelle des Mollusques*: "ils contiennent bien des choses hasardées". Vaillant (1911) is more positive and praised Dénys de Montfort for making all his drawings himself.

There is very little uniformity in the way in which the name of Pierre Dénys de Montfort is cited in the literature and in contemporary documents. In most bibliographies and biographies it is ranged under the D of Dénys, this in contrast to C.F. Brisseau de Mirbel, who is always placed under M of Mirbel. In both names often the nobiliar prefix "de" is omitted, probably as a result of the French revolution. In his 1802 books Dénys de Montfort cited his name on the title page as Dénys-Montfort. The name Dénys is sometimes written Dénis, or the accent is left off. That the third letter of the name should be y and not i is clear from Dénys de Montfort's signature, and from the fact that the y is used on the title pages of his books. On these title pages the acute accent is omitted from the e, but this may be because the name is printed in capitals. Dénys de Montfort's signature shows the accent clearly, while also De Mirbel, who knew him personally, used the accent. That De Mirbel used the spelling Dénis instead of Dénys, may be explained by the fact that there is no difference in the pronunciation of the two. Therefore, it is practically certain that the correct family name is Dénys de Montfort. In the present paper I have used this complete name or only De Montfort.

No portrait of De Montfort is known to me.

I want to express here my gratitude to Mr. C.J. Zandvliet, head of the Division of Maps and Drawings of the Rijksarchief (National Archives), The Hague, who first drew my attention to Dénys de Montfort, and provided me with copies of the documents concerning this interesting zoologist present in the Rijksarchief.

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