

## Charles de Foucauld, a French Spy in Reconnaissance Mission of Morocco (1883-1884)

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### Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to shed light on the life of Charles de Foucauld as a military before becoming a priest living as a hermit in the Algerian Sahara. The research methods adopted in this case of studying a historical figures is to compare and contrast data from different sources. The findings from exploring and studying such sources enable us to draw the following conclusions. The fact that he was a military had a great influence on his decisions all along his life. He became interested in exploring Morocco and the Sahara when he participated in the military campaign to defeat Sheikh Bou Amama's revolt against the French invasion. Foucauld's interest in exploring Morocco was not animated by the desire to satisfy a personal quest to discover the unknown, but to collect intelligence for the French government for an eventual invasion of such mysterious and rich country. It is undeniable that Charles de Foucauld's reconnaissance of Morocco helped greatly in the French invasion of Morocco from 1912 because his maps were minutely studied by the French Generals.

**Keywords:** Charles de Foucauld, Morocco, exploration, espionage, French colonisation, the Maghreb

### الملخص:

الغرض من هذا المقال هو تسليط الضوء على حياة شارل دي فوكو كرجل عسكري قبل أن يصبح كاهناً يعيش كناسك في الصحراء الجزائرية. تتمثل طرق البحث المعتمدة في هذه الحالة من دراسة الشخصيات التاريخية في مقارنة البيانات من مصادر مختلفة ومقارنتها. النتائج المستخلصة من استكشاف ودراسة هذه المصادر من استخلاص النتائج التالية: حقيقة أن شارل دي فوكو كان رجل عسكري كان له تأثير كبير على قراراته طوال حياته. أصبح مهتماً باستكشاف المغرب والصحراء عندما شارك في الحملة العسكرية لهزيمة ثورة الشيخ بوعمامة ضد الغزو الفرنسي. لم يكن اهتمام فوكو باستكشاف المغرب مدفوعاً بالرغبة في إرضاء سعي شخصي لاكتشاف المجهول، بل لجمع معلومات استخباراتية للحكومة الفرنسية عن غزو مستقبلي لمثل هذه الدولة الغامضة والغنية. لذلك لا يمكن إنكار أن استطلاع شارل دي فوكو ساعد بشكل كبير في الاحتلال الفرنسي للمغرب.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** شارل دي فوكو، المغرب، استكشاف، تجسس، الاستعمار الفرنسي، المغرب العربي

## Introduction

In the collective memory of the local population in the Saoura region, Charles de Foucauld was an imposter that cheated on the naive and ignorant autochthons for forty years, especially in Beni Abbes, by claiming himself as a Moslem Marabout to officiate them in their prayers. After he had been unmasked, he fled to the country of the Tuareg to save his life, but he was killed there. Most of the stories exchanged about de Foucauld do not come even close to the real events that he experienced. This article puts into evidence the early life of Charles de Foucauld and his military participation to defeat Sheikh Bouamama's revolt. It also stresses his active, laborious, and successful exploration of Morocco to facilitate an eventual French invasion of the Kingdom.

### 1. Foucauld's Early Life and Expedition in Algeria in 1880

Charles Eugene de Foucauld was born on September 15, 1858, in Strasbourg in a religious family. He had a pious childhood thanks to his mother who was a religiously fervent woman, and his father Francois-Eduard viscount de Foucauld de PontBriand, the assistant-inspector of forests. Unfortunately, for him, his mother and father died respectively on March 13, 1864, and on August 9 of the same year. Charles and his sister Marie were put in their grandfather's care M. Charles-Gabriel de Morlet who was then a retired military officer of seventy years old. Although, Charles was materially well-off, he showed signs of a psychologically disturbed child.

Orphanage had an adverse effect on the personality of the boy. He was a quick-tempered and violent that could not take a joke.<sup>1</sup> His grandfather sent him to Saint-Arbogast episcopal school, and then to a high school (lycee) that was run by Strasbourg dioceses priests. De Morlet moved with the children to Berne because of the war and the annexation of the Alsace and Lorraine by Germany, and in 1872, he went to live in Nancy. Charles was sent to a boarding high school, which had a negative effect on him since he lost the habit to work hard, and gradually lost his religious faith. Later he passed the baccalaureate and joined the Saint-Cyr school in Paris at the age of 17. There, he was not a model student because he was in many times on the verge of being expelled.<sup>2</sup> In others, he was requested to quit the school. There was no other alternative for him just to leave Saint-Cyr and join a military school.

Charles de Foucauld joined the Saumur cavalry school in 1878, where he led a life of abundance debauch to the point that his uncle M. Moitessier provided him with a legal adviser. Lieutenant Foucauld's dissolute life ceased in 1880 when his regiment the 4<sup>ème</sup> hussards was posted in Algeria. His stay in Algeria developed in him a passion for Africa and colonial life. However, his superior officer reproached him for living with a French young woman outside of marriage and undisciplined conduct,<sup>3</sup> and thus ordered him to break off such relation or quit the regiment. Foucauld's stubborn attitude led him to disobey and quit the regiment. He retired in Evian after the Ministry put him in temporary off duty.

Foucauld decided to return to Algeria when news of Bou Amama's<sup>4</sup> armed resistance reached him in the spring of 1881. He wrote to the War Ministry pleading for joining his regiment the 4<sup>ème</sup> Chasseurs that was assigned the mission of defeating the insurrection. As his request was accepted, he travelled to

<sup>1</sup> René Bazin. *Charles de Foucauld, Explorateur du Maroc, Ermite au Sahara*. Paris: Librairie Plon. 1921. P.5.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Carrouges. *Charles de Foucauld, explorateur Mystique*. Paris: Editions du Cerf 1954. P.19.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 34

<sup>4</sup> Cheikh Bouamama (1833 - 1908 Morocco) led a war in Algeria against the French invaders from 1881 to 1883. He was the leader of the Awlad Sidi Shaykh confederation in the southwest of Algeria that fell apart due to disagreements among the tribes. When Cheikh Bouamama retreated to Morocco in 1882 the French conquest of the south of Algeria was complete. Cheikh Bouamama. In: *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved December 28, 2017, from <https://en.wikipedia.org>.

Algiers to participate in the expedition in the southern region of Oran. He asserted that the expedition had a profound impact on him to the point that it had provided him with a new perspective of life.<sup>5</sup>

The Arab population had a profound impression on Foucauld. Once Bou Amama was defeated, he asked for a vacation to undertake a voyage in the south of Algeria. Since his superiors refused to grant him a vacation, he handed in his resignation and settled in Algiers in order to prepare for an exploratory voyage in Morocco in 1883. He was then 24 years old. It is not clear why Foucauld chose to explore Morocco that was hostile to European presence, and did not explore Algeria that was under French rule. Apparently, he chose to explore Morocco because it represented for him the road less travelled by, and proposed exciting challenges. His choice could be also be attributed to a military strategy that required intelligence on Morocco for possible future French invasion.

## 2. Foucauld's Reconnaissance of Morocco in 1883-1884

Foucauld was not the first to attempt the exploration of Morocco. He had been preceded by explorers that intended to portray the mysterious North Africa for the Europeans. In 1803, Ali Bey-el-Abassi, a Spanish born succeeded to make a journey in which he visited successively Tangiers, Fez, Rabat, and then Marrakech, and returned to Oujda via Fez. He intended to visit the mysterious and dangerous Taza but without success. On the other hand, Maurice de Ghavagnac travelled from Fez to Oujda in 1879 and passed by Taza without staying in because of the reigning insecurity that obliged him to take safer routes. Only Foucauld could traverse the Taza region and brought very precise description and valuable geographic data. Such success of exploring was due to through research and meticulous preparation.

The first step to achieve his goal of exploring Morocco was to acquire sufficient geographical, socio-ethnic and cultural knowledge of Morocco. In Algiers, he locked himself in libraries to learn Arabic and study books written on the Kingdom.<sup>6</sup> He also made acquaintances with men that would help him in the preparation for his project. He met Oscar McCarthy,<sup>7</sup> the librarian of Mustapha-Pacha Palace library, with whom he spent long hours studying old geography books and maps. However, the first obstacle that Foucauld came up against was the impossibility to travel while displaying his Christian faith in a hostile Moslem country like Morocco.

The Moroccans did not authorize explorations within the kingdom out of the fear of being conquered as it had happened to Algiers. Therefore, the Moroccan Kings<sup>8</sup> reduced the Europeans' itinerary range to the minimum calling it the Ambassadors Itinerary. While discussing the matter with McCarthy, they concluded that the safest way to explore Morocco was to travel under Arabic or Jewish disguise costumes. The two disguises posed the big problem of acquiring deep knowledge of Moslem and Jewish manners, customs life-style, and above all religion. In the end, Foucauld opted for the Jewish costume, which obliged him to learn Hebrew along with Arabic and study the Jewish customs. McCarthy helped him in this enterprise by introducing him to Rabin MardocheAbi Serour, his future companion and guide in the exploration of Morocco.

<sup>5</sup> Georges Goree. *Sur les traces de Charles de Foucauld*. Grenoble: Arthaud. 1947. P. 27

<sup>6</sup> Georges Gorrée. *Charles de Foucauld Intime*. Paris: Edition La Colombe. 1952. P.29.

<sup>7</sup>Oscar Louis Alfred Mac Carthy (Paris, 1815- Algiers, 1894) was a geographer and in explorer of Irish origin. He was born in Paris and later moved to live Algiers in 1852. He became the director of the National Library of Algeria from 1869 to 1890, a post that enabled him to advise and help many explorers such as Henri Duveyrier, Victor Largeau, Louis Say, Paul Soleillet Paul Flatters, and Charles de Foucauld. *He wrote Algeria Romana* (1857), *Géographie Physique et Economique de l'Algérie* (1858), and *Considérations sur le Chemin de Fer de Sidi-bel-Abbès à Tlemcen* (1878). "Oscar Mac Carthy." *Wikipédia, l'encyclopédie libre*. March 5, 2016. Retrieved: 12-12-2017.

<sup>8</sup>The Moroccan Kings referred to were Moulay Abderrahmane (1822-1859), Sidi Mohammed ben Abderrahmane, called Mohammed IV (1859-1873), and Moulay Hassan ben Mohammed later called Hassan I<sup>st</sup> (1873-1894).

Foucauld's exploration started at Algiers on June 10, 1883, with the intention to find a route through the Rif region after traversing the Algerian-Moroccan frontier. In company of Rabin Mardoche, Foucauld travelled to Oran by train under the name of Rabin Joseph Aleman, a Muscovite that fled from persecution to find shelter in Jerusalem where he spent some time and then moved to North Africa. From Oran, the two men travelled to Tlemcen to get to Tetouan through the Rif. At Tlemcen, Mardoche advanced the story that Foucauld was a great physicist and astrologer, who accomplished miracles by curing severe eye diseases that enabled blind people to see again.<sup>9</sup> He advanced also that his outstanding performances brought him the hatred of Christian doctors, which obliged him to leave for Morocco where he could exercise his profession. On the other hand, the true traveling reason of Mardoche was to find his brother-in-law who fled from Algiers to settle in the Rif region in Morocco.

The two companions had to face the fact that they could not traverse the Rif from Tetouan only under the protection of a Moroccan Sheikh.<sup>10</sup> Since they could not acquire the protection of a Sheikh, they opted for another itinerary that aimed to reach Tangiers via Gibraltar by liner. Therefore, Foucauld's exploration in Morocco started from Tangiers on June 20, 1883, to last until May 23, 1884.

Foucauld's itinerary<sup>11</sup> commenced in Tangiers with the intention to reach Tetouan and then Fez. From Fez, he travelled to the Tadla crossing the mountains occupied by Zemmour Chellaha and Zaian tribes to reach Oued el Abid and then to Demnat. Thanks to the protection of the Mokaddem of the famous Zaouia of Moulay Idriss who maintained the Riata brigand tribe under his religious control,<sup>12</sup> Foucauld could traverse the Grand Atlas in a straight line to Taza, and then make his way to the Sahara to explore the vast regions still unknown to the Europeans between Oued Dra and the Sahel. This phase represented the return point of Foucauld's expedition to go back to Algeria by crossing the Grand Atlas for the second time, which enabled him to explore Oued Melouia. Along the way, he collected very valuable information about the regions he traversed.

Foucauld advocated that his exploration of Morocco was purely at the same time scientific, geographic, military, and political.<sup>13</sup> The instruments he carried were a compass, a watch, a pocket barometer, a sextant, a chronometer, and an instrument called 'horizon à huile' for latitude and longitude observations, two other holosteric barometers, a sling thermometer to measure humidity, and Max-Min thermometer to measure the temperature variations in a day used for meteorological observations.<sup>14</sup>

The materials that Foucauld selected for his exploration do not evoke a scientific expedition where the fauna and flora were part of the subject matter studied. The nature of the instruments gives the impression that it was more for military purposes than scientific ones. Foucauld's task was also to analyse the political situation both in *Blad El Mekhzen* (the part of the country that was under the Sultan's authority) and *Blad El Siba* (the part of the country that the Sultan did not have full control). In addition, he explained in his book *Reconnaissance au Maroc* that he was recommended by the Governor General of Algeria Mr. Tirman to the French Consul in Tangiers Mr. Ordega to assist him and employ all means for the success of his expedition.<sup>15</sup> This recommendation indicates that the French authorities backed him, and the expedition was not a voluntarily personal quest for adventure.

After setting his objectives, Foucauld and Mardoche quitted Tangiers on June 21, 1883, in the company of a small caravan that headed towards Tetouan. In Tetouan, he spent some days and on July 2, 1883, he travelled south in the direction of Chechouen because he preferred to cross wild and forbidden

<sup>9</sup> Rene Bazin. Op. cit., p. 26

<sup>10</sup>Ibid .

<sup>11</sup> See map p.

<sup>12</sup> Georges-Gaulis Berthe. *La France au Maroc, Œuvre du Général Lyautey*. Paris : Librairie Armand Colin. 1919. P.103.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.45

<sup>14</sup> Rene Bazin. Op. cit., p.7

<sup>15</sup> Charles de Foucauld. *Reconnaissance au Maroc, 1883-1884*. Paris : Challamel et C<sup>ie</sup> Editeurs. 1888. P. 2.

regions.<sup>16</sup> He halted there for a month to undertake two important excursions in the east namely one in Taza and the other in Sefrou. Once Foucauld finished studying the two regions, he headed towards Meknes and then to Bou el Djad where he arrived on September 6. It was in *Blad El Siba* where the sultan had relatively no authority that he undertook his observations with relative easiness. He took notes on terrain quality, the trees, and the animals all along his voyage and excursions. He gathered and recorded pieces of information with extreme attention that, as he noted in his book *Reconnaissance au Maroc*, could serve a geographer, a sociologist, a colonist, or a soldier.<sup>17</sup>

Such observations evidently had to be done secretly without raising the suspicion of his caravan companions or the people he encountered whether in cities or in the countryside. It was a risky enterprise because it was punishable by death if caught with materials and notes intended to supply the French conquerors of Algeria with vivid portrayals of Morocco. Foucauld took strict precautions while making his observations and writing them down. In the countryside, he worked only at night by breaking off the caravan with the pretext to pray in isolation.<sup>18</sup> However, in cities, it was somehow easy for him to use the barometer and the sextant since the measures could be taken from the roofs of houses without being seen. Simultaneously, he wrote down his measurements and notes with a very small pencil in a small notebook without exceeding the palm of his hand.<sup>19</sup> Evidently, a risky enterprise required adequate financial means to reach the set objectives.

Foucauld noted that the voyage would cost him all the money he brought with him. Up to this stage in his voyage, he still had two mules valued about 250 francs for each and had spent 1500 Francs.<sup>20</sup> The most expensive thing he had to purchase was the protection of a Sheikh to guarantee his safe passage in dangerous regions. The price of protection or *anaia* varied according to the dangers of the region to traverse. For example, to traverse the region of the Kabylia Riata tribe did not only require a lot of money for protection, but also a representative of the Sheikh who granted it. Foucauld paid 60 francs<sup>21</sup> to receive protection of Sheikh Hadj Tayeb Kssous (Qçouç) of Fes who wrote a letter of recommendation to his friend Sidi Ben Daoud of Bou-el-Djad requesting him to take Foucauld and his companion under his protection. Therefore, Sheikh Bendaoud sent his grandson to escort them through the dangerous territories, especially that of the Riata tribe.

Foucauld and Mardoche spent six days in the hospitality of Omar the son of Sheikh Bendaoud, who put his guests under strict surveillance. The evident behaviour of Foucauld that did not resemble that of a Rabin betrayed him and did not elude Omar.<sup>22</sup> The latter hinted in different occasions that he did not hold any grudge against the Christians and that he was ready to treat with the French by receiving their envoys and make them enjoy his hospitality. Foucauld became well acquainted with Omar's son Idris, who had the task of taking care of the guests. Before leaving Bou-el-Djad, Foucauld and Idris confided in to each other their true intentions. While Idris informed Foucauld that his father was not against treating with the French, Foucauld confessed his faith and the nature of his expedition. Therefore, Idris wrote two recommendation letters to the Jews of Kasbah Tadla and those of Kasbah Beni-Mellal signed by the Rabbins of Bou-el-Djad, and asked Foucauld to deliver a secret letter to the French Government in which he asked to grant him audience through the French Consul in Dar-Beïda (Casablanca).<sup>23</sup> Idris declared that Sheikh Ben Daoud knew nothing of this political standpoint and that only his father Omar supported him.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., P.51

<sup>17</sup> Rene Bazin., Op. cit., p .51

<sup>18</sup> Charles de Foucauld. Op. cit., p. 14

<sup>19</sup> Rene Bazin. Op. cit., p. 46

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>21</sup> Charles de Foucauld. Op. cit., p. 31

<sup>22</sup> Rene Bazin. Op. cit., p.60

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

It is apparent that the idea to ally with the French emanated from two critical economic and political factors. The first was the reigning insecurity that killed any opportunity to develop commercial transactions in the whole *Bled El Siba* region. As Foucauld noted, nearly all commercial activities disappeared maintaining the region in poverty although he found it very fertile and irrigated with rivers throughout the year. The second was political since the absence of the Sultan's authority would have given Idris and his Father a pretext to ally with the French for the establishment of a new authority to bring peace and prosperity to the region. Evidently, King Moulay el Hassan (1873-1894), also called Hassan I<sup>st</sup>, would not have accepted such alliance that threatened his rule, and for such treason, Bendaoud and his supporters would pay for with their lives.

Foucauld and his companions, Idris and Mardoche, started their journey southwards towards the Saharan regions of Morocco via Tanzida and Tisint. The latter was on the left slope of the Dra River that was on the verge of the Hamada where Foucauld encountered Hadj Bou Rhim who became for him a friend and saviour from dangerous situations. He undertook excursions for a month in the south in the region of Tatta, Mader, and Akka. At the end of his excursions, he decided to return to Algeria by crossing the inhospitable and dangerous Rif. Foucauld needed the protection of a powerful Sheikh, which he solicited in the person of Sidi Abdullah Oumbarek who lived in Mrimima.

When Foucauld arrived at Mrimima, it was rumoured that he possessed a great quantity of gold, which watered the mouths of thieves and bandits that intended to ambush him.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, he wrote a letter to Hadj Bou Rhim that a beggar delivered asking for his help. The next day, Hadj Bou Rhim arrived at Mrimima with twenty-five (25) infantryman and two cavaliers<sup>25</sup> to escort Foucauld and his companion back to Tisint. At this stage, the exigencies of the exploration depleted Foucauld's financial means.

Foucauld did the accounts at Tisint and found that with the remaining money he could not follow the itinerary eastwards to Algeria as intended. Therefore, he decided to reach the nearest city where some Europeans lived namely Mogador, Essaouira today, on the Atlantic coast. He also decided to leave Mardoche at Tisint and continue his journey to Mogador with the company of Hadj Bou Rhim. When they arrived at Mogador on January 28, 1884, Foucauld went directly to the French Consulate where he was greeted by M. Montel, the Consulate Chancellor. When he reached Mogador, he had already spent four thousand of the initial six thousand Francs<sup>26</sup> devoted to his exploration in Morocco. Therefore, he wrote to his sister Marie to send him the remaining two thousand Francs to a bank in Tangiers, which would transfer the money to the bank in Mogador.

Foucauld received the two thousand Francs on March 14, 1884, and rejoined Tisint with Hadj Bou Rhim, but this time he took a different route that enabled him to reach Oued Sous in the south of Agadir.<sup>27</sup> On the 31<sup>st</sup> of March, they arrived at Tisint, and after a short stay, he decided to leave with Mardoche taking the northeast route. However, no one accepted to accompany them because of the hazards of the route, which obliged him to hire three men for his escort in order to take the route to Tazenakht to reach Mezquita, then to Dades, and later to Ksabi-ech-Cheurfa. However, on his way to Debdou, his escort decided to rob him leaving him without any money.<sup>28</sup> Fortunately, he managed to reach Oujda from which he entered Algeria to arrive at Lalla-Marnia (Maghnia) on May 23. Later, he left Mardoche in Lalla-Marnia, and then travelled to Paris where he devoted his time to write his famous book *Reconnaissance au Maroc*.

<sup>24</sup> Georges Gorree. *Charles de Foucauld Intime*. Op. cit., p. 40.

<sup>25</sup> Rene Bazin. Op. cit., p.68

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.70

<sup>27</sup> See Map p.

<sup>28</sup> Charles de Foucauld. Op. cit. p. 230.

### 3. Charles de Foucauld's Legacy

Charles de Foucauld stayed in Paris for the drafting of his book *Reconnaissance au Maroc* that was published by the end of 1887 and beginning of 1888. This book was for his contemporaries a mine of information about the mysterious Morocco. The objective of Foucauld's exploration was to collect intelligence on the geographic, cultural, and socio-political and economic aspects of Morocco. In his book *Reconnaissance au Maroc*, he devoted the second chapter under the title *Renseignements* meaning information or intelligence collected from espionage activities. This chapter is a very outstanding piece of work because it contains the necessary information for the French army to invade Morocco. In addition to the geographic studies, he studied the tribes that occupied the lands, rivers, and mountains along with their possessions in terms of arms and horses, and the routes that led to the villages and cities, and the time it would take to reach them. It is evident that such information was consulted by the French military that later operated in Morocco.

In the end of his book, Foucauld added an appendix to portray the Israelites in Morocco socially and statistically, and a list of the astronomic observations made during his voyage including tables of the latitudes and longitudes, meteorological observations, and an index of the geographic appellations of the different sites he visited.

According to the Paris Geographic Society (*Société de Géographie de Paris*), Foucauld's exploration had widened the European knowledge related to Morocco.<sup>29</sup> In one year, he more than doubled the itinerary surveyed in Morocco in length. He improved about 689 kilometres surveyed by his predecessors and added 2250 km of new routes. He also determined 45 longitudes and 40 latitudes. While the European knew only around 10 altitudes, Foucauld brought 3000.<sup>30</sup> His exploit in exploring Morocco encouraged him to undertake the exploration of Algeria mainly the southern regions.

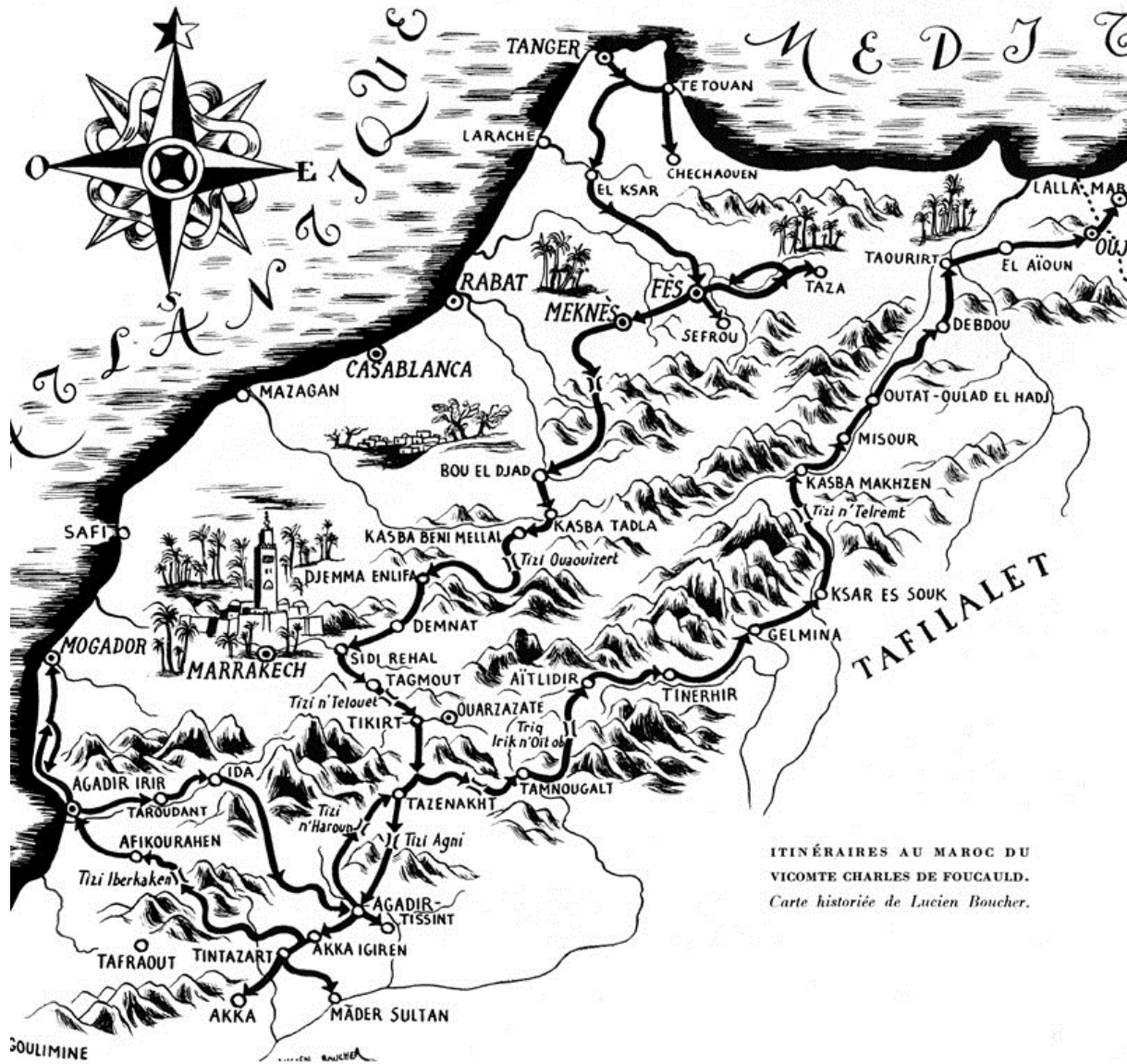
<sup>29</sup> Henri Duveyrier. "Rapport fait à la Société de géographie à propos du voyage de M. le Vicomte Charles de Foucauld au Maroc". In : *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie de Paris*. Paris. Séance du 24 avril. Librairie de CH. Delagrave Editeur. 1885. p. 12.

<sup>30</sup> Rene Bazin, op. cit., p.76

# CHARLES de FOUCAULD

EXPLORATEUR DU MAROC

1883 1884



Map Historiated by Lucien Boucher. <http://www.cemroc.com>



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