

INTRODUCTION

The Dutch presence on the African continent during most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries can hardly be called impressive. It consisted of nothing more than a string of strongholds along the West African coast (and a few on islands to the east of the continent). The length of stay of the Dutch varied greatly from place to place. Sometimes the forts outlived their usefulness and were abandoned. At other times they were taken over (by force or by trade) by other European seafaring nations. In some posts, the Dutch stayed for years (as in Elmina in Ghana from 1637 to 1872), but in others just a few months.¹

The Dutch (and their European counterparts in Africa) were kept in check by surrounding African rulers and residents, who jealously guarded the supply of export goods like ivory, pepper and gold. This trade was soon surpassed by the one in human cargo, as the demand for slaves in the Americas grew. But Dutch power never extended beyond the walls of their forts. The Dutch had to be careful not to do anything to upset their African neighbours. The threat that they could be cut off from inland provisions was ever-present, and if that happened, they would become dependent on a meagre and sporadic supply of food from passing ships. Furthermore, because Europeans at the time had little resistance to tropical diseases, many of them perished — a further incentive to stay within the fort walls.² Thus almost none of the Dutch bases in Africa could be described as a settlement, let alone a colony.

This book is about the one exception: The Cape of Good Hope, which could make a plausible claim to be called Dutch Africa. At the Cape, in the southwestern corner of Africa, the Dutch East India Company or *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC) managed to build a proper settlement, which it governed from 1652 to 1795. The indigenous population was no match for the military might of the Company, and the temperate climate suited the Dutch residents well and was ideal for cultivation. The VOC authorities decided to release some of their men from their contracts as employees and settle them as *burghers*. These settlers pushed further and further inland, despite reservations from the authorities in the Netherlands

1 See a list of Dutch bases in Africa here: Ramerini, M. (n.d.) Africa. List of Dutch colonial forts and possessions. <https://www.colonialvoyage.com/africa-list-dutch-colonial-forts-possessions> (Accessed 12 April 2019).

2 Emmer, P & Gommans, J. 2012. *Rijk aan de Rand van de Wereld. De Geschiedenis van Nederland Overzee 1600–1800*. Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 251–264.

about expanding the territory beyond the immediate environs of the central stronghold on the coast of Table Bay.

Cape society was shaped not only by people from the Netherlands (VOC personnel and the burghers) but also by other populations and social groups (like free blacks, the descendants of slaves). Many (if not most) of the VOC personnel came from other European countries. Slaves and political convicts were forcibly brought in from various parts of Africa and from India and Asia. All these nationalities, ethnicities and cultures left their mark.

Was Dutch Africa, therefore, really as Dutch as it seemed? Because of the diversity of its communities, there will always be a disclaimer when referring to Dutch settlements. But there were enough connections and organisational aspects to support the claim that the Cape was essentially a Dutch settlement. It is an important observation, and one that has not been sufficiently recognised in South African historiography about the VOC period.

It is now widely acknowledged that the Cape did not exist in isolation, but that it was actively engaged in a multitude of different networks, one of which was the Dutch world. Yet the 'Dutch connection' remains underexposed. South African historians are generally unfamiliar with Dutch historical studies, which is unfortunate because so much about the Cape can be explained better once put in the context of its Dutch character. The expansion of the settlement and the increasing size of the population created a need for more administrative organisation and rules, for which the institutions of the Netherlands served as examples. The Netherlands and the Cape had the same judicial system, the same administrative bodies, some of the same economic mechanisms, and many of the same social and political customs. Being Dutch had a profound effect on the way in which Cape residents experienced life in their settlement. In the first five chapters, I will elaborate on the Dutch-ness of the Cape settlement.

The Dutch character of the Cape had far-reaching consequences for the local political dynamics, which is what I will show in the remainder of the book. This was certainly true for the members of the two groups around whom this book is centred: Company officials and burghers, especially those operating in the middle and higher layers of Cape society. This is a story about the elite of the Cape. The Cape residents who dwelt in the higher social and political circles were undoubtedly closer to the Dutch experience than other inhabitants of the settlement. Both VOC officials and burghers had many kinds of connections with the Netherlands. Because of that, Cape burghers, as they developed their sense of belonging, saw themselves as

equal to the burghers of Dutch towns and cities and felt that they should be afforded the same rights and privileges. This was not the view of the powerful Company, which took the position that everyone in its territories was always subject to its supreme power. This disagreement was a constant cause of tension between the VOC government and burghers.

But the burghers were not powerless in their battle against Company constraints. They used the means provided by Dutch traditions of protest to influence policies in their favour and were often quite successful. One of the main tools available to burghers was the petition, which was extensively used in the Netherlands by anybody who wanted to make a change in existing regulations or create new ones. Over time, the practice surrounding the construction, submission and acceptance or rejection of petitions had become broadly accepted in the Dutch political arena. Similarly, throughout the VOC period, Cape burghers used the petition to make their point. The best-known example of this was when they applied for Governor Willem Adriaan van der Stel to be removed from his post at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and were successful.

Another major political conflict erupted in the Cape settlement in the late 1770s. The argument of this book is that this conflict was a natural continuation and outcome of the political dynamics as they had developed at the Cape. Set on the cusp of the dying days of Company rule, it was the last eruption of the ongoing tensions between burghers and Company, but more importantly, of the tensions between leading members of the political establishment.

It is here that I fundamentally disagree with Coenraad Beyers, who wrote an extensive study about the conflict, which has since become known as the uprising of the Cape Patriots.³ His argument is that the Cape protest movement was an awakening of Afrikaner nationalism in that the burghers who stood against oppression by an unjust ruler became Afrikaners. He then links the event to the Afrikaner uprising against British rule in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This view fitted perfectly with the prevalent political narrative during the apartheid era, but one cannot escape the impression that it was specifically made to fit there. This is, in fact, a perfect example of how history has been abused to further the ideas and agendas of an authoritarian regime.

3 Beyers, C. 1967. *Die Kaapse Patriotte gedurende die Laaste Kwart van die Agtiende Eeu en die Voortlewing van hul Denkbeelde*. 2nd ed. Pretoria: Van Schaik.

This book will show that the protestors in the Cape political conflict of the 1770s and 1780s followed in the footsteps of their burgher and Dutch forerunners. I argue that the events of the conflict show that the protests were carried out in the best tradition of Dutch urban politics and revolt. I develop this argument further by examining the social origins of the supporters of the Cape protest movement, who were the middle and upper layers of burgher society. This was the same support base as for protests in Dutch towns and cities.

This is not the end of the story though. In my view, it is too simple to see the conflict as one purely between discontented burghers and an arrogant Company regime. Possible motives for the outbreak of the protests, such as adverse economic conditions or concerns about burgher status, are not enough to explain the scope and impact of the movement. This is not only my opinion, but also that of contemporary observers who had a good understanding of the situation. Joachim van Plettenberg, who was the governor of the Cape of Good Hope from 1771 to 1785 described the group of burghers involved in the protest, who by then were wealthy and powerful farmers and entrepreneurs, as ‘matadors’. By this he meant that they were influential and powerful men who worked behind the scenes to whip up emotions among the burghers and mobilise them into action. These men had their own reasons to stir the pot, and none of these had anything to do with a general feeling of discontent or wanting to serve the common good of the community. They were seeking access to the centre of economic and political power for their personal benefit. The striking aspect of this group of men was that they were part of a closely related network of burghers and Company officials. The conflict as it occurred around 1780 was in fact an ordinary fight for the spoils between members of the ruling elite; and this was nothing unusual in the Dutch political world.

The view of Coenraad Beyers that the burgher protesters were Afrikaner Patriots fighting to liberate themselves from an oppressor is still held. But it is outdated. What happened at the Cape must be placed in the context of Dutch history and then the pieces fit together much more comfortably.