

Book Reviews

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Boekresensies

Admirable collection on identities in Dutch Cape Town

Nigel Worden (ed.), *Cape Town between East and West: Social Identities in a Dutch Colonial Town*

Jacana Media, Johannesburg and Uitgeverij Verloren, Hilversum, 2012

282pp

ISBN 978-1-4314-0292-2

R228.00

Cape Town between East and West brings together a collection of ten essays, along with an absorbing “Introduction”, written by a number of well known historians in the field of Cape colonial history. As far as the contributors to this wonderfully edited volume go, they constitute the “usual suspects” (apart from two recent PhD graduates, Groenewald and Baartman). As participants in an interdisciplinary research group which was founded by the Universities of Cape Town and the Western Cape in 2003, the authors have trained their collective gaze on Dutch Cape Town and produced exciting new work in the process.

The research on offer is fresh, timely and a welcome addition to Cape colonial historiography. The volume is dedicated to the period of Dutch colonial rule from 1652 to 1795, when Cape Town fell under the control of the Dutch East India Company, although the eighteenth century is dealt with in greater depth than the second half of the seventeenth century. This adds to the book’s value, because the British colonial period during the nineteenth century has for the past several decades received a significant amount of attention and has come to dominate Cape historiography. This is especially so with regard to the theme of social identity in Cape colonial history. Related studies on how ideas of status, respectability and honour functioned in the Cape colonial setting have tended to focus on the nineteenth century. *Cape Town between East and West* represents a moment of re-balancing. It is pleasing to see some of the same historians who produced such excellent work on histories of social identities in the nineteenth century Cape delivering equally compelling research on the earlier colonial period.

With its focus on Cape Town rather than the colony’s rural and frontier zones, the book also forwards a new urban history of social encounters and identity formation in a colonial context. As the editor, Nigel Worden, notes in his introduction to the volume, it has only been in the last ten years or so that the “social history of early Cape Town” has come under serious scrutiny (p xi). The groups which appear in the chapters also point towards new emphases in Cape colonial research. In terms of the colony’s under classes, slaves and labouring Khoesan have tended to be the focus of work associated with the significant expansion of Cape colonial history in the past

30 years. In contrast, *Cape Town between East and West* explores the shaping and re-shaping of social identity among groups that have been largely neglected until now: convicts, artisans, soldiers, sailors, exiles and freed slaves. The compilation also includes contributions that explore social identity among some of the city's elite inhabitants, in particular, Cape burghers and the officials of the Dutch East India Company.

These new research impetuses reflect the effects of a "cultural turn" in social histories internationally. Current avenues of research in South Africanist and Cape colonial historiography are tuned in to this contemporary, global impulse. Since the 1990s social historians have been increasingly influenced by a "cultural turn" and have become interested in themes such as dress, leisure, social attitudes, consumption, living spaces, material belongings, social performance and language as notable forms of social performance and expressions of identity in historical settings. Postcolonial and postmodern ideas have led historians to investigate pre-modern or not-yet-entirely-modern worlds with a view to gaining a better understanding of how identities were expressed and defended in colonial settings by both the colonisers and the colonised.

The prevalence of class-based analyses, which were so characteristic of the revisionist historiography of the late twentieth century in South Africa, has been replaced by a growing interest in the cultural distinctions within and between classes. *Cape Town between East and West* is a consummate example of this trend. To the credit of the editor and contributors, the compilation's focus on the complexity of social interactions in the colonial city setting has not negated "conventional issues of power, class, gender and race" (p xii). Indeed, these structural markers of identity defined notions of status, respectability and honour, determining what was possible and what was not in the realm of self-perception, even as they were open to being contested in the pursuit of a self-fashioned identity. The individual contributions to this volume also illustrate the extent to which historians are influenced by their contemporary context. Contests over identity and subjectivity have come to dominate South Africa's post-apartheid public discourse. South Africans of all races and classes are engaged in re-imagining themselves in a context in which apartheid-inspired identities are being challenged and re-invented.

Looking back, pre-industrial historians are attempting to uncover how issues of identity and subjectivity shaped and were shaped by social interactions in the past. In this vein, the colonial city constitutes an ideal locale for exploring how identities were constructed by their bearers. The case studies in *Cape Town between East and West* all exhibit the tensions that existed between identities as they were ascribed by the power, racial, gendered and class dynamics of the Cape colonial context and identities aspired to by those labelled convicts, soldiers, artisans, exiles, burghers or freed slaves, among other categories. A common thread which runs through all the chapters relates to what extent different categories of person in Dutch Cape Town could mould, and in some cases transcend, their own prescribed status. Worden sums it up neatly when he posits that "men and

women constructed their identities with whatever resources they could, and not always in ways determined by the legal categories of free and unfree, burgher and employee, or in accordance with their class or ethnicity” (p xxii). A greater appreciation for the complexity of the processes of local self-fashioning is afforded by recognising that eighteenth-century Cape Town was made up of a largely transient population. Many inhabitants were temporary sojourners. At any one time the budding city was occupied by visiting sailors and soldiers; farmers from the interior seeking to sell their produce; upcountry slaves and Khoesan servants accompanying their masters to market; officials on appointment to oversee Company matters; as well as other occupants who lived in the city on a more permanent basis.

All the contributing authors have either directly or indirectly highlighted the need to study eighteenth-century Cape Town as a port city which was connected to a “much wider network of interchanges of people, material goods and ideas” (p xiii). As such, the volume yet again manages to achieve an important conceptual balance; this time in its approach to how influences upon identity self-fashioning and the types of resources that made this possible among the city’s diverse inhabitants have been analysed. Dutch Cape Town emerges from the text as a far more intriguing place than has perhaps hitherto been understood.

With identity having seemingly replaced the more standard categories of analysis of class and race, the challenge for historians is to ensure that their arguments are verifiable and specific. Identity is a slippery feature of the human condition. For historians, it would be too easy to uncritically endorse the current, prevailing constructivist viewpoint on identity given the widespread essentialist claims of present-day identity politics. Even as identities are necessarily fluid and prone to change, so too are they susceptible to congealing and crystallising at certain strategic moments. Identity cannot be everywhere, for then it would be nowhere. The important role of performance in identity-making comes into sharp focus in light of this. It is via the critical assessment of the performative that historians are most likely to be able to uncover how people thought about and promoted their identities in past contexts. The performative may also yield clues of how identity was defended.

The contributors to this volume can be commended for making their arguments and conclusions demonstrable. Beginning with Antonia Malan’s discussion of eighteenth-century Cape Town’s spatial and physical context, in which it becomes apparent that a local style of building and use of space began to reflect an emerging local identity among the settlement’s inhabitants, each chapter sufficiently grounds its discussion of an oftentimes obscure concept in tangible evidence. Ward and Armstrong offer new, absorbing insights into the perceptions and experiences of Cape Town’s inhabitants of Southeast Asian origin (exiles, slaves and convicts) and those from China, respectively. Both essays end up questioning the sometimes supposed link between race and status. They suggest that even though members of these immigrant groups may have been categorised by the

Dutch authorities according to their ethnicity, this did not prevent certain individuals from transcending the status boundaries of these categories.

The strategic role played by performance in the shaping and promoting of identity is clearly demonstrated in the chapters by Baartman and Worden. Using the lens of protests, Baartman illustrates that constituents of Cape Town's burgher population were extremely sensitive about their status and that rather than being based on an exclusionary national or racial consciousness, burgher identity was predicated to a large extent upon notions of status, honour and networking. As such, some descendants of freed African and Asian slaves were able to acquire burgher status. In contrast, Worden investigates how claims to status and honour played out among men of lower rank. Focusing on masculinity and violence among sailors in particular, Worden shows how incidents of public brawling often amounted to more than mere drunken shenanigans on Cape Town's streets. Instead, ritualised violence among such men served to affirm their reputation and maintain self-respect. Like higher-ranking Dutch colonial officials, sailors also drew upon the resources available to them to construct a respectable, masculine identity.

In keeping with one of the book's primary aims, namely to situate Dutch Cape Town in a wider geographical and cultural context, Groenewald's chapter reveals how local burgher identity was shaped by a cultural repertoire drawn from their European background. It thus highlights the significance of transnational stimuli in the process of identity-making in Cape Town. The chapter does so by examining how a group of local entrepreneurs, the alcohol *pachters*, acquired positions of wealth and status and thereafter marked and performed that status. Meanwhile, the essays by Newton-King, and Shell and Dick, utilise new sources (in Shell and Dick's chapter, a notebook that is the earliest known writing of a Cape slave) to examine how freed slaves sought to achieve status.

An eclectic mix of characters appears in this volume. All were in one way or another engaged in shaping their identity in particular ways. By situating burgher, sailor, freed slave and soldier alongside each other, this collection of essays draws out striking similarities in the processes of self-fashioning undertaken by members of these seemingly disparate groups. Varying access to different cultural resources meant that the performance of identity took on different modes. There is little to fault in this work and much to be admired. The value of this compilation to Cape historiography, especially that of the Dutch colonial period, is such that it is hoped it will spur on further related research in the field and perhaps beyond, into nineteenth and twentieth-century social histories of Cape Town as well.

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