

## Book Reviews / Boekresensies

### A neglected era in Cape history brought to light

**Karel Schoeman, *Twee Kaapse Lewens: Henricus en Aletta Beck en die Samelewing van hul Tyd, 1702-1755***

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This book is the sixth of an eight part series entitled *Kolonie aan die Kaap*, which according to the publisher will cover the entire history of the Cape settlement during the time it was ruled by the Dutch East India Company (VOC). This volume is about the first half of the eighteenth century. In his foreword, Schoeman notes that he had wanted to write a book about siblings Henricus and Aletta Beck for a long time, not because they were outstanding or important, but mainly because there is so much fragmentary information available about them that one is able to reconstruct their lives rather as one would a puzzle. Schoeman does this well and a good idea emerges of who the Becks were. It seems that Aletta was the more interesting of the two. She appears as an intelligent and strong woman; had she lived in a time when women were not as subordinate, she would probably have achieved more for herself. Brother Henricus took the easy route in life. He lived and travelled on his mother's pocket for a long time before deciding to study. And as a Dutch Reformed minister in the Cape settlement he was not known for his engaging sermons; nor was he eager to become involved with the members of his congregation.

Despite the title, this book is not a biography. Schoeman uses the lives of the Becks as a means to an end, namely to describe the Cape settlement, its society, and its place in the wider Dutch colonial world. He states that the life of each Cape resident can shed light on Cape society under the VOC, and that is the reason why a book like this contains so many excursions (p 457). Consequently a multitude of people and topics are discussed. Like most of Schoeman's historical studies, this book is a great source of reference and information for students and researchers. Yet sometimes Schoeman goes into too much detail and the excursions become digressions which are rather distracting and somewhat unnecessary.

Schoeman has chosen his subjects well. During their almost half century stay in the settlement the Becks moved about and were based in Drakenstein, Stellenbosch and Cape Town. This gives Schoeman the opportunity to describe the Cape settlement almost in its entirety and he uses large portions of the book to paint a picture of social, cultural, economic and political life in Table Valley and the outer districts. He points out that the colonial past must not be romanticised (p 200). The early eighteenth century was still a pioneering time and there were many of discomforts. Most of the houses were small and humble. The built environment was generally dirty and roads were poorly maintained. Throughout the book one gets a sense of the dangers of lawlessness and violence, of devastating fires, and also of disease. But Schoeman makes it clear that the Cape

was on the cusp of greater prosperity. He illustrates this repeatedly (perhaps a bit repetitively) on the basis of one major primary source of information he uses: the estate accounts and inventories. Despite the hardships it was possible to live in a stylish manner. That is of course if one was fortunate enough to belong to that group of Cape residents who are the focus of this book: “the well-established haute-bourgeoisie”, the upper layer of wealthy burghers and farmers as well as the higher Company officials (p 303).

To a large extent Schoeman’s historic studies form a bridge between works written by well-known historians like A.J. Bøeseken, J.L.M. Franken, G. McCall Theal, and others, and that of historians of a more modern era like R. Ross, N. Worden, G. Groenewald and K. Ward. One of the main characteristics of the former group is that it is largely empiricist in nature and that there was little attention to interpretation, while later historians tend to do just that: interpret and theorise about the information obtained from primary materials. Schoeman’s work can be placed in the former tradition and in that sense, he may be one of a dying breed. However, his books do provide an enormous amount of information. Many historians (I for one) are assisted a great deal in their research by consulting his works and those of his predecessors.

This highlights a problem though. In his foreword Schoeman points out that the early eighteenth century is a period which does not receive a great deal of attention from researchers. Unfortunately one has to agree with this statement. Not only is there little attention paid to this period, but the number of historians who focus on the eighteenth-century Cape is limited and is hardly infused with fresh ideas and new blood. One of the main reasons for this is undoubtedly the language barrier because all the primary, archival material available to historians is written in Dutch. Many history students prefer to shift their attention to the nineteenth century and subsequent periods because this means they can read their documents in English. An additional stumbling block is that much of the work of earlier South African historians is written in Afrikaans. And even though one must respect the choice of Schoeman to write in his mother tongue, I have to say that it is a great pity that a study of this calibre will not be accessible to more students and researchers. One can only hope that the publisher will consider a translation in the future.

A good example of the “bridge function” of Schoeman’s book is illustrated by his point that Cape residents were continuously in close contact with friends, family and business connections in the Netherlands and the rest of the Dutch colonial empire in Asia. There was a lively correspondence between the various parts of the Dutch empire. People moved around in official positions and regularly received visitors. Schoeman also compares Cape society to that of the Netherlands and Batavia. This is all part of a current trend to emphasise that the people of the Cape were not isolated from the rest of the world as many still believe. By highlighting this he places the Cape settlement firmly in what Kerry Ward has labelled the “networks of empire”, although she refers to the forced migration of slaves and political exiles, while Schoeman focuses on the manner in which, for instance, VOC employees and their families travelled from the Netherlands to the East and back again, all the while building up their web of connections. It shows that from the lowest to the highest strata Cape residents

were part of a dynamic network, which again contributed to the exchange of ideas and commodities which ultimately shaped life at the Cape and made the settlement all the more complex and interesting. The history of the Cape settlement can only really be understood when it is placed in this larger framework.

This would have assisted Schoeman when his book refers to the conflict between status and race. In my opinion, it is here that he makes a serious mistake. Several times Schoeman mentions the importance of status to determine one's place in Cape society. He writes that residents kept a close watch on each other to ensure that each person was treated according to their rank or position, which sometimes led to situations which we would now regard as petty and unnecessary. However, Schoeman fails to mention that Cape society, like other communities in Dutch cities, was divided into status groups each with its own clearly defined political, judicial and economic rights and duties. There is a large body of research available in Dutch historiography about this. Accordingly, the Cape settlement during the VOC period was largely made up of the following status groups: VOC employees, burghers, free blacks, and slaves – each of course with its own stratification.

Schoeman explains that free blacks were freed slaves, but he labels their children and further descendants, because they were born in freedom, free coloureds (p 150). He then explains that he will use this term (*vrygekleurdes*) throughout his book to refer to this population group of free black descendants. However, children of free blacks became assimilated into the burgher group and were thus given the status of burghers. They did not form a separate group and definitely would not have been called 'coloureds' by the Company administration. Schoeman thus introduces an extra group and a term into the narrative of the eighteenth century which does not fit into that place, time or circumstances, but unfortunately has strong connotations with the ideologies and prejudice of a later time.

It is difficult to understand why Schoeman would do this, because in the same breath he acknowledges that there was a large measure of social mobility at the Cape and that members of one group could move onwards or upwards to become members of another. He furthermore discusses the fair number of mixed marriages of the time. Access into the burgher group was not determined by race, but by status. Many descendants of free blacks became burghers and secured positions in the local administration. It is therefore incorrect to state that in 1751 the Cape had "a total white population of 5 024 people" (p 428). Instead it should read that in 1751 the Cape had a total of 5 024 burghers including women and children without classifying them according to race.

Nevertheless, overall the value of Schoeman's work cannot easily be underestimated. And with this book he again proves to be a major source of knowledge and inspiration.

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