

**Valuable as a history and a history teaching resource**

**Dan Sleight and Piet Westra, *The Taking of the Slaver Meermin*, 1766**

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In *The Taking of the Slaver Meermin* Dan Sleight and Piet Westra, two leading scholars on Dutch settlement at the Cape, have delivered a detailed account of a surprisingly rare event in the history of Cape slavery: a slave revolt. Unlike the other two documented slave revolts which occurred in the Cape Colony – the first in the Swartland in 1808; the second in the Koue Bokkeveld in 1825 – the uprising that is explored in this text took place at sea.

On 18 February 1766, while on its return voyage from Madagascar to Table Bay, some of the *Meermin*'s male slaves, who made up a total human cargo of 140 slaves, mutinied and massacred most of the ship's officers, seriously wounding other members of the crew. The slave rebellion aboard the *Meermin* makes for a dramatic tale. Sleight and Westra present the first complete description of the events surrounding the mutiny having consulted all known historical documents. The authors have brought together sources from three different repositories: the Cape Archives; the National Archives, Den Haag; and Amsterdam's Maritime Museum, to produce a thorough telling of this remarkable event. However, the book does much more than lay bare the intricacies of the slave revolt aboard the ship. It also explores a variety of themes relating to the slave trade conducted by the *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC), including the Cape's dealings with Madagascar (chapter 2) and other instances of slave revolt at sea (chapter 4). Of particular worth is the authors' recounting of the VOC's comprehensive regulations for the transportation of slaves by sea, many of which were ignored by the master of the *Meermin*.

The *Meermin* drifted at sea for a few days following the rebellion while the surviving crew members, who had taken refuge in the gunroom, plotted their response. Though they were unable to reclaim the ship, they used their access to the gunpowder stock as leverage, threatening to blow up the whole vessel. Unable to steer the ship themselves, the slaves demanded that the crew take them back to Madagascar. However, the slaves were outwitted by the crew who cunningly steered the ship towards the Cape while assuring the rebels that they were headed home. The *Meermin* eventually entered Struys Bay near Cape Agulhas three weeks later.

The narrative reads more like the script of an adventure film at times and would probably not be believed were it not true. This is especially so with regard to the letters of distress written by surviving crew members; these messages were thrown overboard in corked bottles. The bottles washed ashore alerting the local authorities to the circumstances aboard the stranded vessel.

The situation was an embarrassing and costly one for the VOC. Not only had it lost "an expensive and relatively new trading vessel", but 31 slaves and 24

Company personnel had also been killed (p 133). In light of this, an exhaustive investigation lasting six months was conducted by the Council of Justice. The court records, which include the testimonies of all the surviving officers, provide rich detail about the circumstances surrounding the revolt. Two of the leaders of the uprising, Massavana and Koetsaaij, were also interrogated. Though Koetsaaij's evidence has been lost, Massavana's testimony makes for riveting reading having been translated from the original Dutch and included in full in the book. When asked by the fiscal to describe his life in Tulear, Madagascar, before his enslavement, Massavana replied that he had been a "free man" who had made his living "by agriculture and stock farming" (p 124). The inclusion of Massavana's testimony is a highlight of the work, not least because it makes a rare slave "voice" accessible to a wider audience.

Massavana emerges from the court records as a strong-willed, capable individual. He must have made an impression upon the officials of the council, for contrary to Company practice at the time he was not sentenced to the sort of cruel punishment normally meted out to rebel slaves. Instead he was sent to Robben Island along with Koetsaaij for an indeterminate time. Massavana died on the island in December 1769, some three years later (p 132). In contrast, particularly harsh punishments, relative to their race and Company standing, were handed down to the master of the vessel and the third mate. Both were stripped of their rank and along with other punishments "pronounced unworthy of serving the Honourable Company again and banned for life from the Cape and its dependencies" (p 132). The sentencing of the two was clearly intended to send a strong message to other ships' crews that the Company's regulations were to be strictly adhered to at all times. Indeed, the surviving records not only bring to life in vivid detail the experiences of captives and crews aboard the VOC's slaving ships, they also reveal the Company's anxieties about the risks involved in carrying human cargo.

The authors are to be commended for delivering a work that is not only a valuable history of a captivating event. *The Taking of the Slaver Meermin* is equally valuable as a history teaching resource. The book is beautifully illustrated with maps and drawings of the ship, including its blueprints, as well as images of the original court documents. History teachers and lecturers alike will find the work beneficial for demonstrating how historians glean insights and craft arguments from archival documents. It is a pity that so many typographical errors crept into the final copy. Nonetheless, the collaborative mastery of Sleigh and Westra when it comes to the Dutch Cape is on ample display in this volume. Most importantly, a serious scholarly text has finally been published on the slave revolt aboard the *Meermin*.

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