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Cape lives of the eighteenth century

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This volume is one of a number that Karel Schoeman has published recently on the Cape in the VOC era, mainly in Afrikaans. His objectives are twofold: to provide an understanding of the eighteenth-century Cape world through a series of biographies and to write for a general readership. Schoeman is not an academic and, while his research is wide-ranging, he does not attempt to engage with academic debates. On the other hand, he is one of South Africa's most gifted writers and this is a remarkable volume. He brings to the work, not only his literary gifts, but a wonderfully comfortable familiarity with the period and the sources. Nor has he ignored recent research; on the contrary, his secondary reading draws on the work of historians like Nigel Worden, Gerald Groenewald and Nigel Penn, and he has made extensive use of the internet.

The book is far more than a series of biographies. Each individual is a peg on which to hang an exploration of his or her world. Schoeman has deliberately chosen representative individuals and they range from a small

number of prominent figures like Robert Jacob Gordon, to a far larger group of frontiersmen and women, minor officials, slaves and, in order to examine the distant eastern frontier, Rharhabe. As he moves through the period, he notes the way in which the relatively fluid racial lines of the earlier part of the century hardened. As he observes in the chapter on Jacoba Alida Campher and Willem van Wijk, the Cape in the early eighteenth century was not a world of gabled houses and gracious living. It was, rather, inhabited by North European immigrants, poor and often illiterate, who married local coloured women and struggled to establish themselves in a pioneering environment. Some made it but most did not. Some might find acceptance in the more affluent social world but, by the end of the century, the stain of colour was regarded as reprehensible.

Much of Schoeman's interest lies in the frontier, first in the north and later towards the eastern Cape. The chapter on Campher and van Wijk, for instance, looks at the Olifants River region. The chapter hinges on the court records of Campher who appeared before the Court of Justice in Cape Town to declare that her brother-in-law, van Wijk, had seduced her in the course of a journey to Cape Town from the Olifants River. To tell this story, Schoeman examined genealogies, probate inventories and resolutions of the Council of Policy, building up a picture of the northern frontier over a period of seventeen years.

He ranges through an account of the events surrounding the French deserter, Etienne Barbier, to a description of the raids against the Khoikhoi. Van Wijk's world, he concludes, was one of 'raiding, warfare, random violence and general lawlessness' (p.135). Campher was descended from a German immigrant and, possibly, on her mother's side, from former slaves. German immigrants feature frequently in these biographies and one of Schoeman's strengths is his awareness of the European world from which these people came. The clan also included children born out of wedlock. He goes on:

This then was the family background of the Campher sisters, children of a father who according to the strictly racial standards of a later era was half 'non-white' and a mother who was a quarter coloured. In their own day, such criteria would still have been largely irrelevant, however: what would have mattered was that the members of both families ... had been baptised, and that they formed part of the local farming and slave-owning community, however small the scale.

One such snippet gives very little sense of the richness of this very substantial volume. For me, however, one of the pleasures is Schoeman's engagement

with his sources. Using an account book, for instance, he explores the working of large Cape household towards the end of the VOC period (the biographies are always firmly grounded in place and time). The entries range from payments to the family doctor and for spices, reminding us of the eastern influence on Cape cuisine, to clothing bought for slaves, in this case apparently relatively well treated since there is also expenditure on schooling. Repeatedly Schoeman uses these sources and his own sensitive pen to give a glimpse of a world which, he fully recognises, is difficult to recapture today.

What one finds in this casual incident, ... is people leading isolated and monotonous lives, with too much time for aimless conversation and irresponsible gossip during the protracted visits they paid to one another, and also too much time for brooding subsequently over what had been said or implied (p. 524).

Or, elsewhere:

It was a world of candlelight and smoky fires, of gossip and neighbourliness and attendance at church on Sundays, and social visits where the men smoked heavily while the women drank innumerable cups of tea. Above all, it was a world dominated completely by the VOC, by the bells that rang throughout the day to define the activities of its servants and slaves in the Castle, the Hospital and the Slave Lodge, by the drummers and pipers at the Castle sounding the tattoo at the end of the day, and a cannon announcing the arrival and departure of its ships on their way to the Netherlands and the East (p. 456).

Every chapter ranges widely, including much genealogical information on the network of alliances that formed Cape society, to contingent personalities and events. The result is a series of fascinating and often unexpected glimpses into this small but complex world. Schoeman brings freshness even to the studies of people, like Gordon, on whom there is already a substantial literature.

If I have a quarrel with this volume it is in the absences. There are no maps, desperately needed, and no illustrations despite frequent references to portraits. The dustcover has to suffice. The index, too, is unsatisfactory for it does not include the range of connections that are part of the value of this book. It is a pity for this book is a fine introduction to the eighteenth-century Cape, and beyond.