

Rich insights into the Dutch Cape Colony

Karel Schoeman, *Cape Lives of the Eighteenth Century*

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Karel Schoeman, best known to the general public as one of South Africa's leading novelists, is also a prolific historian of the early Cape Colony. In recent years he has published an astonishing number of books on the VOC Cape, all of them based on detailed research and with the novelist's eye for telling detail and empathetic understanding of a world very different from our own. But most are in Afrikaans and few have been translated, thus denying his work to international readers and to many South Africans.

Cape Lives remedies this. In a series of 17 chapters, each focused on the life of an individual and his or her family and associates, Schoeman provides a rich compilation which partly draws on his previous work but also offers new material. The lives have been chosen to include a wide range of people, women and men, wealthy and impoverished, indigenous, slave, settler and visitor, and take the reader on a journey from the inside of Cape Town houses to beyond the Orange River and deep into the eastern reaches of the colony. They include some well-known names, such as Rijk Tulbagh and Robert Gordon, but many unfamiliar figures who only appear because of the accidental survival of their writings or their fleeting appearance in a court record or household inventory, such as the murder accomplices Maria Mouton and her slave Titus of Bengal, the "free coloured entrepreneur" Frans Lens or the Kruger and Prinsloo frontier farmers. Overall the book shows the complexities of interweaving networks of kinship, economic relationships, patronage and information transfer which extended beyond the Cape deep into the Indian Ocean and Atlantic worlds.

As might be expected of such a writer, the book is a cracking good read. Although Schoeman often refers to the need of the historian

to eschew imagination and stick to the facts, this does not prevent him from revealing the emotions, frustrations and ambitions of his characters in ways which make them more fully human than is the case in most historical works. The past may have been another country, as Schoeman frequently reminds us, but its inhabitants thought and acted in ways which made good sense to them and it is the job of the historian to make that explicable to the modern reader. Schoeman provides a model of how this can be done.

Each chapter is self-contained and the casual reader can dip into it as they choose but when read as a whole it vividly illustrates the social diversity and complexity of the Dutch Cape in a way that most general books ignore. It should certainly be a first read for any newcomer to the period. It will also swiftly disabuse those who have been brought up on a diet of school and popular “tourist” histories (as Schoeman describes them) of many myths. The Dutch Cape was not a dull, isolated and bucolic world but was closely interlinked with the social, political and economic forces sweeping the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds of the eighteenth century. Books and learning were not unknown; religious commitment was not confined to the established church; women could and did take an active part in the shaping of a colonial society.

The interpretation of many specific events is overturned: van der Stel had a strong case against self-serving colonists; the Huguenots were not all successful entrepreneurs; Gordon may not have committed suicide. Most significantly, and this is perhaps the overall thrust of the book, race was not the defining feature of the early Cape and its society was much more complex and nuanced than the rigid divide of settler and slave which is now so frequently promulgated. Slaves pervade the book, and Schoeman certainly does not deny the inequalities and injustices of a slave society, but they appear not as a separate caste but as progenitors of families. The “free coloured” men and women of the book play a particularly significant role, as burghers, farmers and explorers, although Schoeman points out that racial hierarchies and prejudices became more overt as the century wore on and were more firmly entrenched after the British took over.

One of the great strengths of the book is its use of newly available sources. Schoeman has long been active in using long-forgotten sources, both published and archival, and has developed an extensive network of librarians and researchers to assist him in doing so. Some of the lives have been chosen because they can be illuminated from personal letters and diaries, sources which are rare for the VOC period. The book also makes extensive use of estate inventories and probate records, many of which were transcribed by a team of experts sponsored by the Dutch government in 2003–2009. Sometimes these are over-used: lists of possessions can be revealing and Schoeman often does more than merely list them, but at times the eye wanders over yet another catalogue of bedspreads and pots.

All this produces a highly valuable book. But it is also a frustrating one. Schoeman has a habit of inserting lengthy digressions into his chapters, on topics sometimes only marginally relevant to the main focus, in a way reminiscent of the encyclopaedists of the eighteenth century itself. This makes it difficult to use as a work of reference, and although the full index does help there are many details and themes which are not indexed and one suspects will lie buried in the text.

Maybe this does not matter too much. Schoeman and his publishers state that the book is intended for “non-specialist and non-South African readers”. That may be so, although Protea Book House will need to ensure that its marketing (especially overseas) is more vigorous than is currently the case. But it has led to one severe disadvantage: the failure to acknowledge sources. There is a general source note for each chapter which gives broad indications and suggestions, but the source of precise quotations and specific details are missing. This will be especially frustrating for the genealogist, since Schoeman’s assiduous work in unearthing family histories and relationships cannot be followed up for lack of references. Several of the chapters are heavily based on the work of other historians, sometimes acknowledged, but sometimes not. This invalidates much of the material for the serious researcher and means that the book will not find its deserved place amongst specialists. Perhaps this was Schoeman’s decision, and reflects his ambiguous relationship with the

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academy. Perhaps it was the publisher's demand in order to reduce the length of an already extended volume. But it is a serious disadvantage of an otherwise exceptionally rich volume.

Nigel Worden

University of Cape Town