

RACE RELATIONS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

AT THE TURN OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY:

The Cape Colony in the Batavian era. 1803-6.

by

William Freund

If historians have soundly based studies of the last century of South African history on analyses of the structure of class and ethnic relationships in a multi-racial society, the earlier period, since the coming of the European in 1652, has primarily been seen through the dynamic of the expansive force of the white settler with a central focus on frontier conflict. A prime motivation for this paper lies in the conviction that this last emphasis has been exaggerated, and that we must look at the early Cape colony as a prototype for the future development of South African race relations.

The Batavian era is the lens chosen for the purpose of sharpening an image of South African society. The Batavian rulers of the Cape represented the government of a unified republic established in the Netherlands after the French invasion of 1795. The guiding ethos of the Batavian revolution was the desire to replace the complicated machinery of privileges and traditional authorities with an efficient and unified national state. The more radical ideas of the French Revolution were not widespread in Holland, especially after they were squashed in France itself, and the Batavian colonial administrators stood more in the tradition of enlightened despotism than of the sans-culottes.

The Cape of Good Hope, a colony of the Dutch East India Company, was occupied by the British in 1795. It came under Batavian administration in March 1803 as a result of the treaty of Amiens. War between Britain and the Batavian Republic, as ally of France, soon broke out again and following the great success of Trafalgar, the British invaded the Cape in January, 1806 and reconquered it, this time with the determination to hold it permanently.

Despite its brevity, the Batavian period has impressed historians of South Africa above all, George McCall Theal, the archivist and compiler, whose turn of the century works continue to form the basis of general and text book histories. Theal appears to have been interested in painting a portrait of the Batavians that would contrast favourably with his studies of the later British colonial government. The Batavian commissioner-general, J.A. DeMist and the governor, General J.W. Janssens, are depicted as enlightened but conservative rulers who tried to strike out all the abuses of local government in a wide range of reform legislation. In fact, Theal presented a distorted image in so far as he exaggerated the impact and novelty of the reform laws, which essentially codified and slightly modified existing

customs of colonial administration, and in his suggestion that the second British occupation abruptly cut off the promising Batavian programme. In fact, the programme was cut due to economic necessities and in a mood of disillusionment. The Batavian disappointment with the prospects of the Cape probably accounts for the failure of the Dutch to press for a restoration of the Cape after the fall of Napoleon.

At the same time, considerable insight into the character of the early Cape is provided by the freshness of outlook, the genuinely open eye that some Batavian observers cast when they looked on South African society. Our knowledge is increased by a small outpouring of literature, the private documents produced by DeMist and Janssens, the travels of Liechteustein, the German naturalist who served as tutor to Janssens' son, accounts of the military officials, Alberti and Paravicini di Capelli and reports by the white colonials, Van Reenen and Van Ryneveld. We are fortunate in having the documents of missionaries as well, notably those of Dr. Van der Kemp of Bethelsdorp. Through the Batavian documents and writings, we may widen our vision of early South African society. In the thesis which I am proposing to write, I shall attempt to digest and assess the Batavian period, but in this introductory paper I should like simply to discuss the social structure which characterised Cape society in the first years of the nineteenth century.

The Cape of Good Hope was then an agricultural society, with a small population largely concentrated in Capetown and its immediate hinterland, covering a vast territory. The Cape farmers produced wheat and wine and owned great herds of cattle and sheep. The colony was only occasionally dependent on the outside world for food, but its remoteness limited possibilities for sale in Europe of its temperate climate crops. Export took the most profitable form in the sale of produce, especially meat, to passing ships. The Cape was considered to be an enormous liability for a colonial power because of the heavy defence expenditure needed on the frontier and against attacks from the sea and Batavian hopes for reforming on the cheap were quickly shattered.

The colony was multi-racial. According to the census returns, approximately one colonial in three was white, but even this figure is too high because it excludes Khoi, Xhosa and San who were not attached to white-owned farms. The economy was entirely dependent on the labour of non-whites. These included shepherders who accompanied trekboers in the remote east, workers on wine estates and wheat farms in the west and skilled Capetown artisans whose masters hired out their servants.

The non-white community included Bantu-speaking Africans, whom the Batavian government, like governments before and after, considered to be foreigners. These people consisted of large organised groups in the far east, incorporated into Xhosa political structures and of small bands scattered in large areas of the north and east. Records indicate the presence of individuals in most of the colony, for instance, a 'Caffre' described as settling in the Moravian mission at Genadendal, deep in the settled west (possibly

not African) and another who had visited Capetown to trade. Bantu-speaking Africans were, here and there, employed by white farmers and attending mission schools and churches by 1800.

However, a discussion of the colonial population must rather focus on those non-white people who were the ancestors of the modern "Coloured" people, who form the majority of the population of this part of modern South Africa.

A large portion of these peoples were European-owned slaves. Slaves were imported to the Cape (and continued to be in the Batavian period, despite official reluctance) from a wide range of Indian Ocean lands, primarily Mozambique, Madagascar, the Indonesian archipelago and India. Some of the eastern slaves retained their Islamic faith and recreated their own culture at the Cape. Other slaves mixed with European and non-European elements and lost their identification with a pre-South African past. The slave population was concentrated in the estates of the west and in Capetown, but, even on the frontier, people of standing invariably possessed household slaves.

Free non-European labour also existed at the Cape. In the recent Oxford History of S.A., there is a lucid and interesting discussion of the indigenous population, which the authors prefer to classify by economic life style rather than by language. The people who live primarily by hunting are called San rather than Bushmen and the larger bands of herders known generally as Hottentots, are referred to as Khoi-Khoi. Both groups retained in the Batavian period the status of "free" people, who could not be enslaved, but this freedom became more and more nebulous throughout the colonial era. On the one hand, European expansion deprived them of grazing and hunting lands and the chance to earn an independent living. The San characteristically fled to remote parts of the colony and beyond, while resisting outsiders to the death. The Khoi-Khoi took service with white farmers, where the paucity of colonial justice in a dispersed population put them in a very weak position to bargain for their rights. The freedom they had been granted was made an excuse to deny to them the freedoms of the white man's society. Khoi-Khoi reaction to this deterioration in their status culminated in the great servants' rebellion of 1799 in the east. We must finally note the presence of a small 'free-black' community of emancipated slaves and Asian exiles whose presence Batavian documents hardly acknowledge, except to demand corvée labour or limit its freedom of movement.

The European, or white, community at the Cape has been more closely observed by historians, partly because of the intense curiosity of white South Africans about their own development as a people, but rarely in the context of a multi-racial society. The 20,000 whites formed a population only one-third the size of the least important of the 13 original American colonies (Delaware) at the time of the first American census in 1791. Of this small group, one in three lived in Capetown, most of the rest in the wine and wheat country of Stellenbosch county, and the remainder scattered over an enormous, marginally fertile area. By colonial American standards, consequently, the normal cultural institutions,

such as schools and churches existed on a very small scale indeed. The settlers seem consequently little more articulate than the non-European communities in official records. Two major evidences of white expression were the burgher petition movement of 1778 demanding economic rights and representation and the frontier rebellions of 1795 and 1798 when frontiersmen proclaimed Graaf Reinet and Swellendam sovereign republics.

Class differences within the European community usually passed unnoticed, but were significant. At the top of the social scale were the Cape Town bureaucracy and great estate-owners. These people lived like Javanese nabobs, in homes full of European imported goods, and sent their sons to university in Holland. At the opposite extreme, P. J. van der Merwe's trekboer trilogy has pointed to the increasing number of landless white farmers in the census returns, and has described the pressure on the livestock farmers' sons to find new lands. When Khosa intransigence and servant revolt in the east blocked settler expansion, the European felt stymied and his condition deteriorated. Batavian evidence, as well, points to the presence of poor whites, workers and artisans, typically German immigrants, especially in Cape Town. However, class conflict among Europeans only emerged in the form of complaints against Cape Town officialdom, or west v. east. The domination of higher political offices by a small, interrelated class of merchants and rich farmers, together with the network of colonywide family ties, created a sense of white unity. The Afrikaner people, Calvinist, African rather than European, but white rather than brown or black, derive from this sense of community.

I. M. MacCrone has written that by 1800 the division of colonial South Africa into rigidly defined white and non-white groups was virtually completed. This picture, basically correct, can be modified in certain detail to complete our racial analysis. The acculturation of non-whites, particularly "Bastard Hottentot", or people with Khoi-Khoi and European ancestry, is often surprising, not merely in their knowledge of the Dutch language and Christian religion but in terms of possession of goods associated with European culture. The Cape Town tax lists indicate non-white ownership of varied types of goods, including a considerable number of slaves. Similarly, a frontier district tax list enumerates "Bastard Hottentot" farmers with approximately the number of stock and goods of the average white farmer in the district.

Secondly, inter-racial marriage, as well as very widespread concubinage, existed in this period. The tax rolls for Cape Town list a Mr. Mattfeld, owner of 36 slaves, who must consequently have been one of the wealthier men in the city, as married to a lady listed as van de Kaap, a geographic appellation that refers to Cape-born slaves or free blacks. Hoge's "Personalis of the Germans at the Cape" would seem to indicate that most of the steady, if small, stream of German immigrants to South Africa in the eighteenth century, if they did not prosper enough to acquire land and burgher status, lived with, and often married, their non-European "housekeepers". This allusive notion of burgher status must remain the key to an analysis of race and class in Dutch South Africa. The burgher served in the militia, paid certain kinds of taxes, and was eligible for a variety of minor administrative posts.

Although non-Europeans occasionally survived with a measure of economic success in colonial society, their exclusion from burgher status was decisive in the racial distinctions that were gradually hardening in colonial South Africa.

A number of conservative South African historians have stressed that the Batavian insistence (like that of the preceding governments) on the establishment of an impenetrable eastern border with the Xhosa qualifies them as predecessors of present day South Africa's separate development policy. This and the fact that DeMist and Janssens also criticized such past travellers as Barrow for overdoing their indictment of white farmers' brutality towards servants, have made these writers pick out the Batavian government as following a settler-based policy on race relations. Other writers, observing the many written comments of Batavian officials deploring slavery as an institution and emphasizing the need to defend non-white labour from abuses, have placed the Batavians in a liberal tradition.

In fact, the measures of the Batavian government in regard to race relations represented a retention of the fundamental South African status quo. The Batavian ordinances did not discriminate against non-whites, but they retained the spurious freedoms of the Khoi-Khoi and San and did not question the racially exclusive nature of burgher privileges. The Batavian government did concern itself with bringing about fairer treatment of non-whites in colonial courts, and there are a number of examples of servants winning cases against brutal or dishonest masters or of a Khoi-Khoi band successfully claiming land occupied by a white farmer, but in this the Batavians merely followed the hesitant pattern of earlier Dutch and British governments. It was the British who in 1801 established a system of mutual labour contracts witnessed by a third party for farm servants, and the Batavian contract system was probably less effective than the British. Because of the tradition of the large, remote, self-sufficient South African farm, farm labourers still found legal redress of grievances very often impossible, and it is doubtful whether working conditions in South Africa were much improved by Batavian legislation. So far as slave protection was concerned, although the government was occasionally interested in improving the slave code, they, in fact, contemplated no significant new legislation. What interest the Batavians had in better labour conditions was motivated by the unsettled conditions in the east. DeMist and Janssens were concerned about the east, both because they could not afford to supply large military expeditions and because of a growing conviction that wool, best grown in the far east, might prove the financial salvation of the economy. A docile labouring class was needed to preserve the peace.

Thus, although they did not augment it, Batavian rule in no way challenged white paramountcy in the colony. DeMist and Janssens were at the same time believers in liberal principles, such as equality before the law and the absolute evil of slavery, and social conservatives who played politics on the basis of a small, stable, propertied élite. The contradiction in their values emerged clearly in South Africa and led them to emphasize the latter values in their basic administrative decisions. Governor Janssens might even have been

said to be behind the metropole in his thinking. One of his staff members, sent to the Hague on a mission, returned to the Cape a few months after the Dutch surrender in 1806 with the orders that henceforth all children born at the Cape were to be free. The colonial government would have been quite unprepared for the change, which might have had a drastic effect on Cape society, and this gives an idea of the potential scope of colonial social legislation being debated in Europe during this period.

To round off this sketch, one must mention a non-governmental phenomenon that definitely was introducing a new tone into colonial society, the Christian mission societies. During the Batavian period there were over 40 missionaries - British, Dutch, German and local - who were working in South Africa. No previous major writing has done justice to the variety and size of the missionary movement, whose field ranged from the freedmen of Cape Town to the Tswana, a people 600 miles north and almost unknown to the colonial government.

Almost all this activity was vaguely supervised by the South African Missionary Society, founded during the first British occupation, which had relations with both the London and the Rotterdam Missionary Societies. In particular, the role of the local missionaries, probably under the inspiration of an almost undocumented religious revivalism that seems to have spread among the white colonists in the late eighteenth century, has hardly been appreciated. It was primarily these missionaries whose activities were condemned by many local churchmen and by both DeMist and Janssens.

If the evidence were available in greater quantity, it would be interesting and significant to trace the relationship between a religious movement aimed at converting, teaching and focussing on non-whites and a society based on racial divisions. We do know the local mission society, for instance, employed non-whites on an equal basis with whites as missionaries. We also know the case of Mrs. Matilda Smith, a wealthy Cape Town widow, a pillar of missionary and local pietist circles, who gave up her comfortable life to work in the poor mission settlement of Doctor van der Kemp. Van der Kemp spent more than a year trying vainly to convince her of the evils of holding slaves, and finally drove her out of Bethelsdorp because she refused to give up her slave. These examples illustrate the social complexities inherent in the local missionary movement within the white community. There is, in addition, the important factor of the effects of mission education on slaves and servants in the colony.

Apart from the individual missionaries working in every district of the colony, the organized missionary institutions merit a special examination. There was, first, the collection of villages north of the Orange river, where missionaries (notably William Anderson) gathered a population of "Bastard Hottentots" and others, peoples and clans who had retreated before the general advance of the white colonists. This community, whose way of life was described by Lichtenstein as quite similar to that of the trekboers, formed the nucleus of the Griqua people, whose struggles with the voortrekkers form a major chapter in the next half century of South African history.

Secondly, the Moravian mission at Genadendal, the oldest mission station in South Africa, which had collected many of the Khoi-Khoi remaining in the Western Cape, was attempting to socialise their people into a submissive, peasant life-style. While the Moravians sought to create an autonomous economic unit, the limited size of their settlement obliged the Khoi-Khoi there to work as servants on neighbouring farms. The continuing role of Genadendal in the development of the Cape Coloured people may well be of deep significance, both in its failure to secure an independent economic development for Coloureds and in its submission to colonial authority.

Much smaller but the most significant mission settlement of all was Bethelsdorp, the institution run by J.T. van der Kemp, of the London Missionary Society, a Dutch minister, former soldier, doctor and hospital administrator, near the eastern border of the colony. The inhabitants were 'Bastard Hottentots', Khoi-Khoi-Khosa mixed together. Bethelsdorp, established under Governor Janssens, was less economically viable than Genadendal. Two years after its founding, van der Kemp began to plead for its removal to a more fertile site. While it failed to achieve any economic stability, Bethelsdorp, as a centre where missionaries spoke out in the interests of non-whites, was seen by the government as a dangerous challenge.

Van der Kemp initially had won the support of the Batavian government but he came to speak out more and more strongly against the main lines of its racial policy, which he felt was subordinating the administration of impartial justice to the primacy of order on the white-owned farms. Van der Kemp defended the right of his people to evade military service when he was not convinced of their good-treatment. He forwarded their complaints about white farmers to the magistrates and discouraged them from taking service among whites at all. As a result, Janssens demanded that van der Kemp leave Bethelsdorp to answer accusations against him in Capetown. Although van der Kemp defended himself satisfactorily, Janssens kept him in Capetown until the fall of the Batavian administration. In his positive championing of non-European rights, van der Kemp represented a new phenomenon in South African history, the liberal missionary factor. Much of the work associated with John Philip in the 1820's and 1830's had its origins in what he read and heard of van der Kemp and his contemporaries. Thus the origins of the missionary tradition in South Africa perhaps represent the most interesting new feature in race and social relations during the Batavian period.