



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

The first imperial masters of colonial South Africa: a review article

Ross, R.J.

Citation

Ross, R. J. (1992). The first imperial masters of colonial South Africa: a review article. *South African Historical Journal*, 25, 177-183. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4234>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License:

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4234>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

The First Imperial Masters of Colonial South Africa

ROBERT ROSS
Rijksuniversiteit Leiden

De Geschiedenis van de VOC, 2nd ed. By FEMME S. GAASTRA. Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 1991. 337 pp. ISBN 90 228 3838 2.

Dutch-Asiatic Shipping in the 17th and 18th Centuries, 3 vols. By J.R. BRUIJN, F.S. GAASTRA AND I. SCHÖFFER. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff: vol 1, 1987, 356 pp., ISBN 90 6890 132 X; vol. 2, 1979, 765 pp., ISBN 90 247 2270 5; vol. 3, 1979, 626 pp., ISBN 90 247 2282 9.

Bewind en Beleid bij de VOC, 1672-1702. By FEMME S. GAASTRA. Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 1989. 343 pp. ISBN 90 6011 661 5.

Dutch Primacy in World Trade, 1585-1740. By JONATHAN I. ISRAEL. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. 420 pp. ISBN 0 19821 139 2.

It is perhaps unusual to begin a review with a quotation from a book's bibliography. All the same, Femme S. Gaastra's comment in the recently published second edition of *De Geschiedenis van de VOC* makes a very valuable starting point for this essay. After surveying the recent literature on the activities of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in three continents, Gaastra turns to Africa, to the Cape of Good Hope, and writes that 'the historiography on the development of the VOC refreshment post in Table Bay is extensive, and discusses developments which have not been mentioned in this context [that of his book]' (p. 188). He is of course right. His book is about the organization of the largest business enterprise that the world had seen by the eighteenth century, about how decisions were taken, profits made and so forth. In doing so, it is naturally necessary for Gaastra to discuss the Asian world in which the VOC operated, and to analyse the mix within the VOC's empire between direct rule, as in Sri Lanka, the Molucca and on Java, and the traditional position of a foreign trader present on the sufferance of the local rulers, as was the case along the southern coast of mainland Asia, from the Red Sea to Korea, and also in Japan. But these are very different matters from the question relating to the

establishment and expansion of colonial settlement, slavery and the subjugation of the Khoisan, which claim the major attention of historians of Dutch colonial South Africa.

This is a strange phenomenon. The Cape of Good Hope may have been an atypical part of the VOC's empire, but it was nevertheless an essential part of its operations. Historians of different colonies of a single empire, whether that of the Roman, the Spaniard, the British or the French, do not tell identical stories, but they do expect that the themes which each of them find important will recur in the work of all, or most of them. The history of the Cape before 1795 has become separated from that of the rest of the Dutch empire, to their mutual disadvantage. In this essay I would like to discuss some of the recent developments in the history of the VOC as a whole and then to point out how the history of the Cape, at the very least, has to take cognizance of these.

The Dutch East India Company has in recent years once again become a major object of historical study in the Netherlands. It is now possible to look at the Company without either glorifying the heroic deeds of the ancestors or attempting to gain absolution for their sins. Rather, historians now see the VOC for what it was, namely the largest commercial organization of *ancien régime* Europe - indeed the largest that had yet been known - and at the same time a major actor in and reporter on the political and economic life of much of Asia. Thus the VOC archives can be used as a source, pure and simple. To give one extreme example from the late eighteenth century: Burmese invaders burnt the royal capital and the state archives of the Thai kingdom. As a result, the annual report of the VOC employees who were stationed at the Thai court is the single most complete source of information on the political developments within this south-east Asian state. However, it is at least as important to see how the VOC itself operated as an institution.

Organizationally, the VOC was faced with enormous problems and had no predecessor whose experience it could plunder in order to solve them. Essentially they were threefold. Firstly, the Company had to find ways of sending an unprecedented number of ships between Europe and Asia, a route that had only been discovered just over a century before its foundation and which had yet to be exploited on a massive scale. Secondly, the directors of the Company, the Heren XVII, had to develop a structure for making and imposing commercial decisions that was at once sufficiently flexible to cope with the constant change in the commercial environment in which it operated and sufficiently firm to prevent its operations from degenerating into chaos. And thirdly - and here it could have profited from the Portuguese example - the VOC had to find ways of ruling its empire, which it had acquired in the course of its search for profit, without the costs in their turn eliminating all hope of commercial prosperity. And furthermore, VOC organization was encumbered with a highly complex federal structure in the Netherlands, where the Company

was divided into six relatively autonomous 'chambers', so that decision-making was slow and regularly required compromises between the different interests involved. Given the complexity of these problems, it is not surprising that after two centuries the VOC was more or less bankrupt at the moment of its political liquidation. What is remarkable is that it lasted so long.

As a result of the major research project which resulted in the three volumes of *Dutch-Asiatic Shipping*, by Bruijn, Gaastra and Schöffer, we now know in some considerable detail how the VOC ran its shipping business. The most remarkable facet of that operation was its sheer scale. In total, the VOC sent out 4 721 ships to Asia between 1602 and 1795. Of these 3 356, or just over 70 per cent, left one of the Asian ports, most frequently Batavia (modern Jakarta), in order to return to Europe. The peak of this traffic was in the 1730s, a decade in which 375 ships left the Netherlands and 311 began the return voyage. The great majority of vessels reached their destination. On the outward voyage about three per cent were either wrecked or captured by some enemy, and on the return voyage - when the ships were less heavily manned and also older - only about five per cent failed to reach their destination.

Since the wooden ships of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had a relatively short life, the Company continually had to build new ones and overhaul those that were thought fit for a second or third voyage. Over the two centuries of their existence, the six shipyards built 1 461 vessels. Almost exactly half were launched in Amsterdam, so that the Company dockyard on the River IJ was almost certainly the largest single industrial complex in the world for most of the period. Obviously, the volume of activity that this entailed acted as a great flywheel, as it were, on the Netherlands economy, helping to smooth out the fluctuations in the conjuncture of the Dutch Republic.

Finding crews for such a huge fleet was an enormous task, as the researches of Bruijn, Gaastra, Schöffer and their associates demonstrate. Just under a million men set sail from the Dutch Republic during these years. They were joined by a handful of women, either as passengers or as part of the crew, disguised in male clothing. Of these, approximately a third eventually returned to Europe. While mortality on the voyage and immediately after arrival in an Asian port was, in general, at least ten per cent on the outward voyage, but lower - except in the last years of the Company's life - on the homeward journey, most of those who did not return to Europe lived on for at least a few years, either in the Company's settlements in Asia, and indeed South Africa, or as seamen on the intra-Asian traffic.

The Great Moloch of the VOC thus devoured a high proportion of the young manpower of north-west Europe. So great was the need for men that many Dutch towns and villages were left with a highly unbalanced sex ratio. Even so, the maritime regions of the Netherlands, with the major tradition of seafaring, could not supply the VOC's needs, especially as sailors were also

needed for the Dutch Republic's Atlantic and intra-European shipping. As time went on, therefore, increasing numbers of men were needed from outside the Netherlands, until by the second half of the eighteenth century well over half the ships' crews, and an even higher proportion of the Company's armed forces, came from abroad - particularly Germany.

The executive decisions which had to be taken in order to maintain this massive organization in profit were naturally complex. The first question was whether or not the Directors had the information which they needed to make judicious decisions on a less haphazard basis. The systems of book-keeping which the Company developed were not models of lucidity - not altogether surprisingly, since no previous company had had to find ways of controlling such a large enterprise - and the VOC did not make things easy for itself, or later historians, by valuing its money differently in Europe and Asia. Monitoring the costs, and thus the profitability, of any given product was thus very difficult. Nevertheless, there were those among the directors who were able to see, at least in broad outline, where the Company made and lost its money. They could find their way through the accounts to produce satisfactory and well-founded conclusions. As Gaastra has demonstrated in his recent *Bewind en Beleid bij de VOC*, the businessmen who ran the VOC knew how the Company would and could be steered towards the highest profits and recovery from the political and other blows which it had occasionally experienced. That the businessmen were accompanied in leading positions in the VOC by influential politicians, is not surprising. The VOC was certainly not the last major company on whose board commercial acumen was allied to political clout to implement and enforce the policy which had been decided upon.

All the same, writing the history of the VOC is not the same as writing about virtually any other commercial undertaking, even United Fruit or Anglo American. The States General of the Dutch Republic had granted the VOC sovereign rights to the east of the Cape of Good Hope, and no-one seems to have noticed that Table Bay, strictly speaking, is to the west of that point. The Company had to rule and to behave as a state, at least in some parts of the Asian world. In its dealings in the Indonesian archipelago and also in Sri Lanka, the VOC became the first European power to confront the problems of colonial rule as a matter for administration rather than as the combination of plunder and accommodation, so characteristic of the Portuguese. Indeed the history of European-encouraged (admittedly a euphemism) peasant cash-cropping begins with the VOC, in relation to the clove growers of the Moluccas, the cinnamon peelers of Sri Lanka and, most spectacularly, the coffee farmers of the Prianger

in West Java.¹ It also established one of the few slave plantation economies outside the Americas, among the nutmeg *perken* of Banda. Equally the Company had to find ways of working with the Asian rulers who were no longer fully independent, but who could not be cast aside. The philosophy of indirect rule may be an early twentieth-century British creation; its practice was far older.²

In the cities of the Company's empire, especially in Batavia and Columbo, though, the Company had to rule over newly created societies. In many ways, of course, these were Asian cities, though not necessarily formed by local populations. With an eye to shocking the last remnants of Dutch colonial sentiment, Blussé called Batavia a Chinese colonial city in the first twelve decades of its rule by the Dutch.³ The urban life of the Batavian élite, too, was Asian in many ways, made as it was by the women, whether housekeeper, concubine or Batavian-reared of Dutch descent.⁴ Between them, they created a specific society, perhaps more akin to imperial Rome than any of its contemporaries in Asia, Europe or the Americas. It was based on slavery, but with the slaves being used not just for household and other labour, but also for display. It was a society of transient wealth, and indeed of transient life, but therefore one in which the competition for status, both granted by Company office and claimed by riches and pomp, was enormous. It was run autocratically, but the autocrats were nevertheless as much concerned with personal gain as with the well-being of the Company, so that the rich citizens of Batavia could claim a latitude and an influence which the formal institutions of the city's government did not grant them.

Above all, Batavia was part of an empire, whose economy dominated the world as none had done previously. Nevertheless, the VOC's contribution to the Dutch economy as a whole has, in the past, been considered only slight. Jonathan Israel's recent work, however, has shown how it was the combination of the luxury trade in tropical, particularly Asian, products with the European bulk trades in grain, salt, herring and so forth which allowed Dutch merchants such pre-eminence from the early seventeenth century until the first decades of

1. See G.J. Knaap, *Kruidnagelen en Christenen: De Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie en de Bevolking van Amboen 1656-1696* (Dordrecht, 1987); F. De Haan, *Priangan: De Prianger Regentschappen onder het Nederlands Bestuur tot 1811*, 4 vols (Batavia, 1910-1912).
2. L. Nagtegaal, *Rijden op Een Hollandse Tijger: de Noordoostkust van Java en de VOC, 1680-1740* (Utrecht, 1988); W. Remmelman, *Emperor Pakubuwana II: Priyayi en Compagnie* (Leiden, 1990).
3. J.L. Blussé van Oud-Alblas, *Strange Company: Chinese Settlers, Mestizo Women and the Dutch in VOC Batavia* (Dordrecht, 1986).
4. J.G. Taylor, *The Social World of Batavia: European and Eurasian in Dutch Asia* (Madison, 1983).

the eighteenth. This in turn gave impetus to a highly specialized Dutch agriculture and to an extensive manufacturing sector. Thereafter, though, the English increasingly displaced the Dutch.

It was thus the position which the Dutch had built up at the centre of a trading network that encompassed almost the whole world which made them so successful. The Company could out-compete its rivals, at least until the mid-eighteenth century. It held a formal monopoly over Dutch trade in Asian waters but, because of the internationalization of trade, this was not an economic monopoly. Except for a few products whose production the Company controlled - cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, mace and perhaps cowries - the VOC had to compete both in Asia and in Europe. The monopoly products made up a quarter of VOC sales in the Netherlands, though they probably contributed disproportionately to the Company's profits. Pepper, Indian textiles, tea and coffee eventually became much more important, together accounting for two-thirds of sales. In the long term, it was the failure of the Company to dominate the market in these products, coupled with the military disasters of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War, which brought about the Dutch East India Company's downfall.

What does all this mean for the history of the Cape Colony? Is there really nothing more than a certain fleshing out of the obligatory statement that the Cape was founded as a refreshment station for the VOC? Bruijn, Gaastra and Schöffer have a chapter on the Cape of Good Hope which demonstrates in the kind of detail which no-one else has yet achieved what this actually meant for the Company. Or is it merely that the researchers of Cape history have a better idea of what sort of institution produced the archive they read? This is indeed necessary, but the pay-off should and could be greater.

To achieve this, it will be necessary, I suspect, to turn the conventional view of Cape colonial history inside out, or rather to turn it back the right way round. It would be very difficult to write about almost any topic in the history of twentieth-century South Africa without acknowledging the centrality of influences which derive from the economic heartland of the country, now on the Witwatersrand. The history of the Cape, certainly in the eighteenth century, has, with a few exceptions,⁵ been remarkably peripherocentric. But, can we understand the nature of frontier expansion, the reasons for the subjugation of the Khoisan, and especially the characteristics of Cape rural slavery, if we do not know a lot more about the economic, administrative and social core of the colony, which was located in Cape Town? It is an indictment of the current

5. Notably G.J. Schutte, 'Company and Colonists at the Cape, 1652-1795', in R. Elphick and H. Giliomee, eds, *The Shaping of South African Society 1652-1840* (Cape Town, 1989), and perhaps my own article in the same volume.

state of Cape colonial historiography that there is not a significant monograph on the history of eighteenth-century Cape Town. When this comes, it will not only illuminate the history of colonial society in its totality in ways which are unpredictable, but it will also have to depend on studies of the VOC's empire which I have been discussing in this article. But even that is too modest. In the end, understanding how the Cape fitted into the imperial structure of the Dutch East India Company will force a reconsideration, major or minor, of how that structure itself was organized.