

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Die aanslag op die slaweskip Meermin, 1766*

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**Dan Sleight & Piet Westra**

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From the mid-seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries thousands of slaves were brought to the Cape of Good Hope from areas bordering on the Indian Ocean (Southeast Africa, South Asia and Southeast Asia). Throughout the eighteenth century there were always slightly more slaves at the Cape than there were colonists. Yet despite this, in the almost two hundred year history of slavery at the Cape there were only ever two large-scale slave uprisings here: one in 1808 in the Swartland area north of Cape Town and a minor one in 1825 led by Gallant in the Koue Bokkeveld. Historians have ascribed this paucity of rebellions to a number of factors: the small scale of slave holdings on farms (rarely more than 5 to 10), the relative isolation of farms and the lack of a unified 'slave culture' due to the disparate origins, culture and languages of slaves at the Cape. One remarkable exception to this rule – the uprising of a large group of newly captured slaves from Madagascar on their way to the Cape – is the topic of this book.

The story of the uprising on the VOC (Dutch East India Company) ship is fairly well known among the general public: Iziko Museum's Slave Lodge in Cape Town has a permanent exhibition dedicated to it, a documentary called *Slave Ship Mutiny* was produced in 2011, and for several years now maritime archaeologists have been looking for the ship's wreck amid great publicity. Yet, curiously enough, until this book there has been no serious history of this incident – except for the pioneering, but unpublished, academic work of the late Andrew Alexander which is sadly not widely known or easily accessible. This expertly researched book by VOC experts Dan Sleight and Piet Westra will go a long way to provide more sound information to the general public,

and to clear up some misunderstandings in the now somewhat romanticized story of the *Meermin* (such that its wreck *can* be found, while the sources clearly indicate that the VOC authorities sold the stranded ship and that it was most likely chopped up – cf. p. 117).

The text of this book makes it eminently suitable for use in the class or lecture room. This is because the authors do not only tell the story with proper contextualization, but also because they make available (mostly in translated form) the original sources, and discuss the various problems with the interpretation of these sources. As such, the book can most conveniently be used to illustrate through practical applications how historians know the past and can construct arguments based on the documents and other material left by people in the past. As such, it is to be welcomed that the book contains more than 40 illustrations, maps and tables (many in colour), as well as numerous appendices, ranging from a chronology, to various transcriptions of documents (especially relating to the court case which is our chief source of information for what happened on that fatal journey) and very useful and illuminating plans of the lay-out of the ship (which is crucial to understanding the events).

The book comprises nine main chapters (the tenth is a brief conclusion), of which the first four deal with the background and the context of the events which led to the uprising in 1766. After a brief introduction to the VOC Cape in the mid-eighteenth century, the second chapter discusses in useful detail the history of the Cape's slave trade with Madagascar (to which the Cape authorities regularly sent a slave ship when its slave population declined – often after epidemics such as smallpox), with special reference to the earlier voyages of the *Meermin* to that island. This chapter reveals quite a lot of new detail, and is very good in illustrating the numerous factors which were involved in slave trafficking, and how various nations (the English, French, Americans, Dutch and Arabs) sometimes exchanged information with each other, and sometimes deliberately misled their competitors. Given that much of this discussion is based on hitherto unstudied archival sources, the chapter should also be of interest to historians of Madagascar as the slave trading journals are quite revealing of internal affairs which led to wars and raids to capture slaves for the European traders.

Chapter 3 describes the origins and early history of the hooker *Meermin*. One of the strengths of this book is that it so well illustrates something which is often overlooked by modern historians of the early Cape, namely that the

VOC was first and foremost a *maritime* empire which depended crucially on ships and their crews. As such, as the authors point out (p. 46) the main character in the events of 1766 is in fact the *Meermin* herself, and I applaud their attempt to bring home to the modern reader how such a ship operated and how life on it proceeded on a day-to-day basis (all of this is usefully supported by material in the appendices). Chapter 4 briefly discusses other instances of uprisings on sea and graphically illustrates just how violent life aboard an eighteenth-century ship could be, but especially for newly captured slaves who were, after all, *violently* captured and transported.

The bulk of the book deals with the mission of the *Meermin* to obtain slaves in 1765 (chapter 5), the events of the uprising and how it was suppressed (chapters 6-8) and the denouement of the story in the court room (chapter 9). With a crew of less than sixty men, the *Meermin* managed to trade some 140 slaves from various places in Madagascar during 1765. In February 1766, while the ship was well underway to the Cape of Good Hope, some of the slaves – who were released from their chains in order to clean some spears – killed and held hostage a part of the crew, while the rest were hiding below deck. Eventually the slaves, who had no knowledge of ship faring, reached a compromise with the latter, namely that they would leave them unharmed if they were returned to Madagascar. Instead, the crew continued to sail to the south coast of the Cape where the ship anchored off Struisbaai (east of Cape Agulhas). Some of the slaves landed but were captured by local farmers who had formed a commando. For several days there was an impasse while the remaining slaves held the surviving crew hostage (some of whom, dramatically, dropped bottles into the ocean with letters asking for help – these were later found and are reproduced in the book), until eventually the slaves were convinced to surrender to the forces of the landdrost of Stellenbosch who had been sent to the scene. This happened after some of the crew cut the anchor and allowed the ship to run aground.

These dramatic events are narrated from various perspectives (based on court evidence) in chapters 6 and 7: the former from the perspective of the sailors, while the latter provides the evidence of four officers in some detail. Chapter 8 narrates the salvage operation from the perspective of landdrost Le Sueur of Stellenbosch (based on the correspondence between him and the Council of Policy in Cape Town). Chapter 9 tells the story, after a brief contextualisation of how the Cape judicial system operated, of the court cases in which one of the leaders and the commanders of the ship were involved. This discussion

reveals in a fascinating way what the real motives and priorities of the VOC as a merchant company were. Intriguingly enough, only one of the slaves, Massavana, who was identified as one of the leaders of the uprising, stood trial and was never found guilty (but nonetheless sent to Robben Island). Instead, most of the VOC officials' energies were expended in trying to determine exactly what happened and how blame for it can be apportioned – clearly a much greater issue to them than the loss of 4 or 5 dozen lives was the loss of a valuable and expensive hooker (which took years to build and was expected to do service for decades). Most crucially for the VOC, was to determine who was responsible for stranding the ship, if it could have been prevented, and also, if the uprising of the slaves were the result of a dereliction of duty in that their careful instructions were not followed to the letter. In the event, the captain was found guilty, stripped of his rank and status, and banished from the Cape.

This fascinating book, beautifully printed and presented (bar a few misprints), is filled with a wealth of detail for those interested in the eighteenth-century Cape, the slave trade and, more generally, the maritime world of the VOC. In addition to the important contributions it makes to our knowledge of the Cape slave trade, and the operation and management of this trade, the book also reveals some fascinating detail such as that slaves from Southeast Asia feared being sent to the Cape (p. 57), as well as the very rare insight the trial of Massavana provides into the life of an ordinary human being before his violent enslavement (pp. 128-129). I highly recommend it to all interested in the early history of South Africa, and urge high school teachers to use this book (which has recently been translated into English and Dutch as well) in their classrooms to demonstrate the complex history of slavery, and the ways in which historians reconstruct and interrogate the past. Sleight and Westra have made an important and long-overdue contribution to the historiography of slavery in South Africa, and their combined expertise in a variety of matters relating to the VOC period has greatly enriched this volume.