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The Beginnings of White Settlement in South Africa

On the Wednesday of this week, April 10th, as on any day of the year, there were many different celebrations around the world. From the Finnish and the Scandinavian perspectives, the most significant facts include the 775th anniversary of the death of Erik Knutsson, King of Sweden; the 273rd anniversary of the death of Johan Gezelius Junior, Bishop of Turku; and the 118th anniversary of the birth of Kyösti Kallio, future President of the Republic of Finland.

The anniversary on the calendar on the opposite side of the globe, in South Africa, is however of greater significance than any of these, both locally and for the entire southern African region: for last Wednesday was the 339th anniversary of the commencement of fortification of the shores of a favourable bay some few dozen kilometres north of the southernmost tip of Africa, on the tenth day of April, 1652 AD. The work was carried out at the command of the Dutch East India Company, by members of the expedition which had landed a few days earlier under the command of Jan van Riebeeck.

When van Riebeeck claimed Taffelbaai, Table Bay, for the Dutch, European ships had already been making landfall

there for several decades. Ships and seamen had come and gone, but in the periods inbetween, the area had been without a White European presence. The arrival of van Riebeeck changed this permanently, however. With effect from April 1652, southern Africa's black indigenous population was to live alongside permanent White settlement.

Initially, the southern tip of Africa — discovered in 1487 by the Portuguese explorer Bartholomeo Diaz — had been considered too barren to be worth occupying. It was thus only a century and a half after Bartholomeo Diaz' landing that the greatest commercial power of its time in the world, the East India Company of the Netherlands, began to show increasing interest in the economic exploitation of the area.

Closer investigation had now shown that the area was not in fact as barren as had been assumed. The climate was temperate, and the soil fertile, and the Dutch began to see real potential in the southern tip of Africa as the site for a watering station for their traffic to the East Indies. The sea voyage from Holland to the East Indies lasted in those times anything from five-and-a-half to seven months or even longer; the rigours of the journey, moreover, were often fatal. The establishment of a well-maintained watering

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station in a favourable location would considerably reduce the risks of the long voyage, it was believed. The outcome was the dispatch of van Riebeeck's expedition to claim the area at the southern tip of Africa permanently for the East India Company.

Van Riebeeck is justifiably seen as the founder of White settlement in South Africa, and the founder of the nation, in view of his role as the first Commandant and in the energetic development of the watering station. Nonetheless, neither van Riebeeck nor those under his command can justly be regarded as settlers: they remained the salaried servants of the Dutch East India Company, performing the tasks to which they had been assigned. It needs to be borne in mind that in 1652, no one had the slightest intention of establishing a Dutch settlement colony at the Cape of Good Hope.

Salaried servants of the East India Company had in fact very little room for initiative. For the duration of their contract, they were in bond service to the Company, which could transfer them at their request, or without it, to duties elsewhere within the Company's service. They were not permitted to own land or other fixed forms of property, nor to engage in any "burgher" occupation within the Company's area of jurisdiction.

These various restrictions and sanctions were imposed most strictly of all in the first years of the station; fairly soon, however, it was realized that this system was creating a number of problems, of which the most serious concerned the production of food.

Van Riebeeck's solution to this problem was the introduction of free enterprise. From 1657, certain persons were released from their bond service to the Company, to support themselves as free farmers (boeren) and artisans. These per-

sons were thus no longer salaried servants of the Dutch East India Company, but free citizens, or "burgers". This change in policy had a far-reaching impact on the history of the settlement of South Africa, for it created the opportunity for permanent colonization by settlers who adopted the Cape of Good Hope as their new home. It is from this date that one can speak of a Dutch colony, in the strict sense, in southern Africa, and the burgers who received their letters of remission from the Company in 1657 are the first true White settlers.

Even after the introduction of the new policy, however, it was not the policy of the Dutch East India Company to create a settler colony at the Cape of Good Hope. The Company recognized no other objective for the station at "De Kaap" than that of promoting the Company's own interests in the East Indian trade. If the expansion of the colony could further this purpose, then it would have the Company's support.

Population growth in the early years was slow. At the end of the first year of the station, 1652, there were 115 White residents; even by a generation later, in 1687, their numbers had risen only to just over 600, as a result of natural population growth, ships calling in at the harbour, and the very modest results of settler recruitment in Europe, mainly in the Netherlands.

By the beginning of the 18th century, the White population of South Africa had barely passed the thousand mark; but by this time, the views on wise settlement policy held by the East India Company in the Netherlands and by the authorities in the colony had begun to diverge significantly. Fears at the Cape of agricultural overproduction led to opposition to further settlement, and by 1707, the Company had agreed to desist from sending any further settlers.

There was no resumption of the organized recruitment of settlers, with free passages and other benefits, during the rest of the period that the Dutch East India Company ruled the Cape, and 1707 therefore marks the end of a distinct historical phase in the settlement of South Africa. The Company would have liked to reintroduce organized settlement, but their proposals always met with opposition in the colony, for the local view was that the prosperity of the Cape depended rather on the continued importation of negro slaves.



The decisions taken at that time have played a crucial role in the subsequent unfolding of South African history. The distinguished historian of South Africa, Eric A. Walker, argues that at this point South Africa took a wrong turning. If the recruitment of White settlers had been given priority over the importation of Black slave

labour, the subsequent history of the colony would have been different, and at least the western sections of the present-day Cape Province would have evolved as a region of White settlement similar to the United States in North America.

On the other hand, the discontinuation of the official settlement program by the Dutch East India Company did not in fact lead to the total cession of immigration. Individuals continued to make their way to the Cape, even if in small numbers (the total number of new settlers arriving in the entire 18th century has been estimated at no more than about 300).

Further White population growth in South Africa was therefore now dependent almost entirely upon natural increase; but this proved rapid, for families tended to be large. Marriage was entered into a young age, and there was no danger of young girls (one of South Africa's more limited natural resources) remaining unmarried. From a base of just over one thousand at the beginning of the century, the White population had grown by 1754 to over 5 500, and by 1805 to approximately 26 000. For comparison, it is worth recalling that the European-origin population of the United States in 1776 numbered around 2.5 million.

The population survey of 1805 followed not on one change of control of the colony, but two: in 1795, the Royal Navy had occupied Cape Town as a pre-emptive strike against the risk that the French might gain control of this strategically vital watering station on the route between East and West; in that year, the Netherlands had become the French vassal state of the Republic of Batavia, and the British were evidently afraid that the Dutch might surrender the Cape to the French.

With occupation by the Royal Navy, the transformation of Dutch South Africa into British South Africa began. In 1803, the

Republic of Batavia did regain possession of the Cape for three years; but in 1806 the British returned, now on a permanent basis.

The ethnic composition of the White population of South Africa at the termination of Dutch rule is one of the eternal questions in South African historiography, and no accurate answer is possible, for much depends on questions of interpretation. Scholars are agreed on the dominance of persons of Dutch-German origin, although there is some disagreement on the proportions they made up within the population. Dutch and German settlers had between them composed a large majority of the colonists settling at the Cape during the 17th and 18th centuries. The next largest contingent were the French, followed – thanks to the merchant marine of Sweden and Denmark – by a few per cent of Scandinavians, including Swedes, Danes, Norwegians and Finns.

At the Treaty of Paris in 1815, the British control of the Cape since 1806 was confirmed, and the termination of the Napoleonic Wars marked the beginning of

a new prolonged period of peace. The restoration of peace at sea opened the way for overseas migration, which was simultaneously powerfully stimulated by the spread of the market economy.

In 1815, the settlement at the Cape was just 163 years old, of which 143 had been under the rule of the Dutch East India Company. How was British South Africa to carry on from the Dutch traditions of the colony? How would the British pursue the expansion of the population potential inherited from the Dutch East India Company? But also, and especially, what was to be the role of the Nordic countries in South Africa under British rule? The contribution of the Nordic countries to the settlement of South Africa – the response of the Nordic nations to the call of the southern sun – is the special focus of the investigation to be examined here today.

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