

K. Schoeman, *Early Slavery at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1717*

Protea Book House, Pretoria, 2007

507 pp

ISBN 978-1-86919-147-4

R220.00

In this book, Karel Schoeman has provided a richly detailed account of slaves and slavery at the Cape during the early years of the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC) or the Dutch East India Company. Schoeman's approach to the subject has been to read widely in the secondary sources, and in those primary sources which have been published, to produce a narrative that is partly chronological and partly thematic. It is an impressive and valuable contribution to Cape slave studies that contains a great detail of information about the conditions under which slaves worked, as well as revealing glimpses of individual slave lives. Where possible, Schoeman has presented details concerning the origin of Cape slaves. He has also attempted to gauge their numbers and their dates of arrival at the colony. With the help of the index, historians of Cape slavery will now be able to find answers to a great many questions which might interest them. If one wants to know, for instance, what slaves wore, how they were housed or what they ate in the early eighteenth century, Schoeman's text provides many examples. As a synthesis of existing knowledge, it is invaluable. Despite its length, however, it is not complete.

It is incomplete because Schoeman has not attempted to incorporate the work of all historians who have written about Cape slavery. This is partly because he prefers to present evidence based on the contemporary documents, "allowing them to tell their own story" (p 6). He adds that "I have avoided a statistical presentation, and have tried to refrain from analysis and interpretation for which I am not qualified, leaving the facts to speak for themselves, and providing references as far as possible

-
- 16 B Fagan, *Southern Africa during the Iron Age* (Thames and Hudson, London, 1965)
17 R Summers, "Human Figurines in Clay and Stone from Southern Rhodesia and Adjoining Territories", *Occasional Papers of the National Museums of Southern Rhodesia*, 21A, 1957
18 A I Richards, *Chisungu: A Girls' Initiation Ceremony among the Bemba of Northern Rhodesia* (Faber and Faber, London, 1954)

to more authoritative works in the end notes” (p 7). This is not as ingenuous a claim as it seems. In the first place, as most historians after E.H. Carr know only too well, facts can say different things to different people and a selected fact, in a meaningful narrative, says a good deal more than an unselected fact or a non-narrativised fact. In the second place, Schoeman is perfectly well-qualified to analyse and interpret historical documents and, in fact, does so. For instance, in a discussion about the marriage of white men to slave women, he notes that:

It is a striking fact that both men who married ex-slave wives during the early years at the Cape ended on Robben Island [as supervisor – reviewer’s note] This may be coincidence, but seems less so when one bears in mind that Sacharia’s successor Van Meerhoff likewise had a non-white wife, the Khoi interpreter Krotoa, who became an alcoholic while living on the island, if this process had not begun earlier. Quite possibly there were tensions in all three marriages which made it preferable to remove the couples concerned from the small white community in Table Bay, but even if this was the case, it seems likely that the tensions were caused by the community itself

This is a clear example of analysis and interpretation. It is also an example of how a selective use of secondary material neglects the fact that this particular insight has been discussed by other historians who might have expected acknowledgment in a footnote.¹⁹

This is not the only instance where existing scholarship has been ignored. The present reviewer, for instance, has written chapters or articles on Robben Island, slave desertion, Maria Mouton and Titus of Bengal and Willem Menssink and Trijntje of Madagascar. All of these topics or individuals are discussed in Schoeman’s book, but none of my works are cited in the bibliography or footnotes. Schoeman is, of course, quite entitled to select or discard whatever sources he wishes to, but some of his readers may be puzzled by his approach to the literature on Cape slavery. His opening statement is that: “Awareness of and interest in slavery in the Cape Colony is steadily increasing but most of the work that has been done on this subject is in Dutch or Afrikaans, and there are only five general surveys in English, of which the most accessible to the general reader, *Those in Bondage* by Victor de Kock, was published in 1950”.²⁰ One may quibble at the words “most” and “only” and ask, if the literature in Dutch or Afrikaans is more extensive, how many general surveys of Cape slavery there might be in those languages, apart from that written by Schoeman himself?²¹ One might also want to suggest that those works which have dealt with slavery in the nineteenth century Cape are far from irrelevant to the topic and deserve some

19 This point has been made before by: D B Bosman, “Uit die biografie van ’n Hottentottin: ’n eksperiment in beskawing”, *Huisgenoot*, 3 Julie 1942; V C Malherbe, “Krotoa, Called Eva: A Woman Between”, *Communications 19 – Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town*, 1990; N Penn, “Robben Island 1488-1805”, in H Deacon (ed), *The Island: A History of Robben Island 1488-1990* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1996)

20 The works Schoeman cites here are Böeseken’s *Slaves and free blacks*; De Kock’s *Those in Bondage*; Ross’s *Cape of Storms*; Shell’s *Children of Bondage* and Worden’s *Slavery in Dutch South Africa*

21 I refer here to K Schoeman, *Armosyn van die Kaap; die wêreld van ’n slavin, 1652-1733* (Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 2005) Schoeman explains that *Early Slavery* is based on the sources he investigated for *Armosyn*, but that it is “a new reworking of these, intended for English-speaking and non-South African readers”

Book Reviews

mention.²² He goes on to say that the “purpose of this book is to bring together the widely scattered information on the first sixty-odd years of slavery at the Cape and make it available to the general public”. This is an admirable and useful intention and Schoeman has certainly performed a valuable service in bringing many chapters or articles on slavery, particularly in the Afrikaans or Dutch language, to the attention of his readers, but his book is more selective than it claims to be.

Schoeman hints, at the end of his book, that he is going to continue the story of Cape slavery in another book, beyond the year 1717 (the year in which the Council of Policy admitted that the Cape was dependent on slave labour). I, for one, will look forward to that book with the greatest of interest. No doubt, too, I will marvel at the indefatigable industry which it will, like all of his books, exemplify, but I hope that in that book he will allow himself more space to comment on some of the developments in the historiography of South African slavery. As he rightly remarks, “the world of Cape slavery was neither monolithic nor static”. Nor is the world of Cape slave historiography. By choosing to privilege the, supposedly, most empirical of sources on Cape slavery and eschewing debate, he has, in fact, made the subject and its interpretation seem less dynamic than it is.

Nigel Penn
Cape Town