

The Dutch Image of South Africa

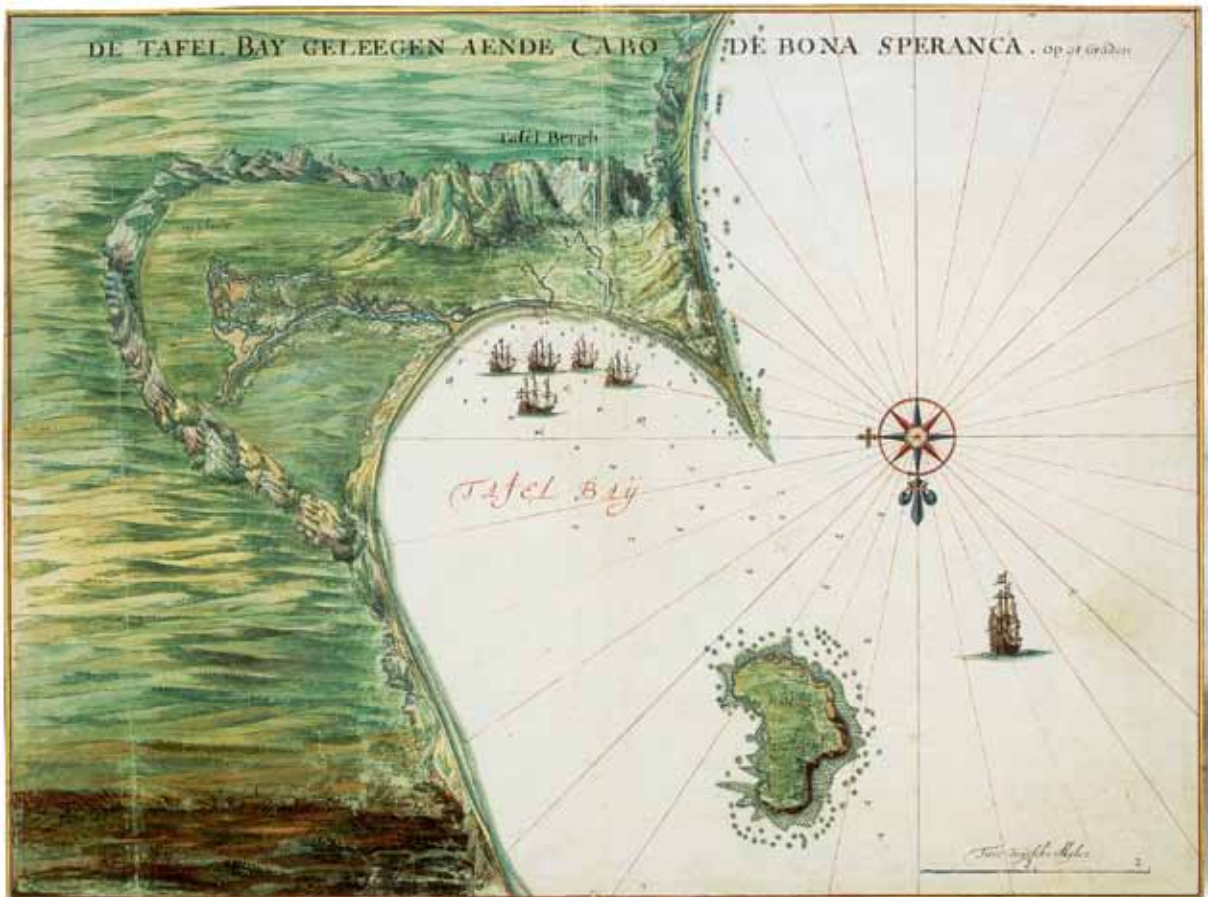
Twenty Years after 1990

88

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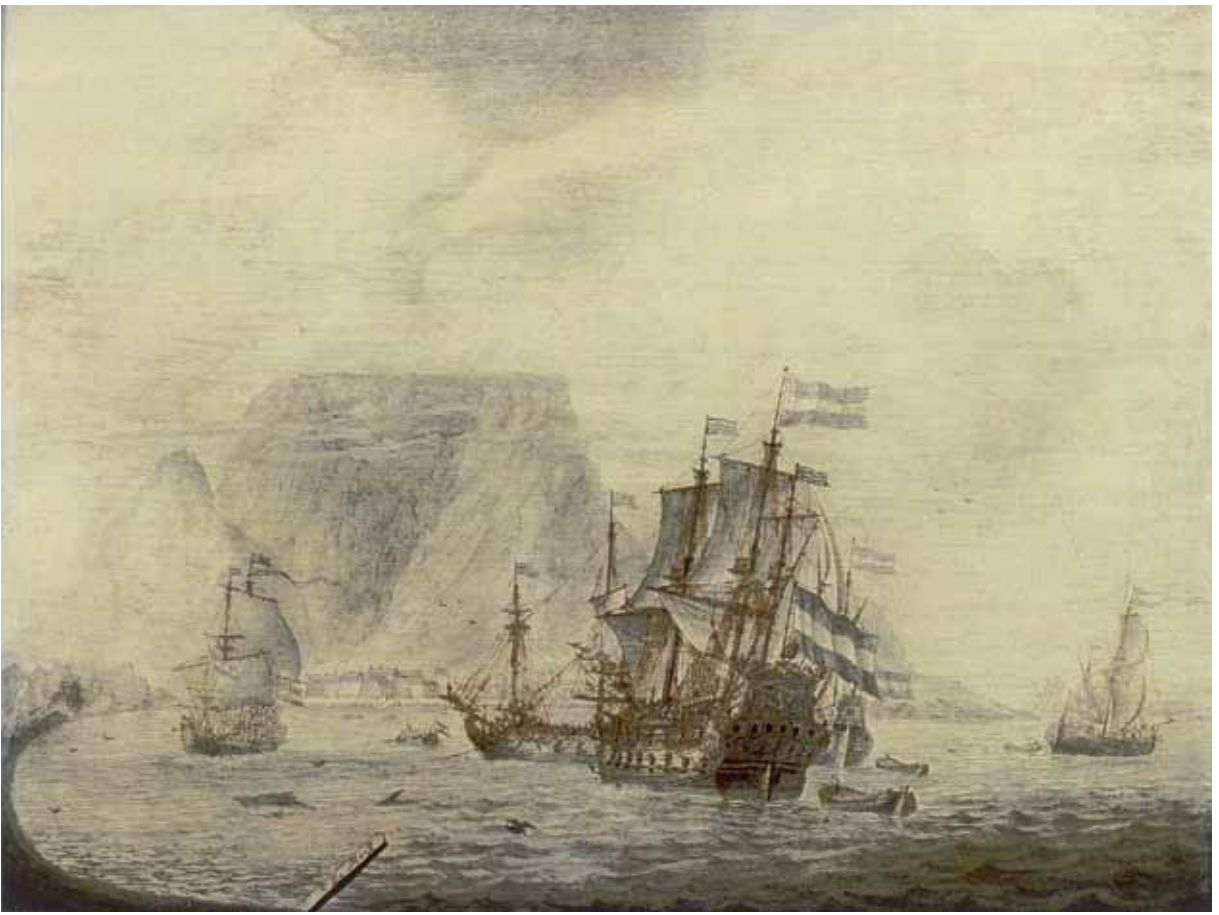
There are old ties between the Netherlands and South Africa. It was the Dutch East India Company that established a revictualling post at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652, from which in time developed into a new society that was Dutch in legislation, structure, language and culture. This colonial relationship came to an end a century and a half later – between 1795 and 1814 the Cape became a British possession and links between the Cape and the Netherlands weakened. However, the Great Trek (1834 and the following years) took the Dutch-Afrikaans community far into the interior of southern Africa, and the young Boer republics there were soon asking the old mother country for help. And receiving it too, specifically for the church and education. And then in every field, when in 1880–81 the Transvaalers, who a few years earlier had had to resign themselves to British annexation, made the Rednecks bite the dust at Laing's Nek and Majuba Hill and thus regained their independence. The Netherlands, surprised at the dynamism of these descendants of the 'Geuzen' who once had fought against Spanish subjugation, began to dream of a New Netherlands under the Southern Cross. For example, the Leiden historian Robert Fruin (famous for his classic interpretation of the Dutch Revolt of the 16th century) managed to get the Association of Dutch Literature to send chests full of literature to Pretoria. Education, the church and the civil service did indeed acquire a strong Dutch bias in the South African Republic (as the Transvaalers, with notable self-confidence, called their state). *'Kruger's Transvaal is our most beautiful colony,'* is how a visiting naval officer once expressed a widely-held Dutch sentiment.

In 1899 the stubborn Boers refused to recognise the dominion of the British world power. Nowhere were pro-Boer sympathies during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902 so widespread as in the Netherlands. They were based on a general distaste for power politics, a strong belief in the right to independence of small states and peoples, a strong sense of kinship and a common history, language, religion and culture. Half a century later, the feelings of kinship were still alive. At the opening of the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria, a temple to Afrikaner nationalism, in 1949 the vice-chairman of the Council of State, F. Beelaerts van Blokland, and the former minister Prof. G. van der Leeuw, spoke words of praise and appreciation on behalf of the Netherlands. In 1952 Prime Minister W. Drees honoured with his presence the festivities marking



the Van Riebeeck Tercentenary, an occasion also enthusiastically celebrated by the Netherlands. Gradually, however, the gap between the two countries was widening. The Netherlands was changing, as a result of the Second World War and the decolonisation of the Dutch East Indies, and the later abolition of religious and socio-political restrictions, secularisation and democratisation. At the same time, South Africa seemed to be becoming fossilised. In 1948 it picked up once more the 19th-century, republican thread that had been broken in 1902, including the old patriarchal, colonial-European social order. As time passed, South Africa under apartheid increasingly displayed the image of what the Afrikaner historian F.A. van Jaarsveld once called 'a bogged-down nation'. Gradually, this divergence undermined the sense of kinship and pro-Boer affection in the Netherlands.

Table Bay, situated at the Cape of Good Hope, at 34 degrees, by Jan Vingboons. The five ships in the bay give a picture of Jan van Riebeeck's arrival in 1652. *Nationaal Archief*, c. 1665.



A fraternal quarrel

Table Bay, Castle and settlement at the Cape by Cornelis Pieter de Mooij (from an unknown model), painting with pen and brush in ink on panel, *Amsterdams Historisch Museum*, 1655-1680.

After 1960 (Sharpeville!), however, apartheid caused the Netherlands' emotional involvement of and its former support to turn swiftly into a violent aversion. A fierce anti-apartheid movement emerged in the Netherlands; condemning apartheid on moral grounds, it therefore wished to isolate and boycott South Africa intellectually, politically and economically. A Dutch know-it-all attitude and sense of superiority were part of all this – at that time the Netherlands saw itself as a model country, wagging a cautioning schoolmasterly finger at many others. Many Dutch people saw politics as a matter of morality and the struggle against apartheid as an ideological war that thus called for political correctness and reform. In addition, Dutch involvement in South Africa had always been based on Dutch nationalism and cultural imperialism. In the eyes of Enlightenment colonial observers such as Hendrik Swellengrebel Jr. and Governor Baron van Plettenberg in 1776–78, the Boers in the interior of the Cape, who over the course of the 18th century had adapted to the challenges of the Frontier and Africa, had become degenerate. Throughout the 19th century, champions of missionary activity, with J.T. van der Kemp as the first but definitely not the last of them, lamented the attitude of the Afrikaners towards the Christianisation of the black population. Afrikaans was admittedly a

charming language for children, many Dutch people felt, but of course the battle against English could only successfully be conducted in High Dutch. When a Commission for Advice and Coordination regarding Cultural Cooperation was set up in 1938, Minister Slotemaker de Bruine stated that the Netherlands 'was willing to offer [South Africa] its services in areas conducive to the development of modern life'. And in 1965 W.F. de Gaay Fortman explained a parliamentary delegation's trip to South Africa – to point out to the government there the evils of apartheid – as due to 'the duty to the old brother nation' that the Netherlands had had to South Africa since the old days. The debate on apartheid between the Netherlands and South Africa thus had all the features of the nature of an older brother's attitude to a younger brother, a fraternal quarrel or a family row – with all the heat and emotion that goes with it. A fraternal quarrel between brother nations: nowhere was this so vehement as in the field of religion, at synods and other meetings of the clergy, between Dutch and South African brothers who ran their lives according to the same ecclesiastical and theological inheritance. The Afrikaner churches had originated in the Netherlands, shared the Dutch Calvinist tradition and maintained close relations with the protestant churches (Hervormd and Gereformeerd) in the Netherlands – many of their clergymen and most of the professors at their theological colleges had studied in Utrecht and at the Vrije Universiteit. But time and again those Dutch and South African Calvinists reproached each other for straying from the true path, desecrating their faith and bible, preaching heresies, equating the gospel with socialism (the Dutch) and racism (the Afrikaners). And even in those areas where theologically they understood each other and shared many of the same views on the church, people and state – as, for example, those taking part in the debate between the Vrije Universiteit and the Potchefstroomse Universiteit vir Christelike Hoër Onderwys (PU vir CHO) in the 1970s – they were unable to agree on how to apply those views to the concrete reality of everyday life and context.

Around 1990, then, the Dutch image of South Africa was extremely negative. People had given up on South Africa and written off the South Africans, i.e. the Afrikaners, as racists, colonial exploiters, people who had placed themselves beyond the pale of modern society. Old prejudices and non-historical allegations long since disproved had gained a fresh place in that black image of a white South Africa. Hadn't the people of the Cape always opposed the conversion and baptism of their slaves and hadn't they obstructed missionary work among the Khoi as much as possible? Hadn't the Great Trek begun as a protest against the granting of equal rights to whites and blacks and the abolition of slavery? Hadn't the Voortrekkers actually driven out the Bantu tribes by force, appropriated their pasturelands and imposed slave labour on their children? 19th-century caricatures had called the Boers lazy, stupid and uncivilised, arrogant and racist, 17th-century rustics who found themselves in modern times – the anti-apartheid rhetoric simply repeated those caricatures.

And just as before, the Netherlands was solidly behind the underdog, *Black was beautiful*. This meant that it became less and less possible to ask critical questions about the ideology of the liberation movements, the behaviour of the freedom fighters: bomb attacks on innocent victims, intimidation and the *neck-lacing* of opponents. No scope, either, for questions about the effects of their own weapons, isolation and boycott – in a holy war the end justifies the means, innocent victims suffer for the good cause.

Turning point

Depiction of the Battle at Blouberg, Anonymous. Watercolour on paper, Iziko William Fehr Collection, c.1806. The end of Dutch rule over the Cape Colony was heralded by this battle.

In February 1990 the Netherlands followed the developments in South Africa with bated breath. With astonishment, almost with disbelief, they heard Prime Minister F.W. de Klerk announce the end of apartheid and thankfully watched Mandela enter the new South Africa as a free man. When, a year later, he visited the Netherlands to thank people for the support he had received in the past and to ask for it to be continued during the transition period, his reception in Amsterdam could only be compared with that given Paul Kruger some ninety years earlier. The Netherlands followed the elections of April 1994 and Mandela's installation as president with rapturous excitement. Like the fairy-tale happy ending to a horrible dream.

The 'turnabout' in South Africa between 1990 and '94, however, also marked the end of the many years of Dutch involvement in South Africa. The anti-apartheid organisations disbanded or converted themselves into development organisations. Routine media coverage of South Africa diminished. It now began to include non-political topics as well, hesitantly at first, with many politically-cor-



rect clichés about the effects of apartheid. And soon there were straightforward human interest stories, or reports about the impressive scenery, the pluriformity of South Africa and the warmth of its people – a world in one country.

Tens of thousands of Dutch people every year now spend their holidays in South Africa. Some spend the winter there, own a time-share pied-à-terre. Or they devote time and money to aid and development projects which vary greatly in scale, often of purely local importance and organised by a parallel support/



South African Centre for the Netherlands and Flanders in Pinelands, Cape Town. Photo by George Hugo.

sponsor group in the Netherlands. Expressions of solidarity with a neglected South Africa.

Indeed, since 1990–94 connections between the Netherlands and South Africa have multiplied. Not only as regards tourism and development aid – trade contacts are also flourishing. SANPAD (South Africa Netherlands research Programme on Alternatives in Development) contentedly writes bulky reports, academic contacts and exchanges are many times more intensive than ever before and the Amsterdam football club AJAX fosters and recruits football talent in South Africa. Stef Bos has star status in South Africa and all kinds of South African talent find an enthusiastic public in the Netherlands.

Even so, the picture of South Africa in the Netherlands is fundamentally different from what it was. It is no longer the country of apartheid. Perceptions of South Africa are now mainly determined by each person's individual experiences. The permanently fine weather, the scenery, the stimulating contact with South Africans both white and black. The incomprehensible gap between rich and poor as well, the difference in development and culture, first and third world combined. Sympathy with those who have been left behind, the poor and backward folk, coupled with attempts to understand the vastness of the challenge which all that represents. And sometimes with a measure of understanding for the complicated position of the whites in all of this.

The old sentiments are quickly being eroded, however. The journalist Vermeulen, who worked for seven years as a correspondent in South Africa, has recently – with almost visible reluctance – had to admit that his old image of South Africa, shaped by anti-apartheid, is incorrect: *'Help, I've become a white'*, he wrote resignedly. Black-white no longer works – South Africa is a country with many voices and attitudes. Dutch people simply cannot comprehend the attitude of the South African authorities and many people there to the HIV epidemic and the inadequate action to combat crime. They giggle at a president who engages in weird dance steps while clad in animal skins, and yet they don't accept rape, self-enrichment, fraud, corruption and the intimidation of opponents. The Dutch picture of South Africa always had a tinge of imperialistic superiority and moral charge about it: accents which are heard more and more in conversations.

Cultural imperialism

Where the Netherlands' current perception of South Africa differs fundamentally from what it was before, however, is the total absence of the old emphasis on kinship. For the Dutch, South Africa is no longer the country of Afrikaner culture and language. The Netherlands has not clasped the new South Africa to its bosom as the returned prodigal son. It has concluded a new cultural agreement with South Africa, but without any mention of the old historical relations. Including those between Dutch and Afrikaans – formally one of South Africa's eleven official languages, and in fact the language with the most speakers/users there. Dutch people do find it interesting and sometimes convenient that Afrikaans is spoken in South Africa and that people there can understand a lot of Dutch words and names. But that's about it.

Nelson Mandela recognised that special relationship when at his first meeting with Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers in 1991 he deliberately said that he was going to speak 'Boers'. The Netherlands, however, opted for political correctness – even royal honours awarded to ex-Dutch in South Africa are handed over by Her Majesty's diplomats in English. And unlike similar institutions in Paris and Jakarta, the 'Dutch House' in the Cape – a private initiative! – failed to attract sufficient funding.

Today the kinship-nationalism of former times is unknown in the Netherlands. That country is increasingly using English, and *the* Dutch person does not exist. Indeed, the Dutch attach little value to what is their own – the average Dutchman, or woman, characterises him- or herself as global and pluriform. A vague feeling of a 'Dutch model country' and '*Oranje Boven*' still exists, mainly on the football pitch. The Dutch no longer dream of a New Netherlands under the Southern Cross as they did a century ago – but they no longer work themselves up any more to great heights of moral indignation, as in the apartheid years .

Admittedly, both the pro-Boer sympathies of earlier years and the more recent anti-apartheid action were manifestations of an obvious cultural imperialism. The kinship was an 'invented tradition', originating within the framework of Dutch imperialism, an instrument to reserve South Africa for the Netherlands. A Janus-faced concept, too, characterised by adhesion and aversion, and far too open to abuse. So it is no great loss.

The Afrikaners too, for that matter, usually viewed the relationship differently, rejecting the behaviour of the Dutch as interfering and know-it-all; the Dutch can still easily arouse hatred of the Netherlands in South Africa. Afrikaners and Nederlanders are not brothers, no 'kinship' connects them – that dubious term all too easily caused misconceptions and false images. It is also having an effect on historiography. Dutch studies of the apartheid years often repeat the same ideological/theological arguments used during religious debates in attempts to convert the other side.

Simply a little piece of Africa

The Netherlands and South Africa have a remarkable relationship: a form of special neighbourliness, resulting from the relationship between Afrikaans and Dutch as well as other shared cultural elements.

For the Afrikaner, the Netherlands embodies part of his European origins, and so the country had and has a special place, 'the dream beyond the horizon', as the Stellenbosch historian Pieter Kapp calls it.

In the Netherlands that history, cherished for so long, now belongs to the past. South Africa has no place in the national historical canon; Afrikaans literature does well in the Netherlands, it is true, but only in Dutch translation, and the academic study of it takes place along with colonial Dutch literature in Surinam and Indonesia. For the Dutch, South Africa – twenty years after 1990 is simply a little piece of Africa. ■



Translated by John Irons

Wine-growing area near Stellenbosch. © Jürgen Doom.