

THE STORY OF SIMON VAN DER STEL

Chapter VII

In 1696, in a despatch taken home that year by the return fleet, Van der Stel sent in his resignation to the Directors. We can imagine that after seventeen years of uphill work without a holiday he wanted to be relieved. The "ruinous war", as he so rightly called it, had not yet come to an end, but there were signs that it could not go on much longer.

The Directors' reply, dated 15 November, did not reach him until the new year with the outward-bound fleet. They accepted his resignation, but ordered him to continue in office until he was replaced. They signed themselves, however, his "good friends".

He had still a long way to go. The war had to come to an end, and further were to occur in the appointment and arrival of his successor. Meantime, he plodded on. On 1 April 1696 the first patrol of the Burger Guard went on duty, a police force of six companies, thirty men to a company, which he established to patrol the town from 4 o'clock in the afternoon until daylight. Their depôt was set up near the market-place. He also began building a new hospital. The old one was on the foreshore. It was too small, delapidated, and smelt. He wanted room for 800 beds at the garden end of the town. The number of sick men who arrived in the Company's fleets, for whom the hospital principally existed, was dreadful. Most of them were down with scurvy, a disease caused by lack of fresh food, especially of vegetables. Blotches came up all over their bodies, their gums swelled and their teeth became loose, so that they could not chew even the food they had. To give you an instance: In January 1696 the remainder of the return fleet, eleven ships, came to anchor in the Bay. 228 men had died, 678 were sick. The sick had to be landed. Even the market-place had to provide shelter for many of them.

The Directors had been much concerned about the number of sick in the fleets. Van der Stel had received despatches which laid blame upon the provisions supplied to the ships at the Cape. He indignantly replied that all provisions taken into the ships were inspected by ship's officers. In his turn he complained of conditions in the outward-bound ships, which could not be placed to his charge. One cause of sickness was the lengthened passage. The fleets in wartime sailed round the north of Scotland to save having to sail the English Channel where French ships would be lying in wait for them. Further cause was the lack of clothing among the soldiers and sailors. They were "almost unprovided with everything." The consequence was that they became filthy, and in bad weather or in pumping water they became wet, and having nothing to change into went to bed in their wet clothes. The result was easy to imagine. A further cause was the

lack of good food. Unvaried salt meat and pork, and especially stews every day of grey and white peas, which became musty in the hold. He was quoting, he said, the chief surgeons whom he had consulted. The men should be supplied with barley, plums, currants and raisins: "Boil them all together with a good dash of mum (German beer), and twice a day some Spanish wine."

Another problem much affecting health in the ships was the provision of sufficient fresh water. Van der Stel refers in his despatch to earlier remarks by the Directors about distilling fresh water out of sea water. There is more than one opinion about its worth, he reminds them. The majority agrees that distilled water is good for cooking in that it saves the fresh water itself, but much depends upon the skill of the distillers.

In reply the Directors sent him a copy of their Resolution in Council containing instructions for the "Water-Workers", telling them exactly how the condensing machine worked and was kept in order. They also sent him the Instructions for Surgeons in the ships, who are to keep records of their cases, and the list of medicines provided for the ships. Instructions were also drawn up for the ships' captains about the rules of health, and the storage and distribution of food.

In this year, 1696, we read that the number of men in the outward-bound fleet of ten ships is 3,250. 188 men had died, and 589 were sick. It gives us an idea of what the Cape station had to supply in provisions and care, and for two fleets a year — outward-bound and homeward-bound. Van der Stel could not help bragging this year, in his despatch of June, that he had supplied to the fleets in the past fifteen years 206,000 head of cattle more than any of his predecessors had done in the same length of time. Moreover, he could show an advance in profits on the station.

Thereby hangs a tale. The Directors still nagged continually about handing over the whole business of supplies, cattle stations, and barter with the Hottentots to the colonists. Van der Stel was just as determined that it would never do. Certainly, the farmers were in a better way than they had ever been, but as a whole they could not be depended upon. Van der Stel complained that there too many idle men who killed off their stock to eat, or to sell, without breeding properly to keep up their flocks and herds, with the result, too, that they were left without manure for the vineyards and grain lands, and came asking for fresh grants of land, or they wandered off shooting game and bartering with the Hottentots. The last thing, he repeated, to hand over to the freemen would be barter with the Hottentots. Too many rascals engaged in the business, and even men who were not rascals were apt to barter with a high hand, and cause jealousy between the various 'Captains'. Moreover, if the freemen had the control of barter they would raise the price of stock to the Company, whereas at present the Company procured stock for a trifle of trinkets, tobacco, and drinks.

The Directors had also expressed the wish that the Company's lands should be sold. How sell the land, Van der Stel asked, when hitherto the freemen had got it for nothing? One establishment especially, he urged, should not be handed over to freeman ownership. This was the much extended cultered land at *Rustenburg*, Rondebosch. The freeman tenant was making good wine. The orchards flourished, and he had developed a tree nursery there to such a point that every season any number of young trees awaited transport to the Company's forests and the farmers.

What the Cape station needed, he advised, were retired Company's servants among the farmers — men of good repute with money to invest in stock-breeding and up-to-date agriculture generally. As we know, the Lord of Mydrecht had believed this, and Governor Goske. Farming, like any other business, needs capital, and capital was just what the Company was not prepared to go on providing for the freemen. However, the end was not yet. For the fleets of 1696 the Ensign Schryver, commanding a garrison expedition, brought in over twelve hundred head of stock.

As for grain, harvests were not always good. 1696 was a drought year. Van der Stel told the Directors how the grain storage vaults at the Castle were largely of his own invention, based on an Italian plan. They were air-tight, and storage there meant that good years helped to relieve the bad years. 1696 was so bad that the brewer recently arrived from Germany, Rutgert Mensing, had been obliged to shut down his brewery for the time. He had been given the property *Papenboom* at Newlands, because the best water for his purpose was to be found there. The Directors had sent out hop plants with him, but they all rotted on the way, and none of the rest would grow. We are reminded of Van Riebeeck's failure with the same thing.

1697 was a good harvest. The return fleet carried away 8,000 lb. of bread.

In October 1696 the Dutch explorer Commodore Willem de Vlamingh dropped anchor in Table Bay, sailing under the Company's orders "to explore the Southland more closely". (The Southland, also called New Holland by the Dutch, was to become Australia.) He was following upon the discoveries of two other Dutchmen, the first the skipper of the little *Duyfken* out exploring from the Company's stations at Bantam in 1605-6. It was the New Guinea coast he was examining, but he crossed over and came upon the point of what was to named the Cape York Peninsula. The savages killed several of the crew. In October 1616 Dirk Hartog, sailing in the *Eendracht*, left his name and the record of his visit on what was still called *Dirk Hartog's Isle*.

He hammered a pewter plate flat and scratched his name and the date on it, and nailed it to a pole. There, Willem Vlamingh — eighty years later, found it, took it down, hammered out a pewter plate

of his own, and recorded his visit upon it. Hartog's plate he delivered to the Governor at Batavia who sent it to Amsterdam, where it still exists. Later on, French explorers removed Vlamingh's plate, and took it to Paris where it was lost. Unfortunately, no journal survived of Vlamingh's voyage. When he anchored at the Cape on his return passage, in April 1698, Van der Stel wrote to the Directors: "We regret that the expedition to the Southland did not succeed very well." The Commodore had also been instructed to keep an eye open for the long lost *Ridderschap* in which Van der Stel had lost his son, and the lack of success there may have depressed him. On 8th May he sent on the laggards of the return fleet under De Vlamingh's command.

Chapter VIII

Van der Stel got the news that peace was in the air from two English ships anchored in the Bay towards the end of January 1697. The King of France, he heard, had offered peace to Great Britain and the States of the Netherlands, who would not accept his offer unless he agreed to recognise William III as the lawful King of England, Scotland and Ireland. They had given him a fortnight to make up his mind.

The Directors confirmed this news in a despatch dated 9 April. Peace, they wrote, had not yet been concluded, but the King's house at Ryswick (near the Hague) had been prepared for the Peace Conference. The King of England had already arrived, and ambassadors from the other countries concerned. Peace was signed at Ryswick on 21-10-1697. News thereof reached the Cape on 3-2-98.

In their despatch which reached Van der Stel with the outward-bound fleet of 1698, the Directors announced their appointment of his son Willem Adriaan, to whom they had given the rank of Governor and Councillor Extraordinary. He did not, however, sail with this fleet.

In this despatch they also instructed Van der Stel, "as we are now living in peaceful times", to send off to Batavia the two extra vessels which had been serving the Cape station during the war. One was quite enough now. He is also to pack off to Batavia in the outward-bound fleet as many soldiers and sailors as he can spare. Batavia needed men. Further, he is to cancel the special war signals used for shipping.

In reply to this despatch Van der Stel "dutifully and cordially" thanked the Directors for appointing his son as his successor, and for conferring upon him the rank of Governor and Councillor Extraordinary.

He and his Councillors decided that now he could see clearly ahead, war over, retirement in sight, he could leave the Cape for a while in order to make a tour of inspection of the Company's outposts near Stellenbosch and Drakenstein, and the affairs they dealt with, and carefully examine the farms and the quality of the soil. He meant to extend the boundaries of the colony so that agriculture might further develop. His report to the Directors gives us the story of his tour.

He set out on 23 September and was away for a month. He found the outposts in order, which was a relief as he had been having trouble again with quarrelling Hottentot 'captains', and with runaway slaves. Some of the farmers of Stellenbosch and Drakenstein complained of too little pasturage for their stock, and not enough good land for grain. There was also a number of freemen to whom land had yet to be granted, among them probably five Huguenots who had recently arrived. (There should have been ten, but five died on the way.) He granted to men who needed it "a good piece of land" south of the Wamakers Valley towards the Limietberg.

He found the original little church at Stellenbosch damp and now too small, so he promised to see to it. The congregation would have to pay for everything except for the glass and iron needed, which the Company would supply. The congregation had already collected a certain amount for the church, and hoped that the congregation at the Cape would help.

Game, he observed, had decreased in spite of repeated proclamations to protect wild life from poaching. People were even shooting enough game illegally to be able to make presents of it to foreign ships.

He was pleased to be able to report that more land had been ploughed during 1698 than ever before, but grain was much injured by plagues of insects, and the "barren and parching south-easters", or else, being sown on the flats or in the valleys, the land got "drowned by cold rains which fall at the end of the year". So it is, he writes, that bread corn gets limited. He has had to ask Batavia for rice again for the use of the hospital and the slaves. However, the 1698 harvest promises to be good. The farmers are apt to waste corn by making brandy with it. This he has forbidden.

He promises to send the Directors "as usual" samples of wine. He had told them the previous year that "wine is now properly taken in hand", and certainly it was Van der Stel from *Constantia*, and the Huguenot Taillefer from his farm *Picardie* who contributed greatly to put it on the map. Batavia was very rude about the samples received at this time. They said they didn't know what to do with it. It was "extraordinarily bad", and they had plenty of French wines. However, even Batavia came round in the end.

Willem Adriaan van der Stel with his family arrived in the *Stad Ceulen* with her consort *Drie Kroonen* on 23 January 1699. He was to take office as Governor on 11 February. Meantime, the father prepared for the son the usual document of 'Instructions' — an account of the condition of the colony, and of what required particular attention — which every retiring commander of the colony had prepared for his successor.

In this document his first concern is to explain to Willem Adriaan the state in which he will find the agriculture of the colony. He tells

him much of what we already know. When he first arrived as Commander, he writes, the freemen were not producing all they needed even for themselves. A special ship came every year from Batavia with rice, to serve instead of the lacking amount of wheat, a matter which provoked cutting remarks from the Batavian Council — what was the Cape colony for but to provide for itself and to serve the Company? Now, farmers produced enough to feed themselves and their families. When the harvest was plentiful they could even export to Batavia.

All the same, he wrote, it was necessary to keep an eye on the farmers, and continually to urge progress and industry, without allowing them to apply overmuch industry in the cultivation of vineyards at the expense of wheat.

Another abuse which had to be prevented was the farmers' grazing on the pasture of the Company's outposts, and mingling their stock with the Company's. Sometimes, the Company's outpost-men dishonestly exchanged Company's good stock for the farmers' bad stock. Nor were farmers on trek to outspan their waggons at the outposts and use the Company's grazing and watering.

The Berg River lands were the richest. Farmers must be made to cleanse this stream, and deepen it, otherwise it overflowed in the rainy season and washed sand over the land and wrecked it. Everywhere in farming country the streams must be looked to in this fashion.

Another thing — the farmers must live near one another and keep in touch, or the Militia service suffered. Men who wandered about, camping in the beyond, pretended not to hear, or certainly did not hear, the signal guns ordering militiamen to the Castle. It was necessary for the burgers to become "thoroughly accustomed to martial discipline, and to know what to do if the place was attacked."

Company's servants, if the men were of the right type, should be encouraged to become freemen, but they should be Protestants and Netherlanders, or men from German States not engaged in sea traffic, that is to say, people not in competition with the Dutch East India Company.

Simon van der Stel was uneasy in his mind about the mixture of nationality among the burghers. "Should the Colony", he wrote, "be populated by other nationalities each individual will hold fast to his own." There might even be civil war in the country. Indeed, he warned his son, that "in this respect the French nation, though settled here and well received, are the least to be trusted." Best of all, encourage the Netherlander Company's servants to become freemen, then others will follow them from Holland and from the Indies. Above all, avoid adventurers, fortune-hunters, people who come to make what they can out of the country, and then clear out with their profits. Such people should be taxed when they leave, then the country that served them will have some reward for its hospitality.

He had a word for the Hottentots. "Govern them with great gentleness", he wrote. "We have accustomed them not to make war upon one another. They came to us to be reconciled." He had not always been gentle himself, having cause for anxiety. Disciplinary expeditions were not only a nuisance but also cost money.

Then, of course, he had something to say about his precious timber. Freemen were to be ordered to plant more and more timber-trees, and when they hacked down kreupelhout for fuel (the best for fuel), they were to be made to dig out the roots that the seed might find room to grow. Garrison cattle barterers had reported to him the existence of fine forests along the barter paths over the Hottentots Holland mountains. The difficulty would be transport. Special roads would have to be made. Not an easy matter. He was reminded of the need to breed horses. Willem Adriaan must see to that. The pace of the ox was becoming too slow for all the colony had to transport. The burghers had only 572 horses among the lot of them.

He does not discuss here the breeding of woolled sheep, but of late the Directors had written about it more than once. The trouble was that Cape sheep did not produce heavy clips of wool. It would be a question of importing thorough-bred sheep. He had sent what wool he could, and it had been sold for what it would fetch in Holland. (At any rate, Willem Adriaan was to take in hand the Colony's first efforts in breeding a substantial number of woollen sheep.)

Besides his own observations Simon recommended his son to examine the files of past Commissioners' orders and recommendations.

He concluded his own document with his blessing:

"We recommend you and the Company's possessions to the Holy and Worthy Protection of the Almighty, cordially praying His Divine Majesty to guide you with His Holy Spirit, and grant you such prudence and justice, and likewise such an upright, pure and steadfast mind, combined with such faithful diligence as you may be in need of for the administration of Church and State, and the furtherance of the Company's interests here, that your work may tend to magnify God's Holy Name, satisfy our masters, and preserve and increase your own honour and reputation."

On 11 February a grand parade of garrison men and Burger Militia, with bugles blowing and drums beating, attended the ceremony of Willem Adriaan's taking up his duties as Governor. Also to celebrate the occasion, imprisoned runaway Company's servants were pardoned, and convicts serving in chains were released from these to work out their time with free limbs.

In the whole colony to come under his command there were only 414 freemen, 207 women, 255 boys, and 266 girls. Burgher slaves numbered

536 men, 84 women, 29 boys and 28 girls. We realise that a great deal depended upon a very few people.

Willem Adriaan has come down to us in South African history with less credit than he deserves, as not a few others have done. The farmers rebelled against the consequences of the Lord of Mydrecht's having confirmed the grants of land to Company's servants still in office. They accused Willem Adriaan of dishonesty. The Commissioner of the year 1700 granted him his fine property on the Lourens River where he followed in his fathers footsteps doing much to increase the knowledge of good farming. It is improbable that a man who had filled the position of magistrate in Amsterdam, one of the most important cities of Europe at that time, should have been a dishonest person. When his appointment as Governor and Councillor Extraordinary was first made known by the Directors he received congratulations from other "Chambers" — that is to say, representatives of the Dutch East India Company in various towns. The Chamber of Hoorn wrote to him that his was "an appointment that greatly pleased this chamber."

Simon van der Stel retired to his *Constantia* property, describing himself as "a simple burger", which only meant that he intended to devote himself entirely to a freeman's affairs. His private life was hardly simple, for he loved gracious living, and everyone of any importance who came to the country visited him there. The Commissioner of March 1699 had enlarged his property by granting to him Zeekoe Vlei and its surrounding lands, and the Commissioner of February 1700, who granted Willem Adriaan his property, granted to Simon for his lifetime the grazing lands of the Steenberg.

He had neighbours now in the valley. In 1682, the widow of Hans Ras, was granted land on the Eastern boundary of *Constantia*. It was called *Zwaanswyk*. In September 1693 the Company's chief surgeon at the Cape, Hendrik ten Damme, was granted the wooded property known as Klaassen's Bosch. In Van Riebeeck's time a man named Klaasen had been granted the plot next to Van Riebeeck's land on the Bosheuvel. (Wynberg Hill.) Klaasen was permitted to chop wood and gather fuel a little farther up the hill into what is now over Klaassens Road and into *Constantia*. Everyone called it *Klaassen's Bosch*, and the name stuck. Te Damme did not change it when the property was granted to him. In 1699 the freeman F. Rosseau was farming *Harman's Kraal*, once the grazing land of a Hottentot. In 1697 *Witteboomen*, an old Company's outpost, was granted to L. Simons.

Taking him all round, Simon van der Stel strikes us as having been the most interesting and creative of all the Commanders and Governors at the Cape in the time of the Dutch East India Company. It was partly because his whole heart was in it. Once arrived, he never went back to Holland. The Cape was his love and his life. That, however, would not have been enough had he not possessed a good brain, an attractive personality, and unfailing industry.

He died on 24 June 1712, and was buried in the Dutch Reformed Church in Adderley Street. (Then the Heerengracht.) His body lies somewhere under the floor of the present church, for the new church was built on the old site. Only the tower was left standing. The memorial to him hanging in the old church was lost. His greatest memorial is the beauty he preserved and helped to create.

M. Whiting Spilhaus.