

Rijk Tulbagh: His Life and Times

A brief historical review

Rijk Tulbagh was Governor of the Dutch-held Cape Colony from 1751 until his death in 1771.

He was born on 14 May 1699 in Utrecht, and grew up in Bergen op Zoom in what is now North Brabant Province of the Netherlands.

In about 1767, he enlisted with the Dutch East India Company under a 5-year agreement in which he undertook to do whatever was required of him, "to shoulder a musket or wield a pen". In 1716, he embarked on the ship *Terhorst* destined for Die Kaap. There, his impeccable conduct, his obliging disposition and intellectual inclinations, brought him to the notice of the Governor, De Chavonnes. As a consequence he rose rapidly through the ranks and was appointed Governor in 1751.

It was at the Cape that he met and married Elizabeth Swellengrebel, a colonist by birth. She died in 1753.

Though acknowledged for his introduction of strict sumptuary laws in an attempt to discourage humbug and public display, his application of rigid court protocol, societal etiquette and strict military discipline, Tulbagh was to be fondly remembered generations later for a popularity occasioned by fiscal discipline, fairness, justice and applied commonsense.

He died in Cape Town on the 11th August 1771.

During his governorship of 20 years, Tulbagh was positively involved in many aspects of the commercial, cultural and social activities of the colony, its institutions and people. That which follows is but a synopsis:

THE CAPE ANIMAL and FLORAL KINGDOM

Like many people of his day, Rijk Tulbagh showed a great interest in natural history, particularly botany.

He established an animal and plant collection in the gardens of the Company, a remnant of which exists to this day.

He sent insects and plants to many famous collectors in Europe. Amongst these was Linnaeus in Sweden. The Mountain Pride looks to have been in one of those collections; and, as a tribute to Tulbagh, in 1764 Linnaeus named it *Aeropetes tulbaghia*. This magnificent butterfly is the exclusive pollinator of the famous Pride of Table Mountain or Red disa, *Disa uniflora*.

The father of modern taxonomy, and one of the fathers of modern ecology, Carl Linnaeus (known after his ennoblement as Carl von Linné) conducted a lively correspondence in Latin with many people around the then-known world. Among these was Tulbagh. Linnaeus was overwhelmed by the richness and beauty of the Cape flora, and wrote the following to Tulbagh:

"May you be fully aware of your fortunate lot in being permitted by the Supreme Disposer of events to inhabit" and "also to enjoy the sovereign control of that Paradise on Earth, the Cape of Good Hope, which the beneficent Creator has enriched with his choicest wonders. Certainly if I were at liberty to change my fortune for that of Alexander the Great or of Solomon, Croesus or Tulbagh, I should without hesitation prefer the latter." (quoted in Conrad Lighton's Cape Floral Kingdom)

A number of Cape lepidoptera and plants today bear the name *tulbaghia*.

COMMERCIAL

The Seven Years War (1756-1763) involved all of the major European powers of the period, causing 900,000 to 1,400,000 deaths. Though a blight on the European landscape, it brought commercial prosperity to the Cape as substantial numbers of ships called seeking provisions. This period of prosperity was long afterwards spoken of as "the good old times of Father Tulbagh".

CULTURAL

Although German and Scandinavian Lutherans immigrants clamoured for their own church, petitions to the V.O.C. (Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie) to be granted a site were ignored by the Company, ignored that is until Martin Melck from Memel settled at the Cape. Tulbagh held Martin Melck in high esteem and granted him a site at the top end of Strand Street. Later, the church that became known as the Barn Church was built and clandestine church services held there. The 130-year rule of "One faith only" was broken only after Tulbagh's death when, in 1780, the first legitimate church service was held.

1761 saw the establishment of the first library in the colony. Funded from a bequest by Joachim Nicolaas van Dessen, a native of Rostock in Germany, who had arrived at the Cape in 1727 as a soldier and rose to the position of Secretary of the Orphan Chamber, it housed three thousand, eight hundred printed books and many manuscripts, some mathematical and astronomical instruments, and several oil paintings. In 1820, it was moved to the South African Public Library, Cape Town, and is known as the *Dessinian Collection*.

FAMOUS VISITORS

Even in the eighteenth century, the Cape was a great draw card for the adventurous, rich and famous. Amongst the many people that passed through its port, two in particular bear mentioning.

In December, 1764, Robert Clive (later Major-General Robert Clive, 1st Baron Clive of Plassey), when on his way to India, was entertained by the Governor, who placed Government House at his disposal and provided him with a military guard.

In 1771 Carl Peter Thunberg, a Swedish medical doctor and naturalist in the employ of the V.O.C. and later called "the father of South African botany", was a visitor at this time, remaining at the Cape in the first instance for three years.

GEOGRAPHICAL EXPLORATION

During his governorship, significant exploration took place. In 1752, Friedrich Beutler explored the east southern African coast with a team comprising a surveyor and cartographer, a surgeon, a botanist, a wainwright and a blacksmith. He returned with descriptions of the Nguni inhabitants of the Keiskamma River region.

Later, Hendrik Hop and Willem van Reenen completed a journey into Namaqualand, travelling as far north as Walvis Bay and Keetmanshoop and discovering copper in the process. Thereafter, Jacobus Coetzee led an expedition north of what is now the Orange River. Significant resistance by the Khoisan to occupation by the trekboer resulted in a chronic state of skirmishing.

By 1767, the frontier of the colony had extended beyond the Gamtoos River into the land of the AmaXhosa; and once armed confrontations between the indigenous peoples and the Dutch trekboer ensued.

Thus it was that, in 1770, the Council of Policy resolved that on the northern or Stellenbosch side of the Zwartberg the colonial boundary should be the hills known as Bruintjes Hoogte, that on the southern or Swellendam side it should be the Gamtoos River; and various procedures were put in place to encourage the effective implementation of this dictate.

HEALTHCARE

During his tenure, the colony was challenged on many fronts. One of these was healthcare.

In 1755, a second smallpox epidemic broke out at the Cape, thought to have been introduced by a homeward bound fleet from Ceylon. From the beginning of May until the end of October that year nine hundred and sixty- three Europeans and eleven hundred indigenous folk died. Whole sectors of the commercial platform of the colony, such as property values, collapsed as a consequence. Owing to the large number of deaths, the cemetery around the Groote Kerk filled so rapidly that it was necessary to find another nearby.

The first cases of leprosy were reported to Tulbagh and the Political Council by the Landdrost and Heemraden of Stellenbosch on the 10th of May 1756.

1767 saw the third great smallpox epidemic, this time introduced to the Colony by a Danish ship returning to Europe. It raged between May and November that year but, as a consequence of previous experience, the precautions that were introduced contained the contagion. One hundred and seventy-nine Europeans, one hundred and forty-five blacks and two hundred and fifty-one slaves died, largely in the country districts.

POPULATION DYNAMICS, SLAVERY AND THE RULE OF LAW

A population census in 1754, disclosed a European population of 510 colonists and 6 279 slaves. By 1756, the European population had grown to five thousand, one hundred and twenty-three and of their slaves as five thousand, seven hundred and eighty-seven.

The indigenous peoples are reported as having caused little trouble under Tulbagh's administration, the indigenous people within the European settlement being usually governed by chiefs of his appointment. Further, the courts of law were accessible to all people, with a high degree of certainty of redress for oppression or ill-treatment.

In 1753, Rijk Tulbagh initiated the codification of slave law, subsequently known as the Tulbagh Code. He was a man of his time, and among the iniquities of that time the inhuman treatment of slaves in bondage was common.

1767 was to see the abolition of the importation of male slaves from Asia.

TOWN PLANNING, VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

During his administration Kaapstad grew considerably, new streets being laid out and the central Grand Parade curtailed with oak trees. Water pumps were installed about the town; and a burgher watch house built on Greenmarket Square, the foundation stone being laid by Barend van Artois, a member of the Court of Justice, in November 1755. Currently, the Old Town House, houses the fine collection of Dutch pictures presented to the city by Sir Max Michaelis.

The graveyard round the Groote Kerk was closed in 1770 although burials within the Church took place until 1836.

Ryk Tulbagh built the original Newlands House on Newlands Avenue, once the home of the first Lady Mayor of Cape Town, Joyce Newton-Thompson.

In February 1743, Gustaaf Willem Baron van Imhoff accompanied by Hendrik Swellengrebel, the Governor and his Secunde Rijk Tulbagh, visited Simon's Town to select sites for staff accommodation, a hospital and provision stores. The building was commenced during Tulbagh tenure and included the hospital, substantial store houses, a stone pier, a slaughter-house, bakery, workshops for smiths and carpenters, and a dwelling house for the officer in charge of the station.

The village of Stellenbosch was also considerably enlarged at this period. In October 1762, the drostdy was destroyed by fire in 1762 and replaced by a larger, more dignified building. In 1768, following a devastating flood, the course of the Eerste River was altered under the supervision of Heemraad Martin Melk of Elsenburg.

Swellendam, on the outskirts of the colony, was but a village. To facilitate access to Swellendam from the Cape, a pontoon was placed on the Breede River in 1767. The most prominent building was the drostdy, today a museum; and the school house served as a church.

The area that was to become the town of Tulbagh was first settled in 1699, established as a church town at Roodezand in Het Land van Waveren in 1743, and, after being proclaimed a drostdy, renamed Tulbagh in honour of Rijk Tulbagh in 1804.