

The taking of the slaver Meermin, 1766

(Cape Town, Africana Publishers, 2013, 159 pp., bibl, index. ISBN:
978-0-620-58141-7)

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The taking of the slaver Meermin, 1766 was originally published in 2012 in Afrikaans, under the title *Die aanslag op die slaweskip Meermin*. The colonial era remains of great importance to historians and the general public. Strange as this era may be to us today, its legacy continues to influence our culture. Trademarks such as “Microsoft” or “Blue Bulls”, so much a part of modern life, were once largely unknown. One of the greatest trademarks, the VOC (*Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* or Dutch East India Company), founded in 1602 and therefore older than the Dutch state, remain influential today.

The officials of this company left us a treasure of records that are still harvested for their information and insights, not only by historians, but by linguists and novelists, among others. The documentation spanning many kilometres and recording the administration of the company, contains data from three continents, including the several sea routes travelled. It has been appropriately elevated by UNESCO to the status of “Memory of the World” (p. 13).

The taking of the slaver Meermin, 1766 is a careful study of primary and secondary sources, bringing one of the colourful stories of this period to life. The text details the story of a slave uprising and is, in the words of the authors, “one of the most dramatic tales of Cape maritime history in the days of sail” (p. 9). While lying in mid-ocean, slaves on board the *Meermin* took control of the vessel, resulting in many deaths in a struggle that continued for days.

By modern standards slavery is a crime and a tragedy not to be tolerated, although it is and will perhaps always be with us in one form or another. The case under scrutiny concerns the transportation of slaves from Madagascar, bound for the Cape Colony. Owning slaves was considered a right at that

time, and one that had to be defended. Taking them captive was not a crime, but instead a responsibility that rested with officials. It was actually a crime to hinder this process in any way.

Whether legally acceptable or not at any time, the experience of being taken captive is painful to humans. Notably in this book, reference is made to the *Amistad* case. In both instances slaves tried in vain to be transported back to their country of origin, putting their lives at risk to do so. The cruelty of colonial slavery will always be incomprehensible to the modern mind that takes this liberty for granted.

The taking of the *Meermin* is placed in a broad historical context, starting with a chapter on the role of the Company at the Cape and moving on to its slave trade with Madagascar. There is also a chapter dealing with the nature of the *Meermin* in terms of its construction, as well as a discussion of mid-ocean slave revolts. The text is liberally supplemented with colourful reprints of artwork that include drawings, paintings, and maps, and there are also photographs of accessed records. A chronology of the events, the ranks on the vessel, and its construction plan, are useful addenda.

The events surrounding the taking of the *Meermin* were cause for a lengthy legal process. This forms a separate chapter in which some of the court proceedings are transcribed. These narrate the aftermath of the revolt, and highlight crucial developments in the legal system of the day. In studying the events, the court found negligence on the part of the VOC officials, considering their role in the tragedy and, according to Sleigh and Westra, the ruling was “a victory for the Roman Dutch legal system” (p. 132) because it showed sympathy for the accused slaves, and condemned their poor treatment *neglect* by company officials. This suggested the early questioning of the institution of slavery.

The system of slavery had a significant influence on the economy. To a great extent the economic success of the colonies rested on the labour of slaves whose lives were defined by exploitation. *The taking of the slaver Meermin, 1766* is a welcome addition to the historiography of the colonial era and of slavery. It is a well-researched book, written in accessible language and making the tragedy not only of this event, but of slavery in general, more attractive to the modern reader.