SLAVERY AT THE CAPE

Jan Van Riebeck set foot at the Cape on 6 April 1652. His instructions from the Dutch East India Company were clear: he was forbidden to enslave the indigenous people of the Cape. However, slaves from elsewhere were another matter and in May 1652, only weeks after arriving at Table Bay, he asked for slaves to be sent to help erect the fort and till the land. For the first five years the only slaves at the Cape were stowaways or gifts from the captains of passing ships. In 1658 there were 11 slaves, eight women and three men.

On 28 March 1658, the ship Amersfoort, which two months earlier had intercepted a Portuguese slaver bound from Angola to Brazil, arrived at Table Bay with a shipment of slaves. 38 men and 37 women remained, the others were sent to Batavia. A second group of slaves were purchased at Popo on the West African Coast and arrived at the Cape in May 1658, 228 of them of which about 80 of them were shipped to Batavia.

The Company Commissioner instructed Van Riebeck to treat slaves well. They were to be taught the basic principle of agriculture and a trade. Almost from the start, slaves began to run away, because of ill-treatment, overwork and the natural desire to live as a free person. The perils of the unknown were preferable to the humiliation and degradation of slavery.

By 1659 Van Riebeck possessed a total of 18 slaves, two from Guinea, one from Madagascar, three from Bengal and the remainder from Angola. Slave trade with the West African coast did not last long, another private Dutch empire, the West Indian Company, had sole right to trade as far South as Angola. So Van Riebeck and his successors were obliged to look to the East and many slaves were dispatched from the coast of India, from such place as Coromandel and Malabar. With Interests in the East Indian Islands, the Dutch rounded up slaves from Bali, Batavia, Timor and the Malayan Peninsula. For a few years from 1724 a slave station was maintained at Delagoa Bay with the Company turning its attention to Mozambique and Zanzibar.

Slaves from Madagascar and the African coast were the least valuable and were set to the hardest work. At the other extreme was the Malay, described as the “King of slaves”. More quickly than any other group, the Malay learnt the skill of almost all the trades practised at the Cape. Most valued of all slaves was a Cape-born child of a slave mother and white father. When a commissioner of the Company visited the Cape in 1685 he noted that among the Company’s slaves there were no fewer than 57 children who obviously had white fathers. He decided that males could buy their freedom on reaching the age of 25 years, provided they had been confirmed in the Dutch Reformed Church and could speak Dutch. The same applied to women, but the age of freedom was 22 years.

Slavery – the imposition of enforced servitude by a powerful group on another group – inevitably breeds fear in both groups, and resentment in the oppressed. There was also tension among the whites, who constantly feared a mass rebellion and death at the hand of a slave. There was always the fear that slaves who had run away might return to rob and kill, and so large rewards were offered for their recapture.

At the time of the first British occupation, the slaves outnumbered Europeans at the Cape, 24,000 to 20,000. In 1807, shortly after Britain occupied the Cape for the second time, the slave trade was banned. Slaves could still be sold within the colony, but no more slaves were to be imported. Slaves removed from visiting ships were landed at Simon's Town and housed in an area which came to be known as “Black Town” - before being “apprenticed” for a number of years to approved employers. The British settlers of 1820 were not permitted to own slaves, and slavery at the Cape was formally abolished on 1 December 1834, although the former slaves were obliged to work for their ex-owners for a further period of four years. It is to be noted that the Emancipation Act was one of the causes among others of the “Great Trek”.

From several sources: Illustrated history of South Africa, Reader's Digest; A History of South Africa to 1870, Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson; South Africa: A Modern History, Rodney Davenport and Christopher Saunders.