

A CHAPTER OF EARLY MEDICAL AFRICANA*

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'Of their Physick'

Willem ten Rhyne

SUMMARY

Mention is made of the early treatment utilized by the indigenous population of South Africa, as described in general terms by an intelligent caller and observer Willem ten Rhyne in 1673, who recorded his observations some 13 years later. Reference is also made to an interesting original medical volume to which Ten Rhyne contributed the use of acupuncture and scarification for the treatment of podagra (gout). A description of the physical methods used by the Hottentots of that period is illustrated from original engravings contained in the famous Kolbe 'Beschryving' of 1727.

It is interesting to note the mention of *dacha* (*dagga*) by the Hottentots in Ten Rhyne's description 'of their physick' and this is possibly the first mention made of this drug in South African literature.

We know that Jan van Riebeeck was a surgeon when he sailed to the Cape to establish a victualling halfway station to the East for the Dutch East India Company. We also know from his diaries that he did practise some medicine on the voyage out.

On 26 July 1649 a document setting out the advantages to be derived from the occupation of Table Valley was presented to the directors of the Amsterdam chamber of the United Netherlands Chartered East India Company, based on the experience of the visit of the *Haarlem*, one of the Company's first ships, which had in 1648 put into Table Bay. On 30 August 1650 the Company decided to accept the suggestion contained in the report and five days later instructions were given to the skipper of the ships *Dromedaris*, *Reiger* and *Goede Hoop* concerning the proposed expedition. They were to proceed to Table Bay to construct a wooden building close to the 'Fresh River', the materials of which they were to take with them, and also to select a suitable site for a fort to contain 70-80 men and to this fort when completed they were to give the name 'Good Hope'. A diary of events was to be kept.

Nicholas Proot declined the offer to head this proposed settlement of the Dutch East India Company and another officer who had previously been a surgeon in their employ was appointed; he was Joan Van Riebeeck also spelt Riebeerg and Rietbeek, but according to modern spelling, Jan van Riebeeck. He was a resolute man and a great voyager. A ship's surgeon of those days was required to possess some skill in dressing wounds and to have a slight knowledge of medicine but he was not educated as a true medical practitioner. Often a copying clerk or a soldier with no other training than as an assistant in a hospital—if he had aptitude for the duties of a surgeon—was promoted to this office. Van Riebeeck was of this class but he was nevertheless a man of considerable ability.

On 29 December 1651, at about noon, the ships *Dromedaris*, *Reiger* and *Goede Hoop* in company with a great fleet of merchant ships hove up their anchors and steered

out to sea from Texel.

On 5 April 1662 the *Dromedaris* caught first sight of Table Mountain rising above the eastern horizon and won the reward of sixteen shillings which had been promised to the first who should discover land. A gun was fired to make the fact known to the crews of the *Reiger* and *Goede Hoop*.

So after a passage of 142 days from Texel Van Riebeeck and his party looked upon the site of their future home. The people on board having been so long without fresh food were somewhat sickly but the death rate was unusually small. The *Dromedaris* lost only two individuals, one being the child of the ship's surgeon who had his family with him and the other a carpenter who was ill when he left his fatherland. No deaths are recorded as having occurred on board the *Reiger* or *Goede Hoop*.

On further searching in the vicinity of their new home the new settlers found 56-60 people all told, forming a little clan calling themselves '*Goringhaikonas*' led by one Autshumato but better known later to Van Riebeeck as Harry. This Harry had prior contact with other white travellers and callers to the Cape. The tribesmen were an impoverished, famine-stricken, half-naked band of savages; they had no cattle and maintained a wretched existence by fishing and gathering wild roots. They were later called Beachrangers by the Dutch.

Van Riebeeck and the three skippers, having made a fairly thorough inspection of Table Valley, selected a site for a Fort. This Fort was in the form of a square, each face 252 Rhymland feet long, constructed of earth, 20 feet in thickness at the base and tapering to 16 feet at the top, 12 feet high. Round the whole structure was a moat into which water of the 'Fresh River' could be conducted. The buildings were used as dwelling houses, barracks and storehouses. In front on the side facing the sea was a large enclosed space beyond the moat; in this enclosure was placed the workshop and the hospital.

Thus our history began. This was the scene set for future generations of South Africans and medically the establishment of our first hospital. Since then many ships and surgeons called to stay or pass on to other lands. One of these callers in 1673 was Willem ten Rhyne, a physician in the Dutch East India Company, on his way to the Far East. He remained at the Cape Settlement from 15 October to 10 November 1673, during which period he made a number of pertinent observations about his new surroundings. He noted particularly the natural history of the Cape and the Hottentots. Most of the information about the Hottentots was obtained from Eva—a Hottentot girl who had been brought up in Jan van Riebeeck's household, who could speak Dutch and Portuguese and who had at one time been married to a Dutch burgher, the surgeon Van Meerhoff.

Some years ago during one of my visits to the antiquarian bookshops in Amsterdam, I came across an interesting and rare medical item associated with the name of Ten Rhyne in the bookshop of an old friend of ours, Mr. Max Israel. As I knew that Ten Rhyne had visited the

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Cape, I was interested to see his name as the co-author of a rare medical volume. I immediately acquired it.

This volume was published in 1690 in Low German. The translated title page reads:

Accurate Essay of Podagra and of continuous gout—where its genuine causes and certain cure thoroughly introduced. Also the wonderful forces of milk together with the clear proof that these (forces) are the very best foods nourishment and resources for health as well as for ill people neatly described by Steph. Blancard, Ph & Med. Doct and famous for practise at Amsterdam but now because of his utility beside Mister Wilhelm Ten Rhyne Med. Doct & practitioner in Batavia India. Strange description how Chinese & Japanese surely cure all illnesses especially Podagra by means of burning & with golden needle puncturing. (Podagra is the modern gout.)

Subsequent pages are reserved for the usual dedicatory epistle.

I decided to investigate Ten Rhyne from the medical aspect. His biography shows that he was an interesting

personality, who was born in Deventer, Holland, in 1647 and died in Batavia in 1700. His father was unknown. His early schooling was in Deventer and later he studied at the Universities of Franeker and Leiden where he presented his medical thesis. In 1673 he journeyed to Batavia and on the way he stopped at the Cape of Good Hope where he had the opportunity of collecting all kinds of local material and of making extensive detailed observations. These observations at the Cape formed the source of an extremely rare item of Africana published in Latin in 1686 at Schaffhausen (13 years after his visit to the Cape) entitled *Schediasma de Promontoris Bonae Spei, ejusve tractus incolis Hottentottis*. I shall comment more on this later.

Accurate Abhandlung
von dem
PODAGRA
und der
Lauffenden Gicht/
Worinnen deren wahre Ursachen und gewisse Eur gründlich vorgestellt/
Nuch
Die herrlichen Kräfte der
Milch/
Nebst klarem Beweis/ daß solche so wol vor
Gesunde als Krancke (vornemlich in dem PODA-
GRA) die allerbeste Nahrungs-Speise und Hülf-
Mittel sey/ ordentlich beschrieben werden/
Durch
STEPH. BLANCARD,
Ph. & Med. Doct. und weitberühmten Practicum
zu Amsterdam;
Nurigo aber wegen seiner Nutzbarkeit/
nebst des Herrn
Wilhelm von Rhyne
Med. Doct. und Practici auf Batavia
Indien/
Curiculer Beschreibun
Wie die Chinesen und Japaner vermitte
Brennens und goldenen Nadel-Steckens alle Kra-
nckheiten/ insonderheit aber das Podagra gewis curiren.
Aus der Niederdeutschen in die Hochdeutsche Sprache übersezt.
Leipzig/ verlegt Joh. Fried. Gleditsch.
Druckts Christoph Fleischer. 1690.

Fig. 1. Title page of Ten Rhyne's book.

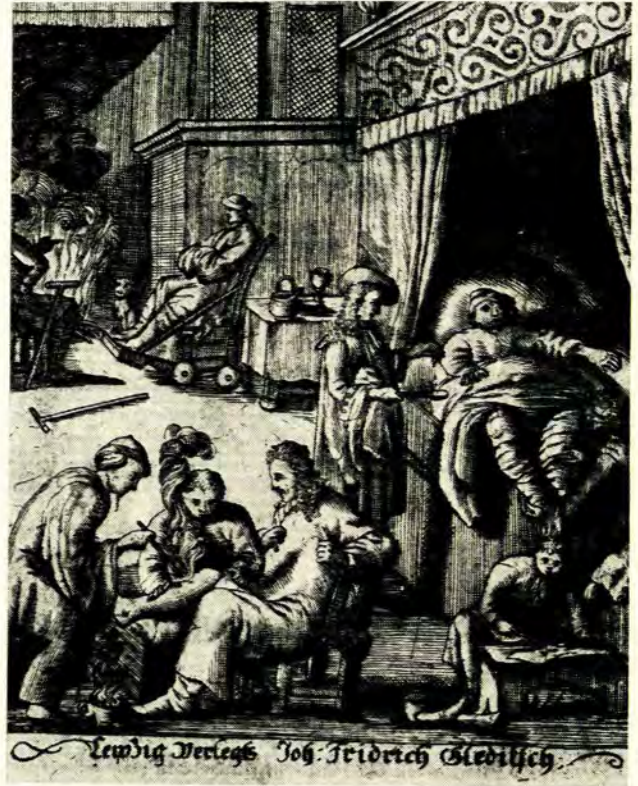


Fig. 2. Frontispiece engraving depicting treatment in what appears to be a hospital.

It appears that Ten Rhyne's mission on the East was connected with a request made by the Emperor of Japan to send medical doctors to Desima in the harbour of Nagasaki, where until then only barber-surgeons were sent. His work and experience were widely varied in Batavia; at one time he was the superintendent of a leper colony and at another time he was attached to the Provisional Mining College which investigated and managed the gold and silver mines of Solida on Sumatra's west coast. It was in this sphere that Ten Rhyne became familiar with the technique of acupuncture and then became the collaborator with Blancard and assisted him with the description of the treatment of podagra.

Ten Rhyne's original Latin description in 1686 published at Schaffhausen brings us back to the Cape, where, among

other descriptions, he details his observation of the Hottentots. His original Latin description was translated into English and appeared as such in *Churchill's Collection of Voyages* (1732 edition, volume IV). In 1970 this English translation was extracted from the Churchill volume and reproduced as a separate interesting item of Africana by the Archivist Publishing Company of Johannesburg and entitled: 'An Account of the Cape of Good Hope and the Hottentots, the Natives of that Country, by William Ten Rhyne, Native of Deventry, Physician in Ordinary, and a Member of the Council of Justice, to the Dutch East-India Company;'

In Ten Rhyne's words it was proposed here to mention the detailed observation of the Hottentots 'of their neighbours' the shapes of their bodies, their growth, their dwelling, their household stuff, their genius and temper, their manners; their way of living, making war, trafficking and dancing; their religion, magistrates, peculiar laws and customs, marriages; the education of their children; their handicraft, trades, language and 'their physick'. The reproduction of a portion of Chapter XXVI (Fig. 3) gives

C H A P. XXVI

Of their physick.

IF we are obliged to the brutes for the discovery of several wholesome remedies; as to the *dogs* for *emetics*, to the *Egyptian bird Ibis* for *clysters*, for *phlebotomy* to the *sea-horse*, for the use of *ditany* or *garden ginger* to the *goats*, of the *swallow-wort* to the *swallows*, of *fennel* to the *snake*, of the *narrow small rove leav'd plantain* to the *toads*, of the *rue* to the *weasel*, of the *origanum* to the *stork*, of the *ground-ivy* to the *wild boar*, and of the use of the *artichock* to the *stag*; what wonder is it, if these *Hottentotes*, tho' never so brutish, have their own way of curing distempers; I don't say all distempers, but like *Podalinus* and *Macbaen*, i. e. the *Trojan war*, who were chiefly employ'd about surgery, if we may believe *Celsus*,¹ *Suffion* and *Unffion* are two chief, if not the only remedy used among the *Hottentotes*; their main dread being from the poison of arrows or venomous beasts: If they are wounded by them, they beat the afflicted part with a small stick, till it be deprived of all sense; then they scarifie and suck it till the blood follows. This way of curing (which *Severinus* in his *chirurgery* recommends as efficacious) is different, according to the different natures of the poison, and according to the different continuance of the beating and suction, it being certain that the *scorpions*, who are not so venomous here as in *Spain*, *Italy* and *France*, don't sting so deep as the creature they call the *Thousand-feet*. If you squeeze his tail just above the stinging, it emits a bright drop out of his crooked sting, unless he has stung some body not long before, which is not much more hurtful than the sting of our bees; his sting is not very soon replenish'd with the poisonous matter, and when he stings it is as if

some idea of the contents of the work.

We now have evidence going as far back as 1686 of observations recorded in 1673 of early well-known remedies, both herbal and physical (in the form of scarification, cupping and phlebotomy) practised by the indigenous populace of the Cape of that period. Were these remedies copied from the Dutch settlers, (who after all only really settled there in 1652, some 21 years previously) or were they part of the indigenous customs handed down by the migration of the peoples of Africa, especially those further north? It is also interesting to note that mention is made of the use of dagga (dacha) and that this is probably the first reference to this noxious weed in our literature. The one puzzling feature is the reference to a date from which the paste is made. I am puzzled by the fact that Ten Rhyne says that dagga is a paste made from a date.

Subsequent to Ten Rhyne's visit further travellers called at the Cape, some of whom also left detailed descriptions. Some 28 years later, in 1705, a German, Peter Kolbe, visited the Cape. His patron was Nicolas Witsen, the learned Burgomaster of Amsterdam at that time, and his mission was to make astronomical and other observations. As his patron, Witsen, was a Director of the East India Company, all possible assistance was given to Kolbe by the officer of the Cape Government.

After a somewhat stormy stay at the Cape during which period he was saved from deportation only by taking service under the Government and serving for a considerable period as Secretary of the Court of the Landrost and Heemraden at Stellenbosch (a mass of records in his handwriting is still in existence), Kolbe returned to Germany in 1713 where he wrote and published his monumental two-volume book *Caput Bonae Spei Hodiernum* in 1714 in German. This proved to be a most exact and detailed account of the settlement, harbour facilities, climate and soil of the territory, its animals, fishes, birds, plants and herbs, to which is added a very accurately compiled account of the Hottentots, all based on the author's own personal investigations, followed by a remarkable report of their language, religion, manner of living, singular traditions and customs, marriage ceremony and circumcision. These writings are augmented and embellished with many accurate illustrations and useful and new maps of that time. His description is really an enlarged and more detailed version of what Ten Rhyne

you were touch'd by a stone; but the *thousand-feet* being very corrosive, communicate very sharp poison: Of the *vipers* we have had occasion to speak before. If the wound proves malignant, or there be the least suspicion of a gangreen, they cut it out with the sharp points of their arrows; and if it has infected a member, they cut it off immediately. All contusions they cure by uncti- ons (with beef or mutton suet, for want of any other ointment) afterwards scarifie the part and suck it till they draw the blood thro' the skin. The rheumatism they cure in the same manner, except that they expose the part (after it is well anointed with the suet) before the fire, that the particles thereof may force out the morbid matter, by their being attenuated before the fire, and then they go to sucking. Among the vegetables they are acquainted with very few physical plants but those of the best, which as I told you before, I cannot learn from them at any rate. This makes me admire how some can boast of I know not what secrets they have attained to among so treacherous a generation as the *Hottentotes*. They have a way of curing the colick by a certain *aromatick* root, almost in an instant. They also stamp a kind of *date* (as I suppose) called by them *dacha*, which they afterwards make into a paste, and being dry'd in the sun, use it as most of the *Mabometans* do the *ansion* or *opium*, and has the same effect upon them. They never cut the navel strings of new born children, but only tie it close till it falls of it self. This is all I was able to learn of a certain woman of the *Hottentotes*, the rest being so cunning as not to discover any thing of this nature.

Fig. 3. Extract of Ten Rhyne's description 'of their physick'.

observed and wrote some 40 years earlier.

Kolbe's work has been translated into other languages but the most handsome edition of all is the Dutch translation entitled *Naauwkeurige Beschryving van De Kaap de Goede Hoop* of 1727. From my own copy of this Dutch edition one finds a series of most fascinating and accurate engravings depicting in detail the manners and customs of the Hottentots. There are two illustrations, one depicting their clothes and the other a most graphic representation 'of their physick' showing the 3 main forms of physical treatment by scarification, cupping and phlebotomy or blood letting. Fig. 5 is a truly clear picture of



Fig. 4. From Kolbe's 'Beschryving', showing the Hottentots' clothing.

how the Hottentots carried out scarification, with what appears to be a metal scalpel of the design of that period; cupping was effected by means of the hollow, cut ends of animal horns and blood letting appears to be done

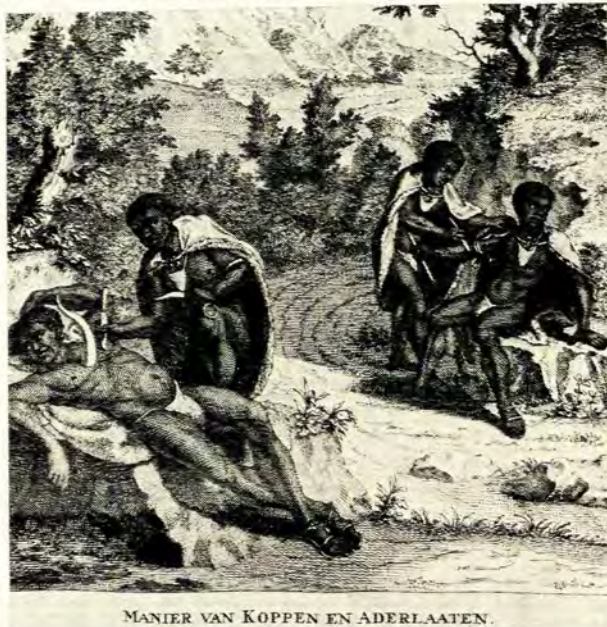


Fig. 5. A graphic illustration of cupping, scarification and blood letting by Hottentots from Kolbe's 'Beschryving'.

with a tourniquet using a scalpel and even the clenched fist on a stick presumably to obtain the maximum degree of venous engorgement. To this day scarification is still a popular mode of treatment by a large number of our Bantu population, either before visiting the 'white doctor' or after he has failed to cure them.

I wish to thank Drs E. Jager and J. Sonntag, on a working visit from Germany, at Edenvale Hospital, who kindly translated the title page of the 'Podagra' book from Low German; Dr A. Hazekamp for the translation from Dutch of portions of Willem ten Rhyne's biography; and Mrs Hughes of the Strange Africana Library for providing notes on Ten Rhyne's biography.