

A NEW LOOK AT THE CASTLE OF GOOD HOPE AND ITS SYMBOLIC IMPORTANCE

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The Castle of Good Hope has been described as unquestionably the 'oldest and historically the most interesting building in the country'.¹ Yet it is often forgotten that its development as a showplace reminding countless visitors of South Africa's early architectural achievements and European roots, is a recent phenomenon which received its most significant boost at the Van Riebeeck Festival in 1952.

In April 1979 the Castle celebrated the 300th anniversary of its completion. It is fitting at this time to examine both its neglect by historians as well as the importance which it has acquired as a cultural symbol of South Africa. Although the Castle is mentioned in countless books and articles and has been a military nerve centre in times of peace, war and civil unrest, unfortunately little scholarly work on the subject has been published and a book devoted to the entire history of the Castle has yet to be written. It is important to note here that whereas so many of our fortifications have had a limited military lifespan, the Castle is still very much in use today, being the Headquarters of Western Province Command.

Miss A. C. Ras has written the early history of the Castle and its predecessors in *Die Kasteel en vroeë vestingswerke aan die Kaap 1652-1715*. Contributions by Col J. Ploeger have also shed important new light on the subject. It now seems highly likely for example that the Castle was designed by a Dutch Military architect and not by Louis XIV's famous military engineer Sebastian de Vauban, for it has been argued that in 1665 when the Castle was planned Vauban had not yet made his name as a military engineer.² Dr P. W. Laidler's *A Tavern of the Ocean* which was first published in 1926 also contains much valuable information.

Mr E. Rosenthal's *300 Years of the Castle at Cape Town* is important because it contains many of the fascinating Elliott Collection photographs of the Castle which were published by kind permission of the Cape Archives. These excellent records remind us vividly what life was like when the building was occupied by the British garrison in the latter years of the last

century and in the early years of the present one. It is particularly interesting to see photographs of the trees and tennis court in the outer courtyard, the rescue rocket wagon and the saluting battery.

To mark the tercentenary of the completion of the Castle a pictorial history has been planned and thanks to the enthusiastic response of the Documentation Service, SADF, the Cape Times, Cape Field Artillery, Cape Town Naval Cadets, Miss L. Bean, Commander W. J. Copenhagen, OBE, and Mrs C. J. Molteno, it is hoped that another important gap in the Castle's history will be filled.

When one considers the neglect of the Castle by historians one should bear in mind that from 1811, when the civilian government offices were moved to the Old Supreme Court Building, to 1952, the year of the Van Riebeeck Festival, the Castle was nothing more nor less than a military headquarters. It is probably for this reason that the Prince of Wales visited Groot Constantia when he was in Cape Town in 1925 and not the Castle. The Cape Times photographs files on the Royal Visit of 1947 likewise contain no photographs of it although a military visitor, the then Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Viscount Montgomery of Alamein gave a lecture there in 1948. However, this argument may be an oversimplification because H. M. King George II of Greece visited the Castle during World War.³

Lack of glamour may account for the neglect of its history between 1806 and the present. The British garrison is generally remembered for its three attempts to demolish the Castle as well as for the additions they made to the building. The British plan of 1913 for example shows the buildings beneath the Castle walls. These include drawing offices, a carpenter's shop, stores and a machine gun shed between Buren and Katzenellenbogen and gun sheds, an artillery store and an Army Service Corps coal store between Katzenellenbogen and Nassau. A miniature cartridge range and a fives court were situated between the Oranje and Nassau bastions and there were two temporary huts in the inner courtyard. A fascinating but somewhat unflattering descrip-

tion of it during the 1860's is to be found in *Life at the Cape a Hundred Years Ago*, by a Lady.⁴ It should not be forgotten either that the last British General Officer Commanding in South Africa, Maj Genl C. W. Thompson, CB, DSO (1913-1916) did much valuable conservation and restoration work.⁵

It is interesting to compare these remarks with those on the 1913 Skeleton Record Plan of the Castle Sheet 1 which states that it 'is built of irregular rubble stone work, bricks and Dutch clinkers laid in shell lime, and clay mortar rammed with gravel. It is still in a good state of preservation.'



View on the courtyard of the Castle from the cat balcony.

The fact that the Castle's guns have never fired a shot in anger may be another reason why it has not attracted much academic attention. The two main military weaknesses of the Castle were mentioned by Lt Genl R. H. Wynyard in a letter dated 22 January 1862 to the Governor of Cape Colony (Sir Philip Wodehouse). Although Genl Wynyard considered that the Amsterdam Battery and the Castle were the only fortifications which might 'be called works of defence' he wrote that both were 'quite inadequate to resist the powerful guns that may at any time be brought against them. The ramparts and parapets are commanded on the landside and the buildings are fast falling into decay from the effects of time' and the poor material from which they were constructed.⁶

For many years prior to 1820 a gun was fired from the Castle to mark sunrise and sunset. By 1807 the practice of firing a noon gun from the Imhoff Battery had been adopted, but was later fired from the Castle before being moved to Lion Battery on Signal Hill on 4 August 1902.⁷

Although it is not known exactly when the firing of anything other than saluting guns was disallowed at the Castle, by 17 April 1884 Lt Col Bertie Hobart (Commanding Royal Artillery, South Africa) considered it 'dangerous and reprehensible' to do so 'among inhabited buildings'. He wrote a letter strongly condemning the action of Lt Bell who had used 'too large a bursting charge, though the firing charge was little more than a

quarter of the lowest service cartridge.⁸ Nonetheless, in 1889 the Castle and Imhoff Battery were still armed with 44 guns.⁹

Saluting guns continued to be fired until fairly recently and a contemporary newspaper report records that the saluting battery on Katzenellenbogen bastion fired a Royal Salute in honour of the birthday of H. M. King Edward VIII at noon on 23 June 1936.¹⁰ Gun salutes are now fired from Lion Battery on Signal Hill.

Those who consider the history of the Castle to be uninteresting have obviously forgotten its vital role as a military headquarter since 1674, and as the seat of government until 1811. Although few photographs taken of the Castle during the two world wars have been traced, one taken in 1916 reveals that Capt L. Beyers (later Lt Gen and Chief of the General Staff from 1949-50) and the distinguished South African Historian Capt E. A. Walker of the Cape Garrison Artillery, both served there. Two other South African historians have commanded famous regiments based at the Castle. Lt-Col Dr C. Graham-Botha, VD, commanded the Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles from 1935-1937 and Cmdt (now Col) N. D. Orpen, JCD, commanded the Cape Field Artillery from 1953-1955. It is also fortunate that those who selected subjects for our World War II war artists to record did not neglect the Castle. Four drawings by Gordon Taylor depicting different views are described in the *Complete Catalogue of SA War Art 1939-45*, but perhaps even more valuable are the two watercolour paintings by Miss Madge Bean, now in the Military Museum, which recorded the colour scheme of the building in 1921. Silhouettes painted on the interior walls of the Castle remind us that it was also the headquarters of the coast gunners who manned the once vital Simon's Bay and Table Bay Defences. In addition to their normal duties as coast gunners these men were responsible for rescuing the passengers and crews of ships wrecked off the Cape, and the Table Bay rescue rocket wagon was kept in a gun shed beneath the walls of the Katzenellenbogen and Oranje bastions for this purpose.

Whilst the conducted tours of the Castle include visits to the 'black hole' in which Adam Tas was imprisoned and the cells on Katzenellenbogen where the Zulu King Cetshwayo was imprisoned for a short while before being removed to Oude Molen at Mowbray in 1879, few people are aware that the British Detention Rooms in the Castle are still in 'n good state of preservation. The grilles

covering the windows of the cells can be seen above the steps leading to the entrance of the Maritime Museum. It should also be remembered that Chief Sekhukhune was imprisoned here in 1879.¹¹

The savage British Army practice of flogging on the triangle was not abolished in time of peace until 1868 and in 1880 in time of war, so it is a mistake to think that the sufferings of prisoners or members of the garrison ceased at a far earlier date.

The importance of the Castle in South Africa's naval history is unfortunately seldom remembered. It was here, from mid-October 1939 until mid-January 1940, that Rear-Admiral G. W. Hallifax, CMG, took the steps which ensured that South Africa's second attempt to establish a navy did not fail.¹² And it was in the nearby former Royal Engineers Yard beneath the Oranje and Leerdam bastions that the Royal Volunteer Reserve (SA) Base and Wardroom stood and where so many of our volunteer sailors, members of the Cape Town Naval Corps and Sea Scouts underwent training until wartime expansion necessitated their moving to a new base, HMSAS Unitie, in Table Bay Docks in 1942.

A report in the Cape Times of 29 December 1923 records that Brig Gen W. E. C. Tanner, CB, CMG, DSO had kindly offered the Cape Town Naval Cadet Corps accommodation at the Castle.¹³

Because of these naval associations, it was fitting, therefore, that the Castle would have been chosen to house South Africa's first purely maritime museum, opened by Admiral H. H. Bierman, SSA, SD, OBE on 18 May 1971, and that the recently adopted South African Navy emblem should incorporate its outline. One of the most appropriate exhibits in the Maritime Museum is a splendid builder's model of the 27 000 ton RMS Cape Town Castle which is displayed near two important relics from this ship: the ship's bell and an oil painting of the Castle in 1938 by Professor Edward Roworth. Also exhibited is the William Fehr Collection, one of the finest of maritime art in South Africa.

Although the writer has not been able to trace any direct South African Air Force links with the Castle other than a South African Aviation Corps group photograph taken in front of the 'Nieuwe Kat' or Kat Balcony, it should be remembered that four distinguished airmen have served as Officer Commanding Cape Command (as the

post was then known): Brig (later Maj-Gen, CBE) K. R. van der Spuy, MC (1 February - 2 October 1937), Brig (later Maj-Gen, CB) C. J. Venter, DFC (13 July 1939 - 4 November 1940), Brig (later Maj-Gen) H. G. Willmott, CBE (16 October 1946 - 18 September 1947) and Brig J. Daniel, CBE (27 January 1948 - 13 December 1950).

Although the Castle was proclaimed a national monument in 1936, it was not until the Van Riebeeck Festival in 1952 that it began to assume its present importance. Two events contributed greatly to this development. The Castle was chosen as the 'centrepiece of the Festival's historic art exhibitions,¹⁴ and these were displayed in the old State Rooms, the ballroom, converted barracks and rooms in the outer courtyard, and opened by His Excellency the Governor-General (Dr the Honourable E. G. Jansen) on 20 February 1952. The fabulous collections of Africana paintings, drawings, china, glass, pottery, Cape Furniture and silver and their eminently suitable temporary home made a deep impression on the public, so it was hardly surprising that attempts were made to persuade Mr (later Dr) William Fehr to continue to lend his collection to the Nation when the exhibition ended. This collection was purchased from Dr Fehr in 1964.

Two later events hastened what one might almost call the renaissance of the Castle. *Son et Lumiere* — the unforgettable presentation in sound and light of its history between 1666 and 1890, produced by Margot Bryant in the middle 1960's and presented by the Department of Education, Arts and Science with the aid of the French Association for the Preservation of Historical Monuments, which did much to heighten public awareness of the Castle's beauty and historic importance.

Secondly, in 1966 a former dormitory on the first floor between Katzenellenbogen and Nassau was converted into the Military Museum by a team led by Major (now Brig) L. S. Kruger, SM and opened by the Cmdt-Gen, SADF, Gen R. C. Hiemstra, SSA, SM on 25 November of that year.

A signal honour was also bestowed on 'the first major fortress in South Africa' on 6 April 1952 when Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II on the recommendation of her Prime Minister, Dr the Honourable D. F. Malan instituted the Castle of Good Hope Decoration (CGH) as South Africa's highest award for valour in place of the Victoria Cross, and the Van Riebeeck Decoration and Medal for 'distinguished service against an enemy in the field'. All three awards incorporated the Castle's outline.



Scottish dancers taking part in the military tattoo which was part of the tercentennial festival which the Castle celebrated.

Furthermore, in 1957 the Castle was chosen to replace the crown as a South African Defence Force rank badge and it has since been widely used in other heraldic symbols. The emblems of the South African Defence Force, Army, Air Force and Navy all incorporate this pentagonal design. The symbolic importance of the Castle is something which is perhaps seldom realised even though the pentagon is so well known.

Despite the inadequacy of the building as a fortress, it should never be forgotten that the task of erecting it so far from Europe between 1665 and 1679 was a very considerable logistic achievement. The fact that the fortress is based on a European design and was built with a combination of imported and local materials is an encouraging reminder that South Africa is no

stranger to military self-sufficiency.

While some of the distinguished soldiers, airmen and sailors who have served at the Castle have been mentioned above, there are three illustrious figures who have been associated with it in other ways. The present Chief of the South African Defence Force, Gen M. A. de M. Malan, SSA, SD, SM was Officer Commanding Western Province Command from 4 January 1972 until 2 January 1973 and Maj-Gen W. H. Poole, CB, CBE, DSO was Commander Cape Fortress from 1 July until 6 August 1942. Both officers then held the rank of brigadier. (Other designations have been Officer Commanding Number 1 Military District from 1914 to about 1932, Officer Commanding Cape Command, Commander Cape Fortress during World War II and from about 1961 Officer Commanding Western Province Command.)



Drill performance by members of Coloured Corps at the tattoo.

Although the writer has been unable to trace a photograph of General Smuts at the Castle, it should not be forgotten that he was in favour both of the establishment there of a museum and of the Castle's conversion into a South African equivalent of the Tower of London or Edinburgh Castle. Nor should the highly important restoration work which was undertaken by the Union Government after it had assumed responsibility for the Castle and other fortifications on 1 December 1921 be forgotten. The history of this has been written by Colonel Dr J. Ploeger.¹⁵

But perhaps the most important thing about the Castle today is that it occupies an increasingly important place in all our hearts. For many years it has been the central point from which young men have left Cape Town for military service in war and peace, and until recently it housed the South African Defence Force Recruiting Centre. When the trained men of our Citizen Force Units and Commandos return home it is here that the joyful reunion with parents, wives, sweethearts and children takes place.

Although there is no longer a church or chapel, religious services have been held at the Castle since it was built and drumhead church services and church parades continue to be held. Dr J.D. Vorster has often officiated at Western Province Command Church Parades.

The Castle occupies an important place in our postal history and has its own distinctive date stamp. In 1914 there was a 16 bed non-dieted hospital in the Castle, which, soon after the outbreak of the First World War, was taken over from the Royal Army Medical Corps by the SA Medical Corps.¹⁶

The Castle's link with Sea Scouts have been mentioned above. On 28 July 1916, South African Boy Scouts who had done war work on the home front were invited to a tea party on the lawn at the Castle by the General Officer Commanding,

South African Military Command, Maj Gen C. W. Thompson, CB, DSO and presented with cards thanking them for their valuable help.

It is easy to discover gaps in our military history but far more difficult to fill them. Nonetheless, there will be a great many people at home and abroad who will welcome a scholarly work on the history of the Castle and it is hoped that they will not have too many years to wait.

FOOT-NOTES

- 1 J. J. Oberholster. *The Historical Moments of South Africa*. (The Rembrandt van Rijn Foundation for Culture, 1972), p 5.
- 2 *Standard Encyclopedia of Southern Africa*, Vol 3 (J. Ploeger: The Castle), pp 122-125; *Militaria* 2/2 1970 (J. Ploeger: 'Die Kasteel De Goede Hoop') (1921-1923): Die verhaal van 'n reddingsdaad, pp 27-46 and *Military Architecture in the Netherlands and her former colonies (1500-1800)* pp. 61-71
3. *The Nongqai*, Vol 36, June 1944 (C. Graham-Botha, VD: The Castle of Good Hope), p 645.
4. *A Lady: Life at the Cape a Hundred Years Ago*, (1962) pp 112-114
5. *Militaria* 2/2 1970 (J. Ploeger loc cit) p 44
6. Cape Archives GH 28/78: Letter from Lieutenant General R. H. Wynyard to Sir P. Wodehouse, 22 January 1862.
7. *Lion Battery Fort Record Book*
8. Letter from Commanding Royal Artillery South Africa to Deputy Adjutant General Cape Town, 17 April 1894.
9. E. P. Mathers. *South Africa and how to Reach it by the Castle Line*, 1889, p 38.
10. *The Cape Argus*, 23 June 1936, pp 12-13
11. C. F. Goodfellow: *Great Britain and the South African Confederation (1870-1881)* (Oxford, 1966), p 178.
12. L. C. F. Turner, H. R. Gordon—Cumming and J. E. Betzler. *War in the Southern Oceans 1939-45*. (Oxford, 1961), p 19.
13. *The Cape Times*, 29 December 1923 (A. P. Moore-Anderson: Sailors in the Making).
14. *Van Riebeeck Festival Official Festival Programme 1952*, pp 23-24.
15. *Militaria*, 2/2 1970 (J. Ploeger, loc cit), p 44.
16. *Commando*, April 1961 (D. O' Stratford: The South African Medical Corps in the South West Africa Campaign) p 14.