



# Jan van Riebeeck in his own words

Contents – June 1652

Sending men to a new continent seem to be a more difficult task than was probably initially thought. Sickness and adversity were not considered, but at least new discoveries are made every day. Read all of this and more in this Edition 5 of "Jan van Riebeeck in his own words" – written 370 years ago. Welcome to all our new subscribers. Remember to forward a copy to your friends. If you prefer the Old Dutch version with Afrikaans notes, request your copy [here](#).

All the best,  
Rian Maartens (Executive Editor)

## This newsletter is extracted from:

"JOURNAL KEPT BY THE SENIOR MERCHANT JAN ANTHONISSEN VAN RIEBEECK<sup>1</sup> WHO SAILED AS COMMANDER WITH THE SHIPS DROMMEDARIS, REIJGER AND GOEDE HOOPE<sup>2</sup> FROM TEXEL FOR CABO DE BOA ESPERANCE IN THE SERVICE OF THE GENERAL UNITED DUTCH CHARTERED EAST INDIA COMPANY UNDER THE CHAMBER OF AMSTERDAM<sup>3</sup>"

*Who was Jan van Riebeeck and what is the source? See the detailed introduction [here](#)*

*How did the Atlantic winds detour the trip between Amsterdam and Cape Town?*

*See a detailed article by P. Serton, [here](#)*

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*Primo* Dark, hazy, rainy, cold weather with N.W. breeze, to which the *Hoff van Zeelandt* set her sails, but owing to contrary wind she had to return to the roadstead.

This afternoon our gunner, Albert Hendrickssen, died of fever. This disease, together with red flux, is becoming more and more prevalent among the men, with the result that our labour forces are considerably weakened.

*Sunday 2nd* Weather and wind as yesterday but clearing up slightly in the afternoon, with a slight S.E. breeze. The *Hoff van Zeelandt* attempted once again to weigh anchor and to get under sail, but the anchor had just been weighed and she had hardly turned about, when she signalled for assistance. Our two sloops, fully manned, were sent to assist her to drop anchor further away: she had been driven rather close to the land, but with the assistance of our sloops could once more anchor safely.

*3rd* In the morning clear weather with a slight breeze from the N.E. The aforementioned ship set sail and got out safely. May the Almighty guide her to Batavia.

The sickness is rapidly increasing every day, so that at present out of 116 men not more than 60 are fit for work.

*4th* Fine weather and wind as yesterday. Last night a youth from the *Oliphant*, named Jan Hendrickssen Backer, died.

At noon the wind began to blow freshly from the N.W., with dry, sunny weather.

*5th* Hazy weather with N.W. wind. Last night another man, named Heere Hiddes, died.

## Summary:

- Death of gunner
- First European child born at the Cape
- Sickness
- Life becomes "sad and miserable"
- Stormy weather
- Asparagus found
- Dutch greens successful
- Abundance of fish caught
- Whales in the bay

6th Strong N.W. wind and much rain; in the afternoon the wind veered right round to S.W. with heavy downpours. On account of this we could to-day make little or no progress with our work on the fortifications and dwellings. We could not cover these tightly enough with the planks and tarpaulin to protect our bread and other dry goods from becoming wet and bad.

This evening the sick-comforter's wife was delivered of a son<sup>1</sup>, the first child to be born within the Fort of Good Hope: for this reason we had given the sick-comforter accommodation in the fort only the day before yesterday, no one else having lived there up to the present. We have all been living together in the tents pitched outside the fort for the time being, but we hope that next week most of us will be able to move inside and find better accommodation there.

7th Variable weather with fairly strong N.W. wind. Have been busy to-day cutting rushes or reeds (which we found in abundance in the down behind the rump

1. The son of the sick-comforter Willem Barentssen Wijlant was the first European child born at the Cape, and therefore, by virtue of his birth, the first South African! On 12 August 1655 the birth of the sick-comforter's second son is mentioned in the Journal.

of the Lion Mountain) for thatching our dwellings. It is hoped this will be a success, as with planks and old tarred canvas we cannot keep our bread and other dry goods properly dry<sup>1</sup>.

During the past 3 or 4 days another 7 or 8 persons have gone down with the red flux and other forms of dysentery and also violent fevers, and some are on the point of dying. Our gardener<sup>2</sup> with his wife and eldest son also went down with the same complaint yesterday and to-day. Thus almost all our men are sick or ailing and the work is being delayed to such an extent that it appears to have come almost to a standstill—at any rate making very little progress because of the debility of the people. And if it does not please Almighty God to stay His striking hand, it is certain that the work will be slow and protracted. Hope, however, that the Almighty will have mercy on us and avert His visitations from us. Amen.

8th In the morning windy and drizzly weather from the N.W. Another seaman from the *Olipphant*, named Marten Poulussen, died and some other persons have gone down with the red flux. Senior Merchant Riebeeck's wife and the sick-comforter are also suffering pitifully from the same plague or sickness.

Sunday 9th Fine, bright sunshine, with a slack N.W. wind. The said Riebeeck, who is still in good health, went behind the Table Mountain about 6 miles from here to a very large forest of large, tall, straight, heavy, medium and small trees<sup>3</sup>, suitable for the largest construction one would desire. They are, however, so far and difficult to convey that it would be less expensive to buy wood in Holland or Batavia and have it sent here than to have it brought from this forest.

10th Fine weather as yesterday with slightly stronger N.W. winds, but not too strong. Still very busy at work with hardly 50 men who are fairly well, the rest being mostly laid up with the bloody flux and heavy fevers. For these very little good can be done other than giving them a little wine and some greens which our Dutch seeds are beginning to produce, as since our arrival here we have been unable to obtain from these natives more than one cow and a calf—and that at the very beginning. So at present life here is becoming sad and miserable; daily one after another falls ill with this complaint and many are dying from it. If it does not please the Almighty to deliver us from this plague, we see little chance of completing our work, as many of our men are dying and the rest are mostly sick in bed.

11th Dirty, wet, drizzly weather with fairly strong N.W. winds and heavy downpours, so that again the entire day passed without any progress whatsoever in the work. Although we have found reeds for thatching, we are now in need of men

1. The winter rains, which began some weeks previously, were therefore now falling fairly continuously.

2. Hendrik Boom. See p. 2, note 4.

3. This is probably the same forest (*grootte hooge ende rechte opwassende bomen*) that the bookkeepers of the *Drommedaris* and the *Reijger* had already visited on 5 and 6 May.

with experience who know how to do it, for the thatch that has already been laid is so untidy and badly done that it will have to be taken down and started all over again in a different way. Meanwhile we are living in very leaky tents, all of us suffering severe cold and discomfort, which is contributing in no small way to the continuous and still daily spreading sickness. To the regret of every one no more progress in the work can be expected owing to the incessant rain and the weakness of the men.

12<sup>th</sup> Last night there were very strong winds from the N.W. with extremely heavy showers of hail and rain, and also throughout to-day from morning till evening, so that once again it has been an unsuitable day for working.

In the evening there were many loud peals of thunder and much lightning, with very heavy windstorms which at times came with such terrific violence that we thought everything would be blown down. All our young cabbage and many other Dutch vegetables and fruits, which were thriving beautifully, have been blown to bits and completely ruined.

13<sup>th</sup> Weather and wind as before, but less rain; we therefore could do a little work with those who are fit. During the last two days another eight or ten men have gone down with dysentery and other complaints, so that we are getting weaker and weaker.

Had another person start thatching to-day in a different manner, using the reeds already cut; these are so fine and suitable for a roof that it would be a pity if no one could be found among the men with a knowledge of thatching. From appearances it looks as if this man will do; although he is rather slow, he works reasonably well. It will at least be waterproof and better than a covering of planks and tarpaulin, which would then be made available and could be better used for other more necessary purposes, as we found the supply of wood from the *Drommedaris* and the *Reijger* to be short.

14<sup>th</sup> Once again very stormy weather with thunder, lightning and hail showers from the W., so that we had great fears that everything would be blown to the ground. We particularly feared for the safety of the yacht, as the sea was rolling very strongly into the bay and caused such heavy swells that she could only with great difficulty ride the waves, rolling continually with the decks nearly under water. We were really glad that we let the *Drommedaris* depart at such an early date. In this weather she could hardly have remained safely at anchor, but would have been in grave danger of foundering with all on board, as there are huge waves more or less where the ship lay at anchor. As a result of this inclement weather almost all our crops have been destroyed, and at the same time we are entirely prevented from proceeding with the necessary work. The men also are getting sicker and weaker every day through the discomfort they are suffering. Nothing can be done about it but to wait for better and more favourable weather; for this



patience will have to be exercised in the hope that the Almighty will provide it. Amen.

Our Biscayan or whale boats also had enough to do to keep afloat owing to the heavy surf on the beach.

15th The same stormy weather, particularly during the night. We therefore provided the skipper of the yacht, at his request, with another of the most able men, so that we think he now has quite enough assistance. They hauled the aforesaid boats high and dry on land, as they would otherwise have sunk, whilst the yacht herself had as much trouble as she could cope with to survive.

16th Weather and wind S.W., with hard squalls and gusts as before, until evening when it appeared to abate somewhat.

17th Reasonably calm, but still wet and drizzly weather with W. wind.

18th *Idem*. To-day the carpenter, named Andries Janssen of Rinckoppen<sup>1</sup>, died.

19th Dry weather with strong S.E. winds. While digging the soil our gardeners found fine specimens of asparagus. Upon further investigation they were found all over in abundance, growing wild, having very good flavour and of the same shape as in the Fatherland, so that we had them transplanted and cultivated in order if possible to make them grow even better and more luxuriantly. Besides the clover sorrel commonly found here, have found another kind of sorrel in fair abundance, very similar to the Dutch sorrel and much better and healthier than the clover sorrel.

Apparently the rain has made many herbs appear and it would seem as if the Dutch seeds will also be doing well by the time the good season comes. Besides the work on the fortifications, etc., we are busy at present with 5 or 6 men preparing some soil for sowing various seeds from the Fatherland in the said good season, as the present crops are daily being beaten to bits by the hail and strong winds and completely destroyed. We have, however, already succeeded in growing Dutch greens in such quantities that we are now able to have radish, lettuce and cress daily for our table and for the sick; and as we have in addition found asparagus and Dutch sorrel, we are able sometimes to cook a good mess of vegetables.

We lack cattle and sheep, however, which the people of Saldania have not yet brought owing to the cold and unsuitable weather, while these Strandlopers who are with us every day, living under the protection of our guns, have themselves nothing else to eat but some rock mussels and greens off the land. The moment the natives of Saldania arrive, they all run away with the exception of the one who can speak a little broken English and who has promised to remain and to serve as interpreter between us and those of Saldania; what will become of it, and whether he will be able to serve us, time will show.

During the night a steady and strong S.E. wind blew, continuing on the

1. Rinckoppen, i.e. Ringkøbing, city and district on the Ringkøbing Fjord on the west coast of Denmark.

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20th to blow so strongly that the skipper of the yacht could not come ashore in his boat, despite the fact that the yacht was lying at anchor quite close inshore in 3 or 3½ fathoms, with lowered topmasts and yards. Very cold but dry weather, so that some progress could be made with the work.

To-day a cadet named Bartel Janssen Oijert died.

21st Bright sunshine and calm weather until evening when it began to blow very hard again from the S.E. It continued throughout the night with the terrific violence of a hurricane.

*Item on the*

22nd It was surprising that everything standing up was not blown to the ground. The little yacht was also in grave danger of losing her anchors. No ships should touch here at this time of the year for they could scarcely remain safely anchored.

In the afternoon the skipper of the yacht signalled for assistance, but owing to the strong wind it was impossible to reach him with the sloops. Through God's will, however, the weather began to calm down towards evening, when the said skipper came ashore and we understood from him that he had merely signalled for the fish he had caught to be taken from the yacht. Advised him in future not to do it again for so trivial a reason in such stormy weather: for we on shore, thinking that he was in distress, might send the sloops to help him, endangering the lives of the men unnecessarily for such an unimportant matter, and as a result he might be faced with heavy culpability.

*Sunday 23rd* Fine weather, clear and warm sunshine; calm.

24th *Idem*, with a gentle S.E. breeze.

25th Good, favourable weather with westerly wind. Four or 5 whales were again disporting themselves near the yacht.

26th Fine, calm weather. This afternoon, while we were discussing whale fishing with skipper Turver, he informed us that every day he had noticed many fish in the bay, and especially this month; they were so near the ship that one could easily jump on to them from the yacht.

As we rose from table we saw a large school of harders close to the shore and right opposite our door; we therefore had the seine drawn. It was so full of fish that the purse was completely torn out and still at least 10 thousand were caught; of these we gave the Hottentots about 2 thousand. Had we been able to get the seine on land without its being torn, we should probably have caught more than 20 thousand fish in this one draught. It is often the case here that we catch more fish than we require. It is to be wished that cattle, sheep and other livestock were obtainable in equal abundance for feeding and refreshing those who are lying sick, and the hard-working labourers, who have had to content themselves with stale food and sometimes a little fish, and to do their heavy work on this.

27th Hazy but good weather with slight, variable breeze. The bay again full of

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whales. It is a pity that one could not attempt to catch them, but we have too much other and more necessary work still in hand; moreover, if we should catch one, we would have no means of storing the train-oil as we are not provided with barrels and hoops yet. If we but had materials for making train-oil troughs under ground as they do in the Fatherland, we could store it in there, which would be much better than storing it in barrels.

In the last 3 or 4 days another 7 or 8 persons have contracted severe fever, among them a butler, a master mason and a carpenter, causing the work to proceed with even less speed.

In the evening there was heavy thunder once more and throughout the night a fairly strong S.E. wind. Likewise on the

28<sup>th</sup> as a result of which nothing could again be done to-day. Towards evening it appeared to subside somewhat.

29<sup>th</sup> Fine, warm, sunny weather and calm.

Sunday ult. Idem, with a gentle W. wind.

## Next Edition...

July 1652

### Highlights to look forward to:

- Rewards offered for extra work
- Ramparts of fort nearing completion
- Pigs, pigeons and fowls breed well
- Cattle trade at a standstill
- Sounding of Hout Bay
- Resolutions of council of Policy
- Van Riebeeck proceeds to Hout Bay

## Final Words...

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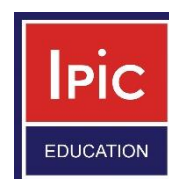
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