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THE LEYDEN TRADITION IN SOUTH AFRICAN MEDICINE

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An interesting cultural link exists between the South African medical profession and the famous medical school at the centuries-old University of Leyden in the Netherlands. Up to about a hundred years ago it was considered proper for a Cape Dutch student to study at Leyden, and nowhere else in Europe.

Several reasons can be given for this fact. Until the arrival of the English settlers in 1820, the Cape of Good Hope—which by that date had been a British colony for 25 years—remained almost homogeneously Dutch in language and tradition. Although both had been considerably watered down and many if not all the Cape Dutch families had lost touch with their forbears in Europe, they nevertheless continued to look upon Holland as a sort of *Patria* whither they could send their children to be educated. And of all the universities in the Netherlands, Leyden was undoubtedly the most illustrious.

The University was established by Prince William of Orange in 1575 to reward the stout burghers of Leyden for their valiant defence of the city against the Spaniards. The Stadtholder had offered them remission of taxes for 10 years or the gift of a university, and they had wisely chosen the latter. Within a few decades it became one of the most famous centres of learning in Europe. By the use of Latin as the academic language of the University and by holding its doors open to all who chose to enter them—Catholics, Protestants and Jews alike—Leyden maintained a universal tradition in an age when many other universities were losing it. In Italy, for instance, the old centres of learning had been forced by papal decree to exclude all non-Catholics. For this reason, perhaps, Leyden was the natural successor to Salerno, Montpellier and Padua as the medical centre of the world.¹ To the lectures of its famous teachers such as Sylvius (1614-1672), Ruysch (1638-1731) and Hermann Boerhaave (1668-1738) flocked students from many foreign countries—England, Hanover, Scotland, America—and also from the Dutch colonies.

In the *Album Studiosorum Academiae* (1575-1875)² of the University are entered the names of about 100 Cape-born students, most of them designated *e Promontorio Bonae Spei*, but several in *Capite Bonae Spei natus Africanus*, and one or two simply *Africanus*. The names are spread over the last golden era of the University, roughly from 1760 to about 1860, when in fact the glory had already departed. Whereas in 1750 the majority of the students were still foreigners hailing from places as far apart as Ceylon and Rio de Janeiro, Moscow and Dublin or *Edinburghensis*, the onset of the nineteenth century saw them rapidly disappear, and by 1850 students *e Promontorio Bonae Spei* stand out prominently from the solid phalanxes of Dutchmen, *Haganus* and *Amstelodamensis*.

In the century between 1766 and 1866, 28 Cape-born students were enrolled in the medical faculty at Leyden University:

- Weitner (Weidner), Didericus (1749-) 12 September 1766 and 22 November 1771.
- Van Nierop, Cornelis Johannes (1755-) 1772.
- Persoon, Cornelis Johannes (1763-) 27 September 1786.
- Berrangé, Antonie (1773-) 24 August 1792.
- Trüter, Petrus Johannes, Jr. (1776-1867) 18 August 1794.
- Kuijs, Arnold Philippus (1779-) 16 September, 24 May 1794 and 31 May 1803.
- Gilquin, Philippus Henricus (Hermannus) (1788-) 8 October 1810 and 31 October 1814.
- Van Oosterzee, Johannes Knockers (1793-1829) 7 November 1814.
- Flech (*sic*), Christiaan (1810-1870) 6 September 1827.
- Biccard, Franciscus Ludovicus Carolus (1809-1884) 16 September 1829.
- Fraenkel, Didericus (1811-1861) 19 July 1832.
- Maasdorp, Gijsbertus Henricus (1814-1888) 16 June 1833.
- Flamme, Johannes Fredericus Josephus (1813-) 1 March 1834.
- Kuijs, Michael Jacobus (1814-) 10 May 1834.
- Roux, Jacobus Petrus (1815-) 13 May 1834.
- Dreijer, Johannes Albertus (1813-) 3 September 1834 and 1 July 1842, *Chir.*
- Dreijer, Hermannus (1813-) 3 September 1834.
- Smuts, Cornelis (1819-) 1 September 1837 and 17 April 1844, *Chir.*
- Smeets (*sic*), Janus (Johannes) (1819-) 5 September 1839 and 10 March 1844.

Fleck, Franciscus le Sueur (1821-) 8 September 1838.
 Glaeser, Louis William (1822-1883) 19 September 1840.
 Herman, Johannes Zacharias (1828-1879) 22 September 1847.
 Biccard, Carolus Guilielmus Talma (*sic*) (1835-) 17 August 1852.
 Biccard, Francois de Lettre (1839-1880) 23 June 1855.
 Kotte, Christophorus Casparus Joannes (1839-) 25 July 1856.
 Zeederberg, Rudolf Abraham (1841-) 17 September 1858.
 Schomberg (*sic*), Nicolaas (1842-) 26 May 1860.
 Du Toit, Ernestus Fredericus (1843-) 13 June 1862.

While the 28 names cover an entire century, nearly half of these medical students attended the University between 1827 and 1840. This 13-year period—beginning a full quarter-century after the British had settled permanently at the Cape—was also the most popular for Cape students in spheres of study other than medicine, e.g. mathematics, jurisprudence and theology. A graph drawn for the century (1766-1866) peaks in the 1830s, when there were more than 30 Cape students at the University at the same time: in 1834, for example, there were probably at least 7 medical students alone. Thereafter the graph declines steadily until in 1863 not a single one remained—probably for the first time in the course of the century.

The reason for the South African students—as they were then already called—forsaking Leyden at that time is obvious. At the Cape, the process of anglicization and assimilation into the English colonial hierarchy that had started after 1820 was beginning to make itself felt. Many descendants of the original Dutch settlers, particularly the affluent, social-minded families around Cape Town, were proud to call themselves colonials, and it was only natural that they would send their children—if they had to be sent anywhere—‘home’ to Britain to be educated. Another factor, namely, the powerful influence of the Scottish Presbyterian ministers imported to fill the pulpits of the Dutch Reformed Church, probably helped to guide the majority to the north of the Tweed. It was these home influences, rather than the shift of the medical centre of the world from Leyden to Edinburgh, that diverted the bulk of the medical students from the Cape Colony across the Channel. Jacob Versfeld, M. D. (Edinburgh, 1825) was probably the first Cape student to qualify at a British medical school; but as the century wore on and the movement gained momentum the numbers at Edinburgh increased, until by 1880 the Scottish capital had completely replaced Leyden as the school of choice for South African medical students.

The influence of Leyden University upon South African medicine extends far beyond the individual contributions of its graduates in their fatherland. In a sense the small

band of doctors that returned home in the 1830s were the true pioneers of South African general practice, for they formed the vanguard of regularly qualified practitioners that went inland, gradually to oust the quack and the barber surgeon from the Cape countryside. The wave of practitioners preceding them had been mostly discharged regimental surgeons; some of these were good and some were very bad, and none remained long in the same place. The Leyden men, on the other hand, tended to settle and stay—at once a stabilizing influence. Thus, the Smutses were at Paarl (Johannes) and Stellenbosch (Cornelis) for over 25 years; J. A. Dreyer was district surgeon of George for 23 years; G. H. Maasdorp remained at Graaff-Reinet, Kuys and Glaeser at Worcester, where their descendants flourish to this day; and so on. Together with several immigrant British practitioners such as Dr. White of Swellendam and Christie of Beaufort West, they provided the first stable pattern to rural medical practice at the Cape and helped to banish the quack to the frontiers of the Colony.

Since most of them were sons of the local aristocracy, the highly-respected ministers of the Cape Church, or the equally regarded *koopmans* of Cape Town, they automatically commanded the respect of the burghers, and this in turn can only have enhanced the prestige of their profession. The Biccard *stamvader* was a leading Cape physician highly thought of by the British commanders, and his medical dynasty has survived to the present day. The pulpit of the Cape Church had been occupied by a Fleck, Kuys or Berrangé for decades, and families such as the Truters and the Smutses were almost as old as the settlement itself. L. W. Glaeser was the son of a discharged regimental surgeon who had married a Cape lady, and Didericus Fraenkel the offspring of the first Jewish doctor (and one of the first Jews) to settle at the Cape.

The most famous of all the Cape medical students at Leyden was one who never returned, and died—the creator of a new branch of scientific knowledge, yet forgotten and penniless—in a Paris garret in 1836. He was C. H. Persoon, ‘the father of modern mycology’, who was born in Cape Town in 1762 and who has been acclaimed the greatest genius ever to come from South Africa;³ yet few people have ever heard of him.

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