CHAPTER SEVEN

ARTEM QUAEVIS TERRA ALIT: BOOKS IN THE CAPE COLONY DURING THE SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES*

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In his founding study on the circulation of books in the American possessions of the Spanish Crown during the sixteenth century, Irving Leonard tried to invalidate the ‘black legend’ concerning the Spaniards, on the basis of the books conquistadors carried in their luggage:

This account of the often denied circulation of books and ideas in vice-regal Hispanic America, added to the investigation of others, may help to demonstrate that the true colour of the “legend” was something like, perhaps a light grey.1

The parallels between anti-Spanish propaganda at the end of the sixteenth century and anti-Dutch propaganda at the end of the eighteenth century are too many to be ignored. The colony of the Cape of Good Hope was founded in 1652 by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) when it was at its height. At first this colony was to serve as a simple refreshing post, but it quickly became a colonial settlement after a decision taken in 1657 to allocate land to free settlers, with a view to increasing agricultural production. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the colony expanded inland until the British conquered the country in two phases at the turn of the nineteenth century.2

The two black legends—one orchestrated by European countries wanting to establish colonies in America at the end of the sixteenth century, i.e. Holland, France and England in particular, and the other by the British

* This article was translated from French by Laurent Chauvet.
1 Irving Leonard, Books of the braves, being an account of books and of men in the Spanish conquest and settlement on the 16th century New World (Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1949), x.
who were gaining a foothold in Southern Africa at the turn of the nineteenth century, echo each other although two centuries apart. The deplorable attitude of the conquistadors and the Boers towards the local populations—the Amerindians on the one hand and the Khoikhoi on the other—is certainly the first of these parallels. In either case, critics could easily swap ‘civilised’ for ‘savage’ and make of Europeans the champions of barbarism. “Perhaps the chief cause of the great depravity of mind found among the distant Boers of the colony, is to be ascribed to the cruelty and contempt with which they are accustomed from their infancy to treat Hottentots” explained Robert Percival, an English traveller who published _An Account of the Cape of Good Hope_ in 1804. A second feature shared by both legends concerns the inability to develop a vast territory with strong potential, an argument which was reproached to both the Spaniards in the sixteenth century and the Dutch settlers in the eighteenth century. In either case, the argument had to do with competing colonial powers claiming and wanting to appropriate such territories for themselves with a view to exploiting resources. A third and still more obvious parallel concerns the ‘ignorance’, ‘obscurantism’ and ‘moral degeneration’ affecting Europeans overseas. By definition, conquistadors and Boers were ‘uneducated’. This is such an argument which Irving Leonard intends to challenge by drawing up an inventory of books found in the Spanish colonies to refute the _leyenda negra._

Such a link between the presence of books and moral dignity is not absent from the black legend of the Boers in South Africa, on the contrary. Many testimonies, from English newcomers in particular, build this bridge between the printing press and civilisation to denounce the deplorable state of the country in this regard. John Barrow, for example, who travelled in the country in 1797 and 1798, and who published _An Account of Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa_ in 1801 to convince the British Government not to leave the Cape, after speaking of the gullibility and savagery of the Dutch settlers, commented on the lack of printing press:

> There never perhaps were a set of men so void of resources in overcoming difficulties as the Dutch farmers of the Cape. The inanity of mind and the indolent habit of the body are not even surmounted by self-interest. Their ignorance cannot be a matter of wonder, but we often find in Europe unlettered men possessed of great talents and ingenuity. No printing press has yet found its way to the Cape of Good Hope, except a small for cards or hand-bills.4

3 R. Percival, _An account of the Cape of Good Hope_ (London: Baldwin, 1804), 222.
4 Ibid., 377. The press referred to here is that of a Johaan Christiaan Ritter.