



MILESTONES

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The Occasional Newsletter of the Muizenberg Historical Conservation Society

"History is Always with Us"

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Empires Fall

A few weeks ago I saw an article that said the 2nd World War had caused the demise of three empires. Only three?

The 20th Century was a seriously bad time for empires. Who would have believed that **11 empires** could meet their end in the same 100 years? Are there any empires left? Two of these extinct empires only got started in the 20th century; they were clearly unstable from the beginning. To me it is a revelation, I had no idea there even were that many empires in recent history.

	<u>Period</u>	<u>Age at Death</u>	
Ottoman	1299 – 1922	623	
Portuguese	1415 – 1999	584	
Dutch	1543 – 1975	432	(remnants exist)
British	1583 – 1965	382	(remnants exist)
French	1534 – 1980	346	(remnants exist)
Russian	1721 – 1917	196	
Japan	1868 – 1945	77	
Soviet	1922 – 1991	69	
Austro-Hungarian	1867 – 1918	51	
German	1886 – 1918	32	
Third Reich	1933 – 1945	12	

Consider that an empire is probably the most complex and certainly the farthest-reaching of all human social organisations. They take time, effort and treasure to establish.

Perhaps the first question to consider is ‘what constitutes an empire?’ Military occupation of multiple territories by one power seems to be a given, and submission by the local populations must be another.

That leads to the second question and partly provides the answer: When the military dominance becomes ineffective, or the locals stop co-operating, does the arrangement fall down? Is that what happened here? Was it so easy? That accounts for several of these empires with some being fatally weakened by military exhaustion and too-high expenses, and curiously this happened to both winners and losers. I suspect the other reasons were education, growing discomfort amongst the ruling about what was being done in their name and demands for self-government by the colonies.

There is probably material here for numbers of doctoral theses, and I do not propose to compete but merely to point it out as a curious affair which is not discussed. Eleven empires is a heck of a death toll.

Blue Plaques in Muizenberg

On 2 September 2021 your Society was pleased to unveil plaques commemorating two important contributors to the history of Muizenberg.



Left to right: Helen Zille, politician (leader of the Democratic Alliance), Glenn Babb vice-chairman MHCS, Chris Taylor chairman MHCS, Rabbi Ryan Newfield (incumbent rabbi Muizenberg shul)

The Jewish Community

The first plaque was in honour of the Jewish Community of Muizenberg, and it was unveiled by Helen Zille, affixed to the wall of the synagogue in Camp Road, directly above the foundation stone. The congregation was represented by Rabbi Ryan Newfield. A small crowd gathered, perhaps 40 people.

The Jewish community is much diminished from its glory days, which ran from the 1880's to about 1970. About 600 Jewish families settled in the village, many from Lithuania. Muizenberg was a booming holiday resort in those days, and of the 26-odd hotels in our heyday some 17 were Jewish-owned and run. For many reasons our little world changed, people looking for a prosperous future had to look elsewhere and most of the younger generations left for opportunities elsewhere. The diaspora of Muizenberg Jews stretches around the world. I bought my own house in Muizenberg from

Jean Tockar, without question the doyenne of our estate agents. The house had been owned by two Jewish brothers who kept it for the holiday season, and each willed his share to his children. The children passed on their shares in turn, equally split amongst them so future generations could also enjoy Muizenberg. I bought the house from 13 people around the world, only one of whom still lived in South Africa. That was the extent of the exodus.

Those who lived and flourished here have left behind a legacy of many good to excellent buildings ranging from the mansions of Atlantic Road to many of the hotels that still stand. It pleases me that the tradition of property investment here is continued, in that Steven Frankel of Faircape Properties drove the revitalisation of the beachfront buildings, to the great benefit and upliftment of Muizenberg.

In history we have the indomitable Isadore Hirsch, in 1880 the owner of Farmer Peck's and much more. He left his mark.

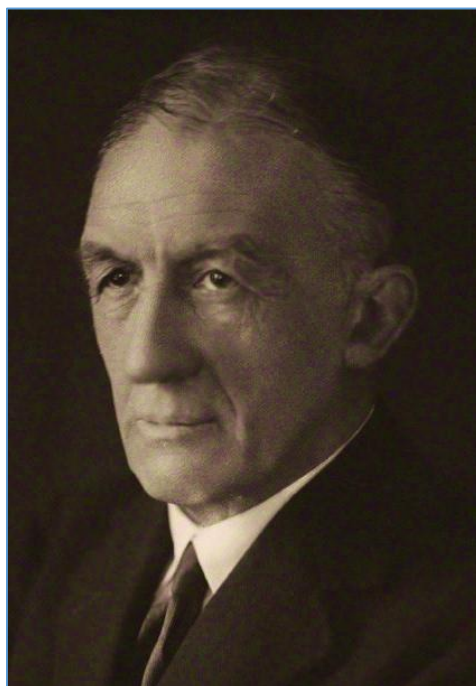
Barney Barnato made a huge impression on the diamond industry, and I suspect at his death Barney was worth more than Cecil Rhodes. He owned a large holiday home in Rhodesia Road which still stands.

Of the current era, Gerald Musikanth stands out for driving through the construction of the catwalk – the walkway beside the sea from Muizenberg to St James. He worked together with Mendel Kaplan, who was a major funder. This is a great and permanent addition to our False Bay coastline, used and enjoyed every day by many. It was ceremonially opened in 1987.

Gerald's wife Celia Musikanth, and the late Bertie Stern had the energy and drive to rebuild and reinvigorate the Masque Theatre after the fire in 1997, and she was still running it when Covid closed everything down in 2019.

To sum up, Muizenberg was in large part built by the Jewish community, and the ties remain strong. Those who remain still contribute to the development of the village. The plaque is to remind future generations of the Jewish effort which stands today all around us.

Sir Herbert Baker



Born in England, but South Africa's most famous architect, Herbert Baker flourished in South Africa from 1892 to 1913. He and his practice were responsible for numerous grand buildings including our Union Buildings in Pretoria, our embassy in London called South African House (still in use) and other monumental government buildings. When he left South Africa it was to go and work in India, the Jewel of the Empire. There he designed more monumental government buildings of which today the Indian government is very proud, and finally he littered Britain with war memorials and other Imperial Statements. He was a Big Deal in his time, a serious name.

Baker built a holiday home in Muizenberg; Sandhills, one of a group. In 1899 he designed Rust en Vrede for Cecil Rhodes, probably our grandest house, which Rhodes never saw built. He also built Vergenoeg, the house in the sand dunes and a national monument for the past 38 years. It is now owned by Mary Slack, daughter of Harry Oppenheimer.

Curiously his own holiday cottage, Sandhills, is outwardly quite dull. The house is one of four that he designed, forming a block, and it is on one of these that we have erected our Blue Plaque, not on Herbert's own house.

Sir Herbert was commissioned by Cecil Rhodes to renovate and preserve a number of old Cape Dutch farmhouses, which in the 1890's were completely neglected, often in ruinous condition and being demolished. It is due to the efforts of these two men that this simple but elegant architectural style is with us today. One of these, of course, is Boschendal.

For himself, Rhodes called in Baker when he bought the original Groote Schuur. It had been a VOC granary to begin with, and later modified as a great house. Baker made substantial alterations to it for Rhodes. In 1896 the building caught fire and was destroyed. Baker then built a new Groote Schuur on the same location.

Sir Herbert's final design for Cecil Rhodes was the Rhodes Memorial, built after Rhodes' death and paid for, I believe, by public subscription.

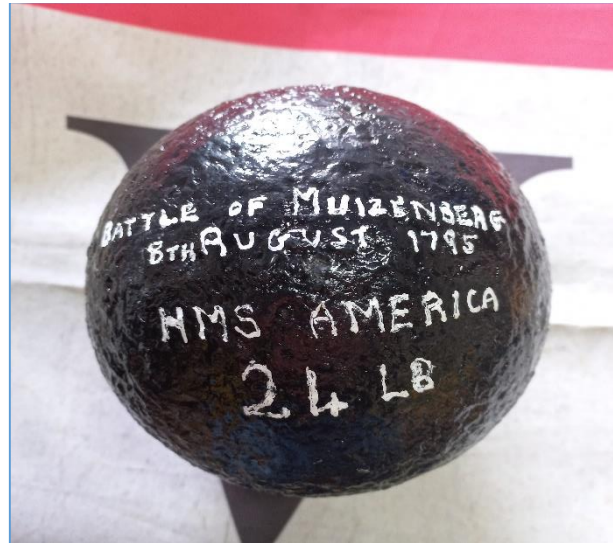
As far as I know, all Baker's Muizenberg houses still stand, a testament to his ability, and his buildings here form an important part of a surprising Muizenberg asset – our architecture. We have grand, we have simple, we have art deco in abundance, we have colonial, we have Empire and we have 1673 VOC. It is a remarkable collection, and a good part of it is from Sir Herbert Baker.

We ought to charge admission to Muizenberg!

*References: Muizenberg a Forgotten Story, Michael Walker, 2009
Cecil Rhodes by his Architect, Herbert Baker, 1934*

The St James Cannonball

In 2014 Derek Stuart-Findlay of the Kalk Bay Historical Society gave a cannonball to the Muizenberg Historical Conservation Society, knowing that the Battle of Muizenberg is a special focus of ours. The ball was dug up by Naseegh Jaffer in his garden in Ley Road, St James, and it tells a story.



HMS America is the big ship flying the red and white flag.

Because we have excellent detail on the actions and participants of the Battle of Muizenberg, we can work out a great deal of information on the cannonball. It was found between Ley Road in St James and Boyes Drive, high above sea level.

An enduring belief amongst non-gunners is that when you apply the burning fuze to the touch-hole of a cannon, it goes off. This is not always true. Sometimes the powder in the touch-hole fizzes and splutters before the flame reaches the charge, and only then does the gun go BANG. On a sailing ship this is a problem because you cannot aim a ship's gun, you have to wait until the roll of the ship brings your gun on target, so effectively you aim the ship, not the gun. If you apply your fuze at the exact right moment and are rewarded with fizzing and spluttering, followed later by the bang, this is called a misfire. The ball could go anywhere except the target.

The St James cannonball is a 24-pound cast-iron ball, cannons being classed by the weight of the shot they threw. The only time cannonballs have ever been fired on this coast was during the Battle of Muizenberg, 8 August 1795. Four ships of the Royal Navy took part in the Battle of Muizenberg on that date. The ships were HMS America (3rd rate, 64 guns), HMS Stately (3rd rate, 64), HMS Echo (sloop, 16) and HMS Rattlesnake (sloop, 16). The sloops were small and light, and only carried smaller 18-pounder guns. His Majesty's Ships America and Stately, the 64's, carried 24-pound guns as well as 18 pounders, so the ball could only have come from one of the 64's.

We have it on record from the log of HMS America that she fired at the VOC picquet at Kalk Bay. The entry reads "at half past 11 weighed anchor... sail in company with Stately Echo and Rattlesnake and 3 gunboats 10 minutes past 12 fired at a three gun battery which the Enemy quitted". (It must be noted here that the Enemy that quitted did not run the 2 km to join their colleagues at Muizenberg, but chose to leg it about 15 km, all the way across the sandy Fish Hoek Valley and around the back of Chapman's Peak to join up with the men at the East Fort in Hout Bay, a journey of many hours. It had the attraction of not being the site of an impending battle.)

Twenty minutes after thumping Kalk Bay, the four British ships formed a semi-circle close to Surfers Corner and each dropped two anchors, fore and aft, to stop the ships from drifting around. They were now directly in front of the main Dutch force which was where Casa Labia is now, and opened fire on the defenders with all the guns they could bring to bear. It was a lot. $2 \times 64 = 128$, plus $2 \times 16 = 32$, a total of 160 guns of which a handful pointed ahead or astern of each vessel. So say 150 in total, or 75 to each side. The ships all fired from the port or left-hand side for this action.

The 64-gun ships had two gun decks; for stability the lower main gun deck carried the heavy 24s, and the upper gun deck carried the lighter 18-pounders. The weather deck was kept clear of guns because all the deck space was needed to work the ship. Of the two 64-gun ships that carried 24-pounders, only HMS America was facing the St James area during the skirmish. We know that from the Federici painting done shortly after the battle, which depicts HMS America clearly flying a red and white signal flag.

Of special interest is that the ball was found where it was, above Ley Road in St James, not far below Boyes Drive. The cannon fire was directed at the ground around Bailey's Cottage and Casa Labia, so the ball was way off target and much too high. This neatly illustrates the problem that misfires meant the cannon only went off some seconds late, when the ship had rolled on the swell, and the gun was no longer pointing at the target but up in the sky.

Thus we can confidently conclude that the cannonball was fired from the lower gun deck, port side of HMS America, between the hours of 12.30 pm and 4.00 pm, and that it was a misfire. About the only detail we do not have is the name of the gun-captain.

And I also like the fact that for 210 years this little bit of unimportant history has lain unknown and buried in the sand, but today illustrates an interesting bit of long-ago military life.

The painting of the Battle of Muizenberg now hangs in Parliament. Apart from being a skilled artist, Johann Federici was also present on the Dutch side at the Battle of Muizenberg, so he qualifies as a direct observer and a war artist. His painting can be considered broadly accurate. Other paintings of the occasion were the result of the artist being told the story by someone who might or might not have been there, so those pictures were based on a second or third hand imagination and bear little resemblance to reality.

The cannonball is available to be seen in Het Posthuys, and strong visitors may pick it up, a privilege not allowed by other museums. Which is strange because I don't know how anyone could break a cast-iron cannonball.

References: The First British Occupation of the Cape, TD Potgieter, Castle Military Museum 1997

The Mfecane

The Mfecane is a period about which little is known by the public. It deserves to be better understood, since it was the cause of mass displacement and extermination of Bantu tribes throughout Southern Africa. Muizenberg Historical's interest is because the Mfecane gave rise to Mzilikazi and his Ndebele/Matabele who feature prominently in Rhodes' story.

Between about 1815 and 1840, what is now KwaZulu-Natal erupted into bloody mayhem, the Terror. Shaka Zulu set about building himself an empire by exterminating the local tribes and stealing their land, their cattle, their children and young women. I will try to outline the events in a future edition of Milestones. It is a large and dark subject, avoided by our politicians even now.

For now, I give you this from the journal of Andrew Smith (who I presume gave his name to Smith Street in Durban, now changed but still commonly used) who travelled through Natal and Zululand in 1832. Andrew Smith visited Dingane and stayed at his kraal, writing copious notes of what he saw. It was Dingane who had Shaka killed in 1829, only three years earlier.

"The country through which we had passed was a very fine one and had been very populous from the number of places where kraals had been and which were more conspicuous from the number of skulls lying near each (Chaka having killed all the inhabitants) ... The whole country about these kraals were strewn with bones of those who I suppose had tried to escape up the mountains."

What disturbs me more than the telling of bleached skulls and bones is that they were intact, indicating that they had not been set about by hyenas or jackals or vultures. That in turn indicates that those scavengers, which were common throughout the land at the time, had more corpses available than they could consume. How many died? The number will never be accurately fixed, but estimates range from 500,000 to 2 million. It was a desperate time, and it changed South Africa.

Ref: Andrew Smith and Natal, The Van Riebeeck Society, Cape Town 1955

An Appeal from your Society

The electric lawnmower at Rhodes Cottage has died of old age. In this time of garden services it is possible that a reader has a disused but functional electric mower gathering dust somewhere. We are willing to relieve you of this burden, at no charge.

We would also be grateful for a working laptop computer to keep at Rhodes Cottage and operate the scanner and the DVD player. We have a fast-growing collection of photos, articles and records and it would be nice to have these available and sorted. We will be careful to delete all previous records for your safety. A laptop is preferable so we can put it away at night.

We can collect from anywhere in the greater Cape Town area.

The Bit at the End – Euphemisms again

I like euphemisms, they are attempts at hiding the truth in a polite fashion, and they have been deployed throughout history. The fun lies in finding out the real meaning.

Readers will know that in many parts of the world bands of criminals and informal militia have the same weapon of choice – the ‘technical’, otherwise known as a Gun On A Truck (a GOAT). It is always a Toyota Landcruiser or a Hilux bakkie with a heavy machine gun mounted on the back. In the world of AK47’s the technical is king. Serious muscle.



But why ‘technical’?

It turns out that in these unsettled and dangerous parts, aid agencies often need muscle to protect their workers and aid deliveries. They pay the militia for this protection and their people are then escorted through bandit country by men with guns on trucks. These services are obviously not free, so payment is made and the entry in the accounts reflects that the payments are for ‘technical assistance’. After all, as a humanitarian organisation you really cannot be seen to be funding the bad guys.

We are a wicked species.

Contributions

Somewhere out there are curious readers who also stumble across interesting items and whose fingers know their way around a keyboard. Send me your stories, your suggestions. No guarantees, but interesting tales could well end up in these pages. Wry humour is always a recommendation.

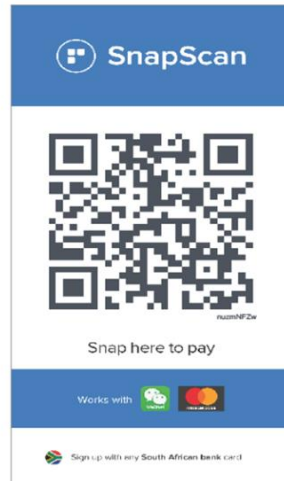
Membership form

Members are asked to pay in their subscription fees, which are unchanged at R50 per individual per year and R80 per family. Payment can be made to the society at ABSA account number 4054583634. Please put your surname as the first word of the reference. Details can be emailed separately to christaylortourguide@gmail.com.

Required information:

- First name, surname
- Email address
- Cell number
- Home town/suburb

To pay by Smartphone, you need to have internet banking loaded on the phone and also the little SnapScan app, which is free to download. To use, activate the application, select 'Pay' and point your phone camera at the SnapScan image. The app will automatically take a photo when in focus, and quickly return the confirmation 'Muizenberg Historical Conservation Society'. Then enter the amount to pay, and tell it to pay. Done.



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