

Breaking the Pledge

The Family Ostracised

The *Neptune* affair in 1849 was traumatic for the family. At the time they already had been leaders in the community for more than 130 years. Now they were ostracised and pilloried¹. When the respected and dignified Hendrik Johannes Morkel of *Onverwacht* visited Stellenbosch, locals pelted his carriage with stones and tomatoes. What happened? Was the family guilty or unfairly treated? We seek to unravel some of these mysteries.

The journey of the *Neptune III* came towards the end of transportation of convicts to Australia. At that time about 10 to 20 ships, each carrying around 200 to 300 convicts made the journey every year until 1853.

In April 1849 the Privy Council in London decided to make the Cape Colony another convict settlement, similar to those in Australia. The third Earl Grey, Colonial Secretary, intended to send a special class of convicts to the Cape. They were Irish peasants who had been driven to crime by the famine of 1845. They were also towards the end of their sentences and the idea was that they could obtain a 'conditional pardon' to settle as 'free exiles' at the Cape, provided they did not return to Ireland, England or Scotland Earl Grey sent a letter to the Governor at the Cape asking to ascertain the feelings of the colonists regarding this special category of convicts. Due to a misunderstanding, the *Neptune* arrived unannounced before the sailing vessel with Grey's letter landed at the Cape. The ship also had the famous Irish rebel and activist, John Mitchel on board. In his book, *Jail Journal* ², Mitchel is eloquent and scathing about the treatment of the Irish and the transportation system.

¹ Heap, Peggy 1970. *The Story of Hottentots Holland*. Cape Town. A.A. Balkema. p54 – 55.

² John Mitchel, *Jail Journal*. <http://www.askaboutireland.ie/reading-room/digital-book-collection/digital-books-by-subject/irish-people/mitchel-jail-journal/> Thanks to Hennie Morkel for the reference.

The Anti-Convict Agitation

When the news that the ship was on its way, reached the Cape, feelings ran very high and an Anti-Convict Association was formed. At a well attended meeting on 4 July 1849 a severe thunder storm broke loose but those who attended in the open square stayed in the drenching rain to show their support against what they saw as a degradation of the Colony. Artist Thomas Bowler³ produced a lithograph of the meeting showing the rain storm and smoke blowing horizontally from stacks.



Lithograph by Thomas Bowler: Public Protest Meeting. Cape Town. 4 July 1849

Our three Centuries p50

The meeting stirred up feelings and the Anti-Convict Association organised a pledge not to employ any convicts and to turn their backs on anyone who helped the Government with aid to the criminals. Anyone who broke the pledge ran the risk of complete ostracism. He would be publicly cursed, people would throw mud and rocks at him, his image publicly burned and he would be banned from society.

In September 1849, the *Neptune III* with about 300 convicts on board dropped anchor at Simonstown, the naval harbour on the Cape Peninsula. Church bells were rung to mobilise the populace against the 'plague ship'. The Government was forced to establish a bakery and butchery because the existing shops refused to deal. Anyone who broke the pledge ran the risk of complete ostracism. He would be publicly cursed, people would throw mud and rocks at

³ Bowler, lithograph reproduced in De Kock, Victor 1952. *Our Three Centuries*. Cape Town, Central Committee for the Van Riebeeck Festival. p50.

him, his image publicly burned and he would be banned from society. Regular vigilante type meetings were held and merchants had to defend themselves against accusations. Shops were boycotted on rumours and had to present meetings with referrals of their innocence, and if approved, were let back into the fold⁴.

A merchant Benjamin Norden helped the convicts with supplies and suffered a boycott. He was pelted with stones in the *Heerengracht* (Cape Town's main street) on 15th October 1849 and became an invalid as result. The movement was described as the 'Cape Inquisition' by Sammons⁵.

The local Governor, Sir Harry Smith found himself in a difficult position. Privately he sympathised with the colonists, but his duty was to the Imperial Government in London. He responded to a deputation with:

'I am proud to remember that today is the anniversary of Waterloo – and I would prefer to be killed by God Almighty than to ignore the commands of Her Majesty's Government and thus commit an act of rebellion.'

The agitation did not fade away without some achievements, as it led to another movement to obtain free, representative government for the colony. The British government granted this concession, which had been previously promised by Lord Grey, and a Constitution was established in 1854 of almost unprecedented liberality.

Breaking the Pledge

Sir Harry Smith had to await orders from London (correspondence via sailing vessels took months each way) and in the meantime the *Neptune* desperately needed food. (Eventually the ship was at Simonstown for five months). On 10 October, in the middle of the night the attorney-general and the Collector of Customs called on Colonel Robert Stanford to supply food from his farm *Gustrouw*, at the present day town of Gordons Bay.

Although Stanford identified with the protest, he agreed in the belief that by 'his timely assistance open rebellion and civil war would be averted'. He was assured that the assistance would be required for only a short time since Sir Harry Smith was 'almost daily in expectation of receiving replies to the despatches forwarded to Earl Grey⁶.

⁴ Unknown author and date. "*Kijkjes in onze Geschiedenis*" Chapter 38. *DIE BEWEGING TEEN DIE BANDIETE* .1849. My source, Mari Mostert, email 2001 apologised that the title page of the book (written in Dutch) was missing.

⁵ DSAB Vol I. p594. (Date unknown) My source, André van Rensburg, email 2002, assumed that I would know what "DSAB" is. I do not

⁶ Heap ibid



Compare the land and sea routes to transport provisions from the Gustrouw farm near Gordons Bay to the Neptune anchored-off Simonstown. Oxwagons using the land route had to skirt around the sandy Cape Flats and go via Hardekraaltjie (Bellville) and then proceed down the Cape Peninsula, dodging angry protestors. The sea route is direct.

The family farm *Onverwacht* adjoined *Gustrouw* and Stanford asked for assistance. Peggy Heap tells that D.J. Morkel helped to supply the ship. This would have been *e1* Daniel Johannes (1822 – 1879), *27* at the time, acting on behalf of his father, *d7* Hendrik Johannes (1798 – 1859), *51* in 1849.

Peggy Heap wrote that the food was supplied by ox wagon. This was the standard mode of transport at the time and it would be a reasonable assumption most would make. However, Hennie and I feel it is likely that they used a boat. Ox wagons would have had to skirt the sandy Cape Flats travelling to Bellville (*Hardekraaltjie*), down the peninsula to Simonstown and then had their cargo loaded on boats to the ship at anchor.

Both Stanford's farm *Gustrouw* and *Onverwacht* bordered on the coast of False Bay, and the cargo could have been transported by small boats directly from Gordons Bay or the Strand across the bay to Simon's Town. This would have by-passed any blockades and harassment and avoid the difficult sandy Cape Flats. Stanford already used boats⁷ to supply Cape markets from his farm at present-day Stanford, near Hermanus. They could also have made use of the many fishing boats at The Strand and Gordons Bay.

Supplying the ship with about 300 convicts on board plus their guards and crew for five months must have been a formidable task. As the months passed, the anti-convict agitation became more intense and they also refused supplies to the rest of the navy at Simonstown as well as the Governor and senior officials. These people did not starve, thus alternate supply routes were clearly in place. Stanford did not simply supply a few wagonloads of food. According to Mitchel⁸ Stanford placed 2,000 head of cattle, beside sheep without number at the Governor's disposal. However, no tradesmen would touch them, so inexperienced soldiers had to butcher the meat, build ovens and bake bread, enduring incessant volleys of civilian laughter and ridicule.

There was an active black market operating with opportunistic entrepreneurs exploiting the situation. Mitchel mentions that life in the ship was not intolerable, and they were not battened down. About 120 convicts were transferred to an old dismantled frigate *Seringapatnam* anchored nearby, to alleviate congestion on the *Neptune*.

In London Lord Adderley pleaded the Cape Colony's case and the Imperial Government changed their mind and the *Neptune* was sent on its way to Tasmania. In gratitude, the main street of Cape Town, *Heerengracht*, was renamed Adderley Street.

Pilloried and ostracised

As threatened, all hell broke loose when the word got out that The Pledge was broken and Stanford and the Morkel families were in disgrace and ostracised. The sanctions were indeed severe and relentless, even as Hendrik Johannes protested innocence (See his letter to the editor below). According to Peggy Heap they were mercilessly attacked.

'Haystacks on their farms were burned down, banks refused to transact business with them, creditors pressed for payment, their servants deserted them, their children were expelled from school and subjected to every kind of insult and abuse. Even medical attention was refused resulting in the death of one of Colonel Stanford's children.'

Stanford was a man 'broken in health and financially ruined'. Unable to pay his debts he was obliged to 'assign his estates' and left the Colony. The agent he appointed to look after his affairs in his absence, connived to strip the estate of most of its value. His properties, including

⁷ S.J, du Toit. *Stanford Stories 1729 to 1995*. Stanford Tourism Bureau

⁸ John Mitchell, *Jail Journal* ibid

Gustrouw were sold at public auction on 5 April 1855 to help pay his debts. Queen Victoria knighted Robert Stanford for his services and awarded him £5000 (a substantial sum in those days) as compensation.

The Morkels at *Onverwacht* also suffered ostracism and financial hardship.. An elderly aunt who visited the farm regularly for summer holidays told my father how, as a young daughter, she accompanied her father to Stellenbosch in their carriage and that the locals pelted them stones and tomatoes and hurled abuse at them. She was *e10* Esther Leonora Louw Morkel born on 1837 (thus about 12 at the time of running the blockade). She married a merchant H.C. De Jongh and she continued to take her vacations on the farm until her death in 1902. My father would then have been about 7 years old when she died.

To what extent were the Morkels involved?

As far as the activists were concerned, the family broke the pledge and were punished. H.J. (*d7* Hendrik Johannes) Morkel wrote a letter to the Editor of the *Commercial Advertiser* protesting innocence and that he was falsely accused. He mentioned that his petition to establish his innocence was ignored by the Anti-Convict Association of Hottentots Holland.

Guilty or innocent? I am ready to believe my great great grandfather. It is likely that their involvement was confined to selling goods to their neighbour Robert Stanford and no more. If that were so, were they guilty? I would say no for example, is the shop who sold a knife guilty if it were used to murder someone? The counter argument would be yes, if the seller knew what the buyer intended to do. Whatever, the activists felt the Morkels to be guilty and carried on with their persecution. Mitchel also felt the seller had to be held responsible. He quotes a case (see Appendix 2) where Wentzel Laubscher pleaded innocence when his children sold sheaves (of wheat) which the buyer then supplied the Neptune. Mitchel commented *while I eat his bread and beef I denounce him as a traitor*. The cynic in me wonders about the morality of his principles when enjoying the proceeds of the 'crime'. The test would have been how long he would starve to uphold his principles.

What did the Morkels sell?

Peggy Heap writes that Stanford provided substantial numbers of cattle and sheep while the ship was at the Cape. Apart from that we do not know what else was provided, and what came from the Morkels. *Onverwacht* was a wine farm, not pastoral with sheep. Grain, such as wheat would have been grown mainly for own use. Perhaps wine was supplied for the captain, officers and guards. I do not know what other products were produced on the farm, perhaps potatoes, onions and vegetables?

SIR,

It is with great reluctance that I again trouble you, but circumstances render it unavoidable. You are aware, sir, that for an alleged violation of the pledge all intercourse was dropped with me by the public. When I perceived it, immediate steps were taken by me to disprove the charges thus falsely laid against me, and satisfy the public mind that I was innocent of what I was accused of. I applied to the Anti-Convict Association of Hottentots Holland for the privilege of having my case inquired into; and, if found innocent, to be restored to public favour.

This, my application, has been entirely disregarded; and I find that I can no longer endure the pain of public contempt, whilst I sincerely regret any proceeding of mine which may have been constructed into an act of disrespect for the opinion of the public; and being desirous of granting all my influence and support to the Anti-Convict Association, in order to aid the people to accomplish this grand object, I beg to request that the A.-C. Association of Cape Town, as the parent of all other Associations, will cause the necessary inquiries to be made into my case, and to see justice done to one of its true members.

"I have, etc.,"

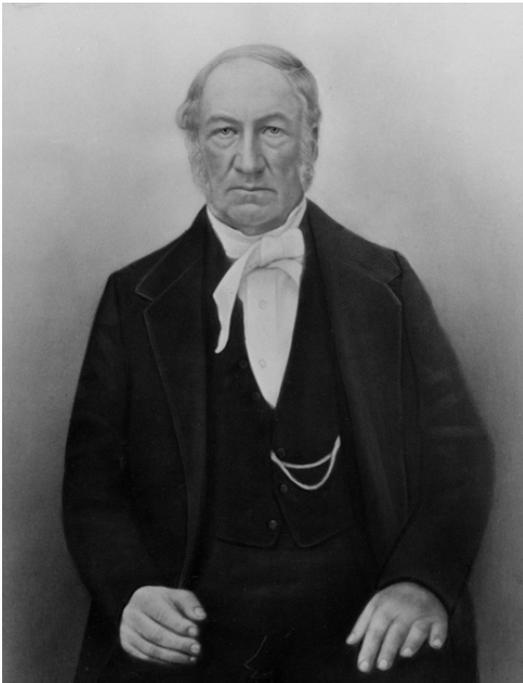
H.J. MORTEL

**Letter to the Editor of the Commercial Advertiser
by d7 Hendrik Johannes Morkel, protesting innocence.**

John Mitchel, Jail Journal

Sir Daniel or Sir Hendrik?

Heap reported it was said that, apart from Robert Stanford, a knighthood was also offered to *e1* Daniel Johannes Morkel but that he refused it. It is more likely to have been offered to his father, *d7* Hendrik Johannes, as owner of the farm. I remember my father telling the story over dinner table: that there could have been knighthood in the family, but that our ancestor declined to accept it. As mentioned above, he had a direct oral history connection to the event via his elderly aunt. Her story about pelting the carriage in Stellenbosch and the rejected knighthood are the oldest items of oral family history that I heard directly.



Hendrik Johannes Morkel 1799 – 1859

Source: Die Bos



Daniel Johannes Morkel 1822 – 1879

Source: Die Bos

André T Morkel
Revised August 2018

Appendix 1

The Neptune

The Neptune III

This story has some poignant relevance to us who have migrated to Australia more than a hundred years later.

The journey of the Neptune III in 1849 came towards the end of transportation of convicts to Australia. At that time about 10 to 20 ships, each carrying around 200 to 300 convicts made the journey every year until 1853⁹. According to Wikipedia, the third Earl Grey, Colonial Secretary, intended to send a special class of convicts to the Cape. They were Irish peasants who had been driven to crime by the famine of 1845. They were also towards the end of their sentences and the idea was that they could obtain a “conditional pardon” to settle as “free exiles” at the Cape, provided they did not return to the Ireland, England or Scotland¹⁰. Earl Grey sent a letter to the Governor at the Cape asking to ascertain the feelings of the colonists regarding this special category of convicts. Due to a misunderstanding the Neptune sailed with its cargo of convicts before the opinion of the colonists was received. The boat had 289 convicts on board, including the famous (or infamous) Irish rebel and activist, John Mitchel.

When the Neptune arrived in Simonstown on 19 September 1849, the Governor, Sir Harry Smith was forced by public opinion to keep the convicts on board, until he received orders from England for the ship to proceed to Tasmania. The ship sailed on 19 February, 1850 (after 5 months) and eventually arrived in Hobart on 5 April.

According to Charles Bateson¹¹, the ship concerned would have been the Neptune III, built at Calcutta in 1814, a sailing ship of 644 ton. The ship arrived at Hobart in 1850 with 282 male convict prisoners on board (after having embarked 300 ex England).

According to Mitchel, life in the ship was not intolerable, and they were not battened down. Also 120 convicts were transferred to an old dismasted frigate *Seringapatnam* anchored nearby, to alleviate congestion on the *Neptune*.

⁹ Bateson, Charles 1974. *The Convict Ships, 1787-1868*, 2nd ed. <http://members.iinet.net.au/~perthdps/convicts/shipsTAS.html>

¹⁰ John Mitchel Jail Journal *ibid* p139

¹¹ Bateson, Charles 1974. *The Convict Ships, 1787-1868*, 2nd ed. <http://members.iinet.net.au/~perthdps/convicts/shipsTAS.html>. Thanks Bill Edgar for the reference.

Appendix 2

John Mitchel

Jail Journal of John Mitchel¹²

John Mitchel's father was a Presbyterian Minister in Ireland. He practised as a barrister and defended poor Irish Catholics who suffered under their absentee English landlords and their agents. Dating back to the 17th century and Oliver Cromwell's conquests, the British had dispossessed the Irish and through harsh penal laws deprived them of education and job opportunities. They became poor and ignorant and the butt of English jokes and ridicule. Their plight worsened during the terrible potato famine of the 1840's, while their British landlords exported plentiful food supplies abroad. When they stole food in desperation, they were treated harshly in prison and those on board the *Neptune* had been transported, first to Bermuda, then to the Cape and eventually to Van Diemens Land (Tasmania)

He became an articulate activist for their cause, which became desperate during the potato famine, which started in 1845. Mitchel was accused of sedition and tried and found guilty by a packed jury. He was transported to Bermuda and in 1849 sent to Cape Town on the *Neptune III*. After five months at Simonstown, the ship departed for van Diemens Land. Mitchel published his *Jail Journal* which is a damning indictment of the British treatment of the Irish.

While ordinary transported prisoners were harshly treated and did hard prison labour, Mitchel was treated amazingly well by the British. He was considered a gentleman and given his own cabin on board ships, and a separate cell with amenities on land. It might also have been to isolate and prevent him from stirring rebellion. He was excused from doing work because of his asthma. While he accepted these privileges, he wrote that he never asked for them and he remained hostile and contemptuous of the British Government, and particularly of Lord Grey.

The following are extracts from his journal¹³:

¹²Mitchel, *Jail Journal*. <http://www.askaboutireland.ie/reading-room/digital-book-collection/digital-books-by-subject/irish-people/mitchel-jail-journal/>

¹³ John Mitchel, *ibid* p210

The agitation and excitement here still continue as violent as the newspapers and Anti-Convict Association can contrive to make them; but with all they can do there is evidently an abatement from the original fervour of anti-convict rage, though none whatever in the universal determination to adhere to the pledge, in its strictest letter, if Graaf Grey should ultimately order the convicts to be landed. Meanwhile we all await the Downing Street doom, and I, at least, with perfect equanimity and good humour.

It was on the 12th of October (three months ago yesterday), that the Eurydice frigate sailed out of this Bay bearing intelligence which was expected to elicit Lord Grey's final despatch; and it is therefore possible that the mystic packet of red-tape destiny is now off Madeira, or Ascension, or beating to windward near the coast of Brazil or scudding to leeward under close-reefed topsails in the latitude of Tristan d'Acunha. Or the ship may have gone down with the red-tape in her or the Eurydice herself may have been lost on her way home.

Ah ! miseram Eurydicen. Or the Ministry may have gone out, and the new Colonial Secretary will know nothing about it must have a correspondence with the 2 before he can decide anything; a few half years, more or less, will make little difference to a crew of convicts. Did ever human destiny hang before on so precarious a tape? As to the place we are likely to be sent to, if not landed here conjectures are numerous and wild. The favourite guess now seems to be that the Neptune is to make a beginning of a new penal colony in New Guinea, among the Papua cannibals. At the Cape, or at New Guinea, our reception promises to be equally hospitable here the people would give us nothing to eat there they would feed us indeed, but only to fatten us for their own tables. These are cheering speculations.

I have omitted to make a regular record of the "anti-convict movements "; for, in fact, there is so much sameness in them that I tire of reading the papers. The symptoms of a chronic disorder, being the same every morning, would not be interesting to read of. But from yesterday's Commercial Advertiser I will copy two letters, the reading of which, and consultation thereupon, formed part of the business of the Association at its last meeting:

Poor Laubscher lives in the district of Stellenbosch ; and the Association have simply referred him and his complaint to the local authorities, that is to the Stellenbosch Branch Association. The truth is, Mynheer Laubscher's account of himself is not satisfactory: he was bound, or his innocently sinful children were bound, to be sure they were not selling their sheaves to a traitor; and Adrian Beck is a well-known supplier of convicts and government: I know his name as the

name of a "bad member" months ago; and while I eat his bread and beef I denounce him as a traitor.

"SIR,

About the month of October last I sent three waggons of mine, with sheaves, to the town-market. On their arrival there a young man of colour came and offered my children a reasonable price (without mentioning what it was for); but when the bargain was closed, he would show where the waggons were to be unloaded.

The waggons were subsequently brought by that lad to New Street, behind the residence of Adrian Beck; and when they were unloaded, Adrian Beck made his appearance, and paid for the sheaves.

My children have, consequently, sinned innocently, because, as the bargain had been already concluded, and the best part of the sheaves delivered, they had no alternative.

But this had, however, the effect that my children were placed under the pledge, as also myself, with a wife and young children. This has gone to the extent that no one will buy from, or sell to them or me. And moreover, I have in consequence been summoned by one of my creditors, who, but for this occurrence, would not have done so.

I therefore beg leave to pray you, as chairman of the Anti-Convict Association, to bring my case before your meeting, and kindly to decide in my behalf, in order to prevent my total ruin. Expecting a favourable answer, I remain, etc.,"

WENTZEL PIETER LAUBSCHER."

**Letter to the Editor Commercial Advertiser by W.P. Laubscher.
The second of the two letters Mitchel refers to in his journal.**

John Mitchel, Jail Journal