

An Early Modern Entrepreneur: Hendrik Oostwald Eksteen and the Creation of Wealth in Dutch Colonial Cape Town, 1702–1741

GERALD GROENEWALD¹

Department of Historical Studies, University of Johannesburg²

This article uses the career of Hendrik Oostwald Eksteen at the Cape between 1702 and 1741 to illustrate the mechanisms free burghers could use to create wealth in an economically restrictive environment. By making use of the concept of entrepreneurship and its attendant issues, the article describes Eksteen's rise to fortune and prestige through his exploitation of a combination of economic opportunities afforded by Cape Town's position as a port servicing passing ships. Crucial to Eksteen's later success was his successful use of the opportunities provided by the monopolistic alcohol retail market at the Cape. Eksteen's initial success in this arena provided him with a capital base to pursue other opportunities in agriculture, fishing and meat provision, making him the wealthiest man at the Cape by the 1730s. The article also illustrates how Eksteen's upward mobility was linked to his use of social capital and the cultivation of large social networks through kinship. It demonstrates, furthermore, that economic success was wound up with social power and prestige. In using the biography of Eksteen, the article argues for the importance of economic history in the study of the early modern Cape, but calls also for a study which links economic developments with social and cultural ones through a focus on individual entrepreneurs. Shown, too, is the fact that the existing conception of the rise of a Cape gentry in the eighteenth-century needs to be revised to take into account the role of entrepreneurship, the urban foundations of wealth creation, as well as the role of the free black community in this process.

1 Gerald Groenewald studied at the University of Cape Town and teaches at the University of Johannesburg. He has published (with Nigel Worden) *Trials of Slavery, 1705-1794* (Cape Town, 2005), as well as several articles and essays on a wide variety of topics in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Cape history.

2 I am most grateful to Andrew Bank, Susan Newton-King, Grietjie Verhoef and Nigel Worden for their advice and comments on earlier drafts of this article which greatly improved the final product. They are of course not to be held responsible for what I have made of it.