

CHILDBIRTH-RELATED DEATHS AND THE INVENTORIES

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Introduction

What strange paths we are led on to where, on a particular day, strangers meet and history which has long been hidden from many can suddenly be revealed.

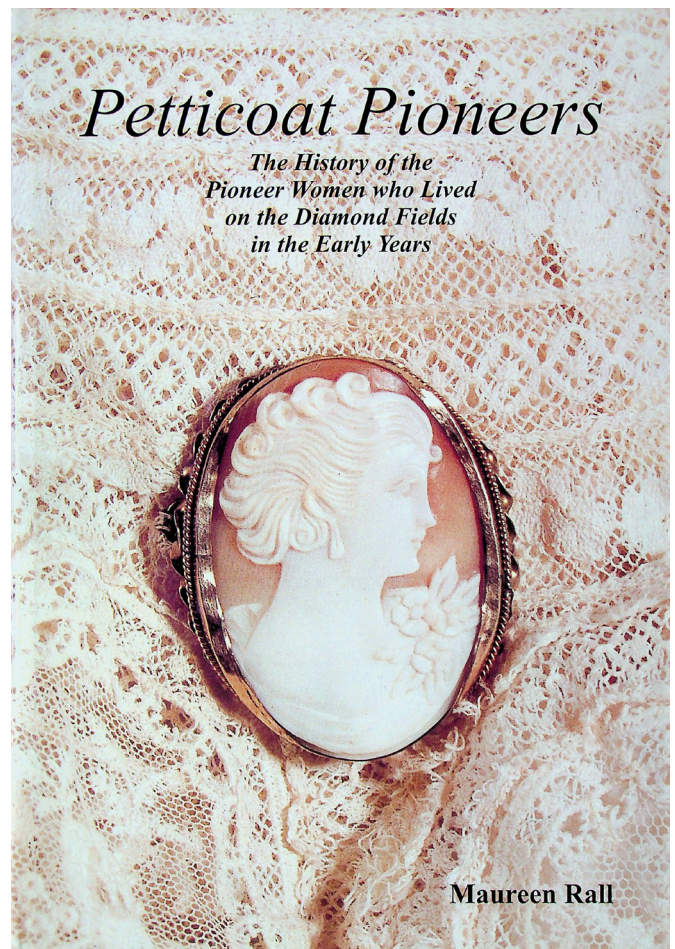
I have always felt that in some mysterious way my own path had been mapped out without my having too much of a choice. Exasperated by my total inability to fathom even the basics of accountancy, an irascible teacher took a hand. He told me that as I spent so much time reading, there was only one choice for me – librarianship. And so it was.

Kimberley's Petticoat Pioneers

After a peripatetic career at various libraries, I joined the staff of the Kimberley Africana Library in 1991. My life was now about to take an unexpected turn. One morning I came upon an old tin trunk stuffed with letters, diaries and notes written mostly by women. I transcribed all of these and my excitement was catching. From this beginning arose the Kimberley Africana Series. My *Petticoat Pioneers*, no. 5 of this series, celebrates the bravery and integrity of the women who followed their hearts and the dreams of their menfolk to this chimera of diamond wealth and “shared in the shaping of this sudden city”, as I put it in my dedication. But the stories of many of these women were inevitably filled with pain, as were those of the women who came to the Cape many years before them.

Their arrival on the diamond fields to join their husbands inevitably brought pregnancies and the attendant problems, with little available medical care or comforts to be had. Early burial records in meticulous copperplate script give matter of fact descriptions of death during childbirth or of puerperal fever. Diaries attest to the fact that motherless children were taken care of by aunts or grandmothers, some of whom came to the diamond fields for the specific purpose of taking on this burden. Often older siblings had the responsibility of rearing the younger family members.

Kimberley's Pioneer, Dutoitspan and Gladstone cemeteries abound with pitifully small graves. Mothers and children often shared a resting place; 22 year old Catherine Dougherty, who died on 15 October 1875, lies with her daughter, still-born on 13 October.



The dust jacket was the inspiration of identical twins, one of whom was at the time First Librarian of the Africana Library and the other a curator at the National Museum in Bloemfontein. A cameo mounted on a delicate piece of lace in subtle colours is the epitome of femininity.

Cape Town calls – a new phase of my life

Family ties brought my husband and I to Cape Town and my daughter persuaded me apply for a vacant position on a team tasked with transcribing the inventories of the Orphan Chamber at the Cape of Good Hope covering the years 1673 to 1834, known as TEPC (Transcriptions of Estate Papers at the Cape).

Of the history of the VOC I knew nothing at all. I had not studied Afrikaans-Nederlands, although I read Flemish and Dutch literature for my own pleasure and Afrikaans, my other home language, had after all its origins in 18th century Dutch. I appeared before an august panel, after having been handed a vast volume opened at a page of to me illegible Gothic script and asked to transcribe it. To my utter astonishment I was appointed, and two days later there began a new phase of my life which has brought me much joy and a great deal of enlightenment.

What the inventories revealed

The day after joining the team in the Cape Archives, my eye caught a familiar name: Jacques Pinard. This inventory was much shorter than the one I had transcribed the day before and listed only the bare basics needed for farming and caring for a family. I was home! Jacques Pinard (who soon became Jacobus Pienaar in this Dutch community) was a Huguenot refugee who arrived at the Cape in 1688 and was the progenitor of my father's side of my family. Indeed, quite a few of my cousins still bear various forms of the name Jacques. He settled on a farm in Drakenstein where several French families had already found a home.

MOOC8/1.30

Vorie, Esther
16971122

Esther Vorie
22 November 1697

Inventaris en tacxatie der goederen van de overledene vrijborgeresse tot **Drakenstein** Esther Vorie, nagelaten ten voordeelen van haar egte man Jaque Pinard ter eener; en

haar twee kinderen gen:t	Pieter oud 7 en Jaque oud 5 jaren	ter anderen sijde
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soo als deselve bij den boedelhouder voorn:t sijn opgegeven en bij de E:E: Weesm:ren sijn aangenomen, bestaande in meenigte en prijs als volgd, namentlijk

	f	f
Een stuk land, leggende over de Berg Revier onder het gebied van Drakenstein , waar op een kleijn huijsjen tot woning, met weinig bouwgereetschap, waar op gesaaid is 5 mudd: tarw en 1/2 mudd: rog, staat alle slegt, gestelt op		700
20 p:s beesten, kleijn en groot, waar onder verscheijden heele oude beesten, et p:s f24		480
2 p:s paarden, een oude met een jong paard, et p:s f50		100
1 weijning huijsraadt		50
Somma		f1330
Voorsz: boedel is schuldig als volgd, te weten		
aan d' E: Comp:e	312	
aan Gabriel de Roe	82	
aan Antonij de Roe	105	
aan Jan Cruijwagen	112	
aan Fransois du Toij	30	
Somma		f641
Dese voorn: lasten des boedels ten bedragen van f641 van de bovengenoemde f1330 afgetrokken sijnde; blijft het nette dees boedels, ten bedragen van		f689

Aldus geïnventariseert en geprijseert ter Weeskamer aan Caap de Goede Hoop den 22:en November a:o 1697.

Jacque Pinard

In kennisse van mij: A: Coopman, Secret:s

Inventory of Jacques Pinard (MOOC8/1.30)

The very next day a great shout arose from the table in front of me. A fellow new appointee who had witnessed my excitement the day before had met his progenitor, Jacobus Faassen, who was rather more

prosperous than mine, and of Dutch origin. For two total strangers to be granted such unexpected grace within two days can surely only have been brought about by a nudge from beyond.

Stories locked into the inventories

What can one hope to discover among the bare bones of inventories? A surprising amount of information about life at the Cape in the 18th and 19th centuries lurks within the formulaic, and on the face of it boring, lists of belongings of the recently dead.

Once you have learned to negotiate your way around the language and the script, it immediately becomes obvious that there were a considerable number of extremely wealthy people at the Cape who lived in great style. Many owned farms as well as town houses, lavishly equipped with furniture fashioned from exotic hardwoods from the East as well as the local yellow-wood and stinkwood. There were carpets from far-flung regions on the trade route. On the walls were family portraits or other paintings and mirrors in elegant frames.

In glaring contrast to the extravagant lifestyles of the elite, many people at the Cape lived and died in abject poverty, owning little more than the clothes on their backs. Some of the farmers granted land by the VOC had the bare minimum of equipment to develop it. It was expected of them to deliver tithes of wheat or other produce to the Company and adverse conditions often prohibited this. Large families lived on very little and suffered great deprivation. In later years, as the interior opened up, it seems that many people lived in their ox-wagons. Their inventories list only livestock, the usual feather bed, a bucket or two, a few tin plates, forks and spoons, iron pots and perhaps a veld-stool.

The inventories, despite the stilted officialise, reveal that human nature has remained immutable. There was avarice and cruelty, love and kindness, brooding resentment and deep despair. Locked into the inventories are stories of the tragedies which befell these long-dead people.

One of the saddest that I encountered was that of a young farmer, Jan Hendrik Coetzee and his wife, Hester Brits, who committed suicide, leaving a nine-year old son. Their inventory shows that they owned nothing but a basin, two tin plates, a spoon, a fork, a feather bed, three pillows, 100 sheep, 30 goats, two old horses and a rifle. No mention is made of the fate of the child. The estate would have been auctioned by the Orphan Chamber to raise money for the boy, but as the auctioneer's fee came to 42:1 rix dollars, this could not have been a great deal.

High death rate of young women in childbirth

Exposed to these documents for five days a week, as time passed each member of the team developed a special interest in different aspects of the society of the time.

My own attention was caught by the exceptionally high death rate of young women in childbirth or shortly thereafter, probably of puerperal fever, leaving husbands to cope with young families. In a sad little letter, a young Stellenbosch farmer begged the Orphan Chamber to defer his journey to Cape Town to settle his affairs, as his wife had died giving birth and the baby was only four days old.

In 1817 two young unmarried women in outlying areas died in childbirth. Their inventories reveal that they owned good clothes and some jewellery. It would appear that the men who recorded their property may have been the fathers. It could well be that there was no minister available to marry the parents or baptise the children. Poignantly, the inventory of one of the young women lists a trunk containing an entire layette lovingly prepared for the baby. The inventory of the other young woman notes that the baby had died, unbaptised, five days after her mother.

The tragedies of these deaths prompted me to undertake a detailed analysis of these women, their spouses, the number of children born to them, the date of the official inventory and, where possible, the date of the

first inventory, which was carried out by family, friends or the field-cornet of the district in which they lived. The date of birth or the age of the child at the time of the official inventory was noted, and the death date of the mother if given, as was the name of the farm or town and the district in which they resided. Finally, personal details were recorded, and where possible the age of the deceased at the time of death. However, not all the names which appeared in the inventories could be found in the published genealogies. I also used church records to research marriages and baptisms, as well as death registers (see Appendix 1).

Despite the incomplete records, certain trends emerged:

- Many deaths occurred when the first child was born, and these mothers tended to be very young. It was not uncommon to find that their ages varied between 16 and 19 years, and one of them was only 14. Of all the deaths recorded, 217 (34.2%) were first confinements.
- Families tended to be large, and it was not uncommon that women who were only in their thirties or early forties had given birth to numerous children. The largest family recorded numbered 13 and the mother died aged 43.
- Far more deaths were recorded in the outlying areas than in Cape Town. There were a number of reasons for this, the most obvious being that there were doctors as well as trained midwives in Cape Town, whereas in the far-flung districts medical help was very limited. There were few physicians, among them the district surgeon of Graaff Reinet, Johann Friedrich Häszner, who was to contribute greatly to our understanding of the circumstances surrounding so many of these unnecessary and devastating tragedies.

There were of course deaths in Cape Town, too, childbirth being hazardous at the best of times, and even the elite were not exempt. The first example concerns Baroness Cornelia van Rheede van Oudtshoorn. She was born on 20th October 1740 and married Johan Anthonij Thierens in Cape Town on 14th December 1765. She died in childbirth on 13th November 1771. The other death in the family was that of Susanna Margaretha van Schoor, who was baptised in Cape Town on 19th July 1750. She married Baron Willem Ferdinand van Rheede van Oudtshoorn in Cape Town on 26th March 1774 and died in childbirth on 19th September 1776.

It became very clear that women living at the Cape and environs stood a much better chance of survival than those farther afield during the years 1720 to 1834. The records show that during this period the Cape District (which included Piketberg and Wijnberg) accounted for 37 deaths. Drakenstein, the home of the Huguenots, recorded only 19. This may be ascribed to the fact that they had among their number a trained physician, Jean Prieur du Plessis.

In Stellenbosch where the deceased numbered 52, there were also two Huguenot physicians, Jean du Rand and Paul le Febre. But moving further afield where there was little or no medical help, Swellendam lost 119 souls and Graaff Reinet 105, in spite of the efforts of Dr. Häszner.

Häszner's important contribution

Documents found in the MOOC 14 series reveal a surprisingly high incidence of physical defects, insanity and epilepsy, and blindness occurs in more than one member of certain families. The question arises whether only bad midwifery could be blamed, or whether genetics or inbreeding could have played a role. Johann Friedrich Häszner's important unpublished medical treatise forms part of this series.

Häszner was born in Breslau, Silesia, Germany in 1764 and arrived at the Cape on board the *Spaarenrijk* in 1785. He was initially employed by the VOC as handyman, then as third surgeon in the hospital, after which he practised at Paarl as district surgeon before his appointment as district surgeon of Graaff-Reinet, a position he held until 1795. His medical treatise was written in atrocious handwriting in 1793 while he was stationed there.

He especially admired Aeschylus, who had found that medicine was under the tyranny of the most despicable and deceitful superstitions, and agreed that the only way to get rid of the old idols was to discover the simplest sources of health and to teach the people accordingly. He intended to follow this renowned physician and not to excuse any practises, lifestyles and treatment of illnesses that had been proven to be detrimental.

In “Nederlands” Africa, people also made much use of herbs, plants, roots, etc. which were credited with a particular efficacy if they were worn around the neck, on the chest, on or under the arms or around the legs to protect children from fits, ease the discomfort of teething, heal epilepsy, and still others which had the power to cause people to fall in love and other such ridiculous foolishness.

The more I can in my practise restore the general useful rudiments and teach these to them without expecting from them the particular education demanded from physicians, and having often found that complete and prolonged help in illnesses rests upon such things and hardly needs the help of a physician and only depends upon lifestyle ...

And this he proceeded to do with gusto, compiling a treatise which consists of 40 chapters and covers every conceivable known illness and its treatment (see Appendix 2). Häszner wrote passionately about the dire circumstances under which people lived and the terrible ignorance which caused unnecessary suffering and death. He was a very graphic writer and the symptoms of rabies, poison by Bushman arrow, snakebite and plants, smallpox and other life-threatening conditions are so vividly described that no illustration is necessary.

Chapter 25 is devoted to women’s ailments, and given my interest in childbirth-related deaths, I read it with interest. The chapter goes into some detail concerning menstruation, pregnancy, miscarriage, confinement and the dire consequences of women in labour being attended by ill-informed so-called midwives and of course, the dreaded childbed or puerperal fever.

At the heart of Häszner’s philosophy lay his abhorrence of ignorance, superstition and laziness and he did not mince his words.

Under the heading, About Menstruation, lifestyle was at the root of the problem. He blamed a sedentary life, a bad diet which featured salted meats such as biltong, beef and lamb and salted fish, sharp spices such as chilis which are used in chutney, sambals, curries and other spicy dishes; also the imbibing of strong drinks such as chocolate, coffee, tea, wine and brandy, as well as excessive tiredness, strong emotions, etc. He warned that if a girl at this time of her life remained sitting indoors, did not get out into the fresh air, did not engage in activities which kept the body in complete motion, she would weaken and remain small and delicate of stature. Such was the lot of a large number of unhappy women who, either as a result of too much indulgence or confined circumstances in this dangerous time of life, lacked the benefit of movement and fresh air. He recommended movement, especially on horseback, healthy food as well as cheerful company and all kinds of innocent amusements. But he did not neglect to give recipes for such remedies as were available:

Among the innumerable blessings with which the Great Architect has honoured us and which is conducive to the promotion of our happiness, the procreation of our lineage is probably the greatest and most mysterious.

Thus Dr. Häszner commences the section, On Pregnancy, and then proceeds:

Most pregnant women begin their pregnancies subject to nausea and vomiting, especially in the morning. Headaches and heartburn are also trying occurrences. Heartburn usually lasts only for a few months, but some women experience this until the first or second day after their delivery.

... but these complaints ... can be relieved by bleeding or gentle laxatives, such as a few figs and a handful of raisins boiled with a bottle of water and then strained through a cloth; however there is no better remedy than white magnesium, which does not only absorb acid, but is also a laxative.

Häsner warned that every pregnant woman was in some danger of suffering a miscarriage. He advised women of a weak constitution that in order to prevent miscarriage, they should eat solid food, drink little tea, coffee and other liquids, and not sit in front of a roaring stove all the time. The danger of miscarriage could be avoided by going to bed and rising early, avoiding damp houses, getting as much exercise in the fresh air without tiring themselves and never going out in damp and misty weather, especially barefoot, if they could prevent this.

In the section, About Confinement, Dr. Häsner's irritation and contempt are palpable; ink blots abound and at times his quill pen digs deep into the paper. I quote him verbatim:

Loafers and vagabonds, etc., as soon as they are bankrupt or are too lazy to work, cannot think of a better way to survive than to pass themselves off as medicine-men or witch doctors. The same goes for our midwives. The number of women murdered by bad treatment, the number of children who lose their lives in the birth process because of wrong and ignorant treatment, or one can justly say have been murdered, the number of the former would far exceed those who died of illnesses and of the latter that they enter the world either dying or dead ...

One is sometimes astonished that women who have had an easy and fast delivery die within hours or days. This can be ascribed to the use of dangerous medicaments, and the manual removal of the afterbirth, which most of the time cause deadly infections of the uterus.

Häsner went into considerable detail about the symptoms and deadly effects of puerperal fever. He considered that to a large extent ignorance and ill-treatment by self-appointed midwives were responsible for the death of the patient and the untold misery of the husbands and children who were left behind.

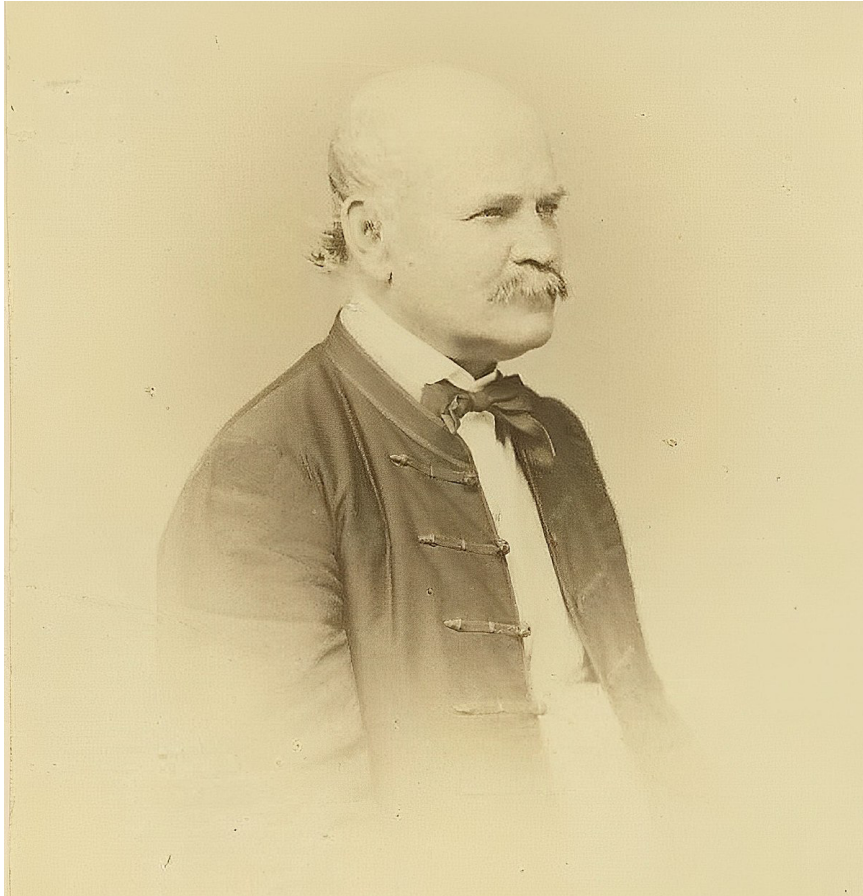
The real killer was something quite different. On 15 May 1850, thirty years after Häsner's death, a Jewish Hungarian obstetrician named Ignaz Semmelweis addressed a meeting of the Vienna Medical Society in which he announced his important discovery: that the spreading of infections could be prevented by the simple act of washing the hands. This was met with a scepticism which lasted for years.

Semmelweis then began exhorting his fellow physicians at the Vienna General Hospital to wash their hands before examining women who were about to deliver babies. This would help to prevent a deadly malady known as childbed or puerperal fever. In the mid-19th century about five in 1 000 women died in deliveries performed by midwives at home, while when doctors working at the best maternity hospitals in Europe and America performed deliveries, the maternal death rate was often 10 to 20 times higher. The cause was invariably puerperal fever. The symptoms recorded by Häsner in 1793 were exactly the same.

The reason for these deaths are clear. Medical students and their professors started the day by performing bare-handed autopsies on women who had died of puerperal fever the day before and then went on to examine the women who were in labour. Semmelweis made the vital connection that puerperal fever was caused by doctors transferring some kind of "morbid poison" from the dissected corpses in the autopsy room to the women in the delivery room.

Dr. Semmelweis's insistence on clean hands for deliveries found a reverberation in this country where Häsner had agonised about the same deadly killer. The author, W.A. de Klerk, once owner of the farm Klein Drakenstein, wrote a moving play, *Die Verterende Vuur (The Devouring Fire)* about this far-sighted doctor's crusade against the toxic practices of his colleagues.¹

¹ I owe this information to my literary husband who obtained his Ph.D. in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology of the University of Stellenbosch medical school at Tygerberg Hospital and reminded me of "Bill" de Klerk's play.



Dr. Ignaz Semmelweis, aged 42 in 1860, photograph by Borsos és Doctor

HÄSZNER'S FINAL YEARS

When Häszner left the employ of the VOC he went on to manage the warm baths at Caledon from 1804, which he did very successfully.



A sketch by William Burchell of the bath cum guest house built by Dr. Häszner at Caledon in the Overberg. The water rose from the hill behind the buildings. The chimney indicates where the kitchen was situated. A row of poplars decorated the landscape. (William J. Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*, London, 1822, p. 83)

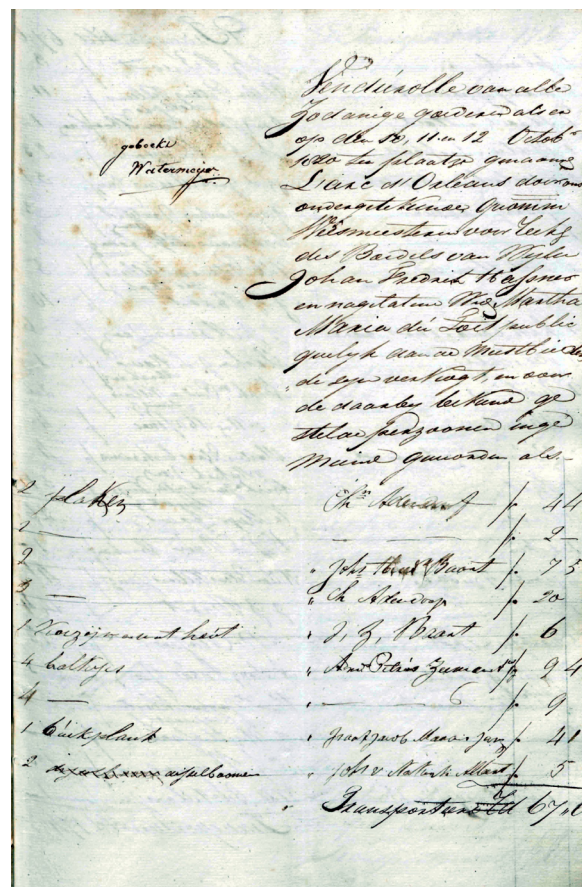
At the time of his death at the age of 56 on Sunday 20th August 1820, his inventory showed that he had amassed a considerable amount of property. According to their joint will dated 10th September 1817, his heirs were:

- his second wife, Martha Maria du Toit,
- the two children by his first wife Jacoba Elisabeth Ackerman, namely Alida Jacoba Carolina, married to a major in the Cape Regiment, Donald McNeil, and Jan Fredrik Donald Häszner, 11 years old,
- and the two children from the current marriage, Johanna Elisabeth, 2 years and 3 months old and Jacoba Fredrica Häszner 1 year and 3 months.

Properties listed were:

- a farm named l'Arc d' Orleans in Drakenstein on the Wemmers Hoek River,
- a piece of quitrent farmland adjacent to this measuring 11 morgen and 394 square roods and
- a piece of quitrent land of 75 morgen and 297 square roods;
- a homestead on the loan farm in Zacharias Hoek on the Wemmers Hoek River annexed to the above farm;
- a homestead on the loan farm Boebezaks Kraal situated in Saldanha Bay beyond the Patrys Berg.

The homestead on l'Arc d' Orleans was obviously a very busy establishment and there were more than 50 slaves listed in the inventory to help keep this enterprise alive.



First page of the auction roll of the estate of Johan Fredrik Hassner (written as such) and his widow Martha Maria du Toit, dated 10, 11 and 12 October 1820 held on L'Arc d' Orleans (MOOC10/36.29)

And so we take leave of a remarkable man who did as much as he was able to relieve the lot of so many women who would otherwise have been doomed to join the ranks of those who left the world far too young and ill-equipped to survive the vicissitudes of giving birth in an untamed country with little knowledge and much ignorance.

How sad it is that someone who cared so deeply about children, was not privileged to see his own children, except for his eldest daughter, grow to maturity. But perhaps he has been granted the grace to carry on teaching the ignorant in his abode above this sad world.

Conclusion

Childbirth-related deaths have occurred for as long as mankind has existed and it needed exceptional people to try and overcome this tragedy. Häszner and Semmelweis were two of these. They had much in common, including their irascible natures and their determination. I would like to believe that these two gentlemen had much to discuss when they met in the realm they now inhabit.

References

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 - 1.2 MOOC 6/2: Death Registers
 - 1.3 VC 6/3/2: Baptism registers
 - 1.4 MOOC 14: Estate accounts
 - 1.5 MOOC 14/34: Johann Friedrich Häszner: *Huijslijk Geneeskundig Handboek*, transcribed by Maureen Rall
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