

Childbirth-related deaths and the Inventories

Maureen Rall

2020 UCT Summer School course lecture
Friday 25 January at 9.15 am

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. At the beginning of my matric year I was still dithering, when fate, in the guise of an irascible teacher took a hand. Exasperated by my total inability to fathom even the basics of accountancy, he told me that as I spent so much time reading, there was only one choice for me – librarianship.

And so it was. I worked in many kinds of libraries, in various places, including the Jagger library, and even did a stint cataloguing a Police Department library in Michigan, before the Kimberley Africana Library opened its elegant Victorian doors and the warm hearts of colleagues who would become lifelong friends.

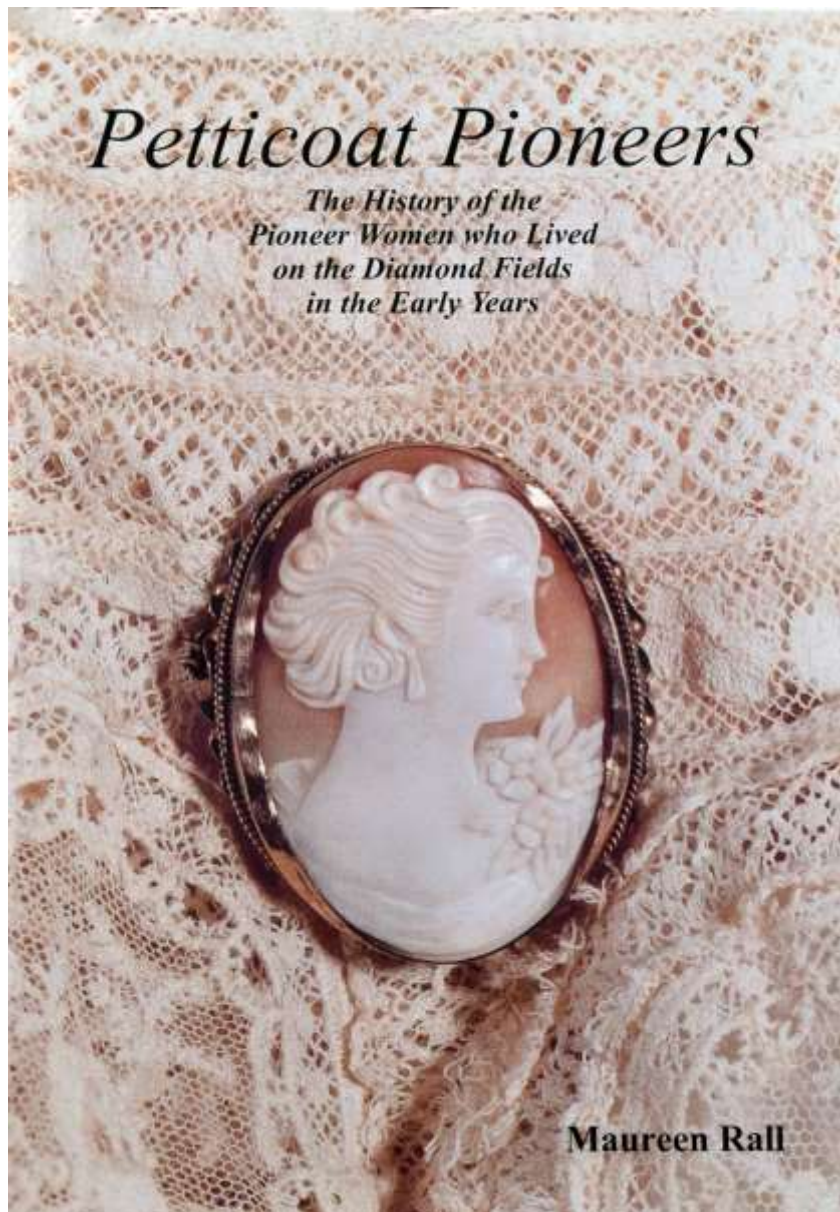


Africana Library Kimberley

My life was now about to take an unexpected turn. One morning, in what used to be the librarian's office many years before, I came upon an old tin trunk stuffed with letters, diaries and notes written mostly by women, and I was hooked. I transcribed all of these, many discoloured with age, often very difficult to read and my excitement

was catching. From this beginning arose the Kimberley Africana Series, a limited edition, illustrated with photographs, newspaper clippings and paintings by contemporary artists, for which the library became justifiably famous. Sir Harry Oppenheimer, who was a very generous patron, always received No. 1 of the leather-bound and gilt-edged Special Edition.

My own *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”. The dust jacket of the standard edition 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 epitomy of femininity. Judge Leo van den Heever, a redoubtable member of the fairer sex who wrote the foreword, found the book “doubly interesting, because it also incidentally, not stridently, reflects the beginnings of the so-called

liberation of women.” But the stories of many of these women are 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. A considerable number of 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.

Children were especially vulnerable to the rampant diseases and the searing heartache of losing a child, sometimes two or three in a few weeks or months, was the lot of many a mother. The Pioneer, Dutoitspan and Gladstone cemeteries abound with pitifully small graves. A visit to the Pioneer Cemetery on a blustery winter morning revealed neglected graves, many of them in a sad state of dilapidation, too many attesting to brief lives. Indeed very few of those buried there were accorded their threescore and ten years. 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.

At that time of course I had no inkling that I was being set on a new path where, ultimately, the fate of other women in an earlier harsh and unknown country would come to occupy a great part of my life. The time had come to retire and leave the barren thorn-veld where so many hopes and dreams of so many women lie buried and step back three hundred years, to encounter what?

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).

How I had the temerity to apply, goodness knows. The only history I had studied after school was that of Art, Music and Literature. 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 was always amazed that the meaning of Old English poetry, so different from Middle English let alone modern English, which was part of my English curriculum, became quite clear to me if I thought in Afrikaans. Gothic script to me meant the beautiful illuminated manuscripts that the history of art brought to mind. Not that any of this crossed my mind when 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.

I must have inadvertently made out a few words, because 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. I trust that over the years I may have helped people in their quests for knowledge of the history of their families,

not a few of them living scattered across the globe, and a deeper understanding of the plight of the women who were thrust onto the shores of this dark continent, many of them poor, illiterate, marrying far too young, bearing children in dire circumstances and ultimately dying far too soon, leaving young children.

And so I became one of a small but dedicated group of people, totally committed to opening up an unknown world which would enthral, enlighten and ultimately sear our hearts with pity for all the losses which would have to be borne in this unknown and unforgiving land.

On 5 December 2004, the day after joining the team, after battling with quite a lengthy inventory of the belongings of someone who had clearly been a prosperous farmer, my eye caught a familiar name: Jacques Pinard. This inventory was much shorter and listed 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.

I have little recollection of what my reaction may have been, but it brought all my new colleagues to my side, marvelling at my good fortune. However, 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. Sadly, Kobus died suddenly a few years ago, but I remember him with warmth as a very caring human being, willing to stand up for his convictions.

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 was 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 do not mention a house

or furniture – 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. From the introductions to the inventories, notes scribbled in margins, last wills and testaments and the occasional letter, a picture emerges of the frailties of those early settlers. 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.

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 listed 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 and so many others which kept cropping up in the inventories, 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.

De Villiers and Pama, *Genealogies of old South African Families*, Heese and Lombard, *South African Genealogies* and Malherbe, *Family Register of the South African Nation* were used to ascertain dates of birth and/or baptism, marriage, and where given, the date of death. However, not all the names which appeared in the inventories could be found in the genealogies, partly because de Villiers and Pama did not cover the entire period and the Heese and Lombard work was not yet complete. I

also used church records to research marriages and baptisms, as well as death registers.

It must be borne in mind that the table that I eventually drew up, covering 57 pages, does not purport to be exact, as there were too many particulars which could not be found in the available sources. The inventories seldom mention children who had predeceased the mother, so to all intents and purposes she could have given birth to more children than indicated. It also happened that a woman died when the last child was around two years of age. As the gap between siblings tended to be about two years, it could very well be that mother and child had both died when she was giving birth. These cases were not included in the table which I drew up, because the official inventory was often taken much later than the death occurred, sometimes up to two years after the event.

Nevertheless, 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, Johan 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. I came across two entries in Heese and Lombard's *South African Genealogies* which illustrate this. Two deaths in childbirth befell a very prominent family at the Cape:

The first concerned *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.

After trawling through the various documents pertaining to deaths in childbirth during years 1720 to 1834, it became very clear that women living at the Cape and environs stood a much better chance of survival than those farther afield. 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 the deceased numbered 52 but, moving further afield, Swellendam lost 119 souls and Graaff Reinet 105, in spite of the efforts of Dr. Häszner.

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, so that the question arises whether only bad midwifery could be blamed, or whether inbreeding could have played a role. Johan Friedrich Häszner's important unpublished medical treatise, written in atrocious handwriting in 1793 while he was district surgeon of Graaff-Reinet, forms part of this series. Entitled *Huijslijk geneeskundige handboek voor de ingezetenen van Nederlands Africa*, his treatise was dedicated to Johannes Isaac Rhenius, governor of the Cape of Good Hope



Johan Isaac Rhenius (1750 – 27 July 1808), Cape official and acting Governor of the Cape Colony between 1791 and 1792

at the time and was accompanied by a letter in which he explained why he had taken the liberty of placing before him the fruit of his labours, albeit being of little worth, as having been written to the best of his ability.

His aim, he went on to say, was the promotion of the welfare of the community, and that he could not dedicate it to a better person than His Honour, the father of this settlement, who was so interested in the welfare of his fellowman and whose greatest pleasure was to do good to others.

It was signed:

Jean Frederik Häszner

Graaffe Rijnette

1793.

In the introduction he mentioned Aeschylus, Pliny and Mithridatus as though they were old acquaintances, but he especially admired Aeschylus who had found that medicine was under the tyranny of the most despicable superstitions: there were herbs which could dry up rivers and lakes, others which, if sprinkled on enemies, could put them to flight. There were herbs which Persian kings gave their envoys which could open the portals of any fortification, others which could beget virtuous and happy children. He found this misguided people to be the victims of public deceit and history, and he considered 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, Häszner, intended to follow this renowned physician and not to excuse any practises, lifestyles and treatment of illnesses that had been proven to be detrimental.

As Aeschylus had found medicine to be under the tyranny of the most despicable superstitions, the same could be said of the country districts of his “Nederlands” Africa. Here 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 them 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. Häszner wrote passionately about the dire circumstances under which people lived and the terrible ignorance which caused unnecessary suffering and death. But who was Häszner and where did he come from?

This extraordinary man arrived at the Cape from Breslau, Silesia, in Germany on board the *Spaarenrijk*. He was initially employed by the VOC as a handyman, then as third surgeon in the hospital and then practised in Paarl before his appointment as district surgeon of Graaff-Reinet, where his experiences led to the compilation of his medical treatise. Häszner 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.

He started off by giving a brief explanation of what he had set out to do:

“To make this work more useful and at times more pleasant for the more informed, I had to use the simpler description of harmful lifestyle and prevention, illnesses, etc. by which they are known, but I took care to give the real name of the illnesses, medication, etc. at the outset. I have given for many of the illnesses, apart from lifestyle, some of the simplest and more approved medicines, with the necessary precautions to prepare them with safety.

“The measurement of draughts I have prescribed in four pints, bottles, bowls, teacups, wine glasses, spoons.

“The boiling of draughts and other medicaments, because not everyone possesses a clock, I have instead of hours, half hours or quarters of an hour, given instructions to reduce them to half, a third and a quarter.

“All the medicaments which are described in each chapter for a specific illness, as well as their preparation I have, to make it more comprehensible and to prevent mistakes, added at the end of the work in a list where anyone who wishes to use the work effectively, can see which medicaments he needs and also how they can be prepared.

“It pains me that I cannot read the pulses of these people or at least indicate the regularity or irregularity thereof. I have, however attempted to make it comprehensible to them.

“To those who are battling with a wasting or other dangerous illnesses, I have given the advice that they go to knowledgeable physicians and consult them.”

Häszner’s treatise did indeed cover most known illnesses, and he subdivided each chapter under different headings, the last two chapters being devoted to a table of medicines and recipes for decoctions, so that, if it had been published at the time of writing, it could have benefited at least those who could read.

Chapter 25 is devoted to women’s ailments, and given my interest in childbirth-related deaths, I read it with interest. He began the chapter by saying that, although women were subject to all the illnesses that he had already written about and that he would write about in future, they were, because of their sex, subject to yet other discomforts. These could certainly not be called illnesses, but because of the delicacy of their gender the wrong treatment which is sometimes used for these conditions became the source of innumerable catastrophes and afflictions. 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, Häszner mentioned that this usually commenced at the age of about fourteen, but in the case of idle, sedentary girls often some years later. It ceased at about the age of fifty, which two periods were therefore the most dangerous of their lives. At the onset of menstruation prudence was of the utmost importance, as the health and happiness of any woman depended on her behaviour at that time.

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. If her blood was not properly regulated, she would appear pale, yellow and wretched; her mental health

and energy would become depleted and for the rest of her life she would be sickly. 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.

Among the most common causes of illness among young girls and women in what he calls “ons Nederlands Africa” was the habit of drinking tea and coffee, and sitting in front of the fire, which would enervate them even more. A melancholy disposition was very detrimental to girls of this age. One seldom saw a lively, cheerful girl who did not enjoy good health. However, he went on to say, excessive cold was also detrimental, and advised against walking barefoot in cold or wet weather, which was common there, and sitting on cold stones or flagstones instead of chairs. Likewise emotions such as anxiety, fear, sadness and anger, which had an influence on all parts of the body, should be guarded against.

All the above could cause amenorrhoea, which should be treated as soon as possible, for which 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.

Menorrhagia, or excessive bleeding, on the other hand, also caused distress. The sufferer became pale, lost her appetite, her feet became swollen and dropsy often followed. Lifestyle once more was, according to Dr. Häszner, 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. In an age when there was no such thing as refrigeration, it is hardly surprising that meat and fish were pickled. And in a country where many people were of eastern origin, curries, chutney, sambals and other spicy dishes had become part of a cuisine which remains popular to this day. Who can tackle the day without a good cup of coffee or tea. As for wine, viticulture has been an important part of South African culture since the very early days.

Häszner suggested that in order to stem the excessive flow of blood, the patient should lie in bed with her feet raised, and be wrapped in sheets soaked in a few bottles of vinegar mixed with half a bucket of water, which had to be changed as soon as they became warm. However, if nothing helped, the patient should sit in a bath of cold water, the first time for no longer than about thirty seconds, the next time somewhat longer, depending on the strength and circumstances of the sufferer. She should eat light meals, such as calf or chicken soup with or without bread. There followed a recipe for whey made by bringing to the boil half a bucket to which is added a small amount (three knife-points) of alum. For pain he recommended thirty or forty drops of Hoffman’s pain-killer in half a glass of milk or wine.

About pregnancy

“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 this part of the chapter, 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”, he says, “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.”

About miscarriage

Häszner warned that every pregnant woman was in some danger of suffering a miscarriage. This she should take into account with the utmost prudence so that it did not only weaken her constitution, but in future expose her to the same misfortune again. A miscarriage could occur during the whole period of pregnancy, but it mostly happened in the second or third month, sometimes also in the fourth or fifth.

The usual causes of a miscarriage were the death of the foetus, weakness or slackening of the uterus, diarrhoea, strong movement, vomiting, coughing, fits, beating or bumping against the stomach, falling, fevers, a surplus of blood, idleness and lack of movement, a too lavish or too poor lifestyle, sitting in front of fires and strong emotions such as anxiety, fright, sorrow, anger, etc.

The symptoms of an approaching miscarriage were pain in the loins or in the lower abdomen, a dull pain and heaviness on the inner side of the thighs, nausea, palpitations, and the uterus expelling blood or a watery liquid.

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; doing so, coupled with a sedentary and somnolent lifestyle were the true causes of the miscarriages which were so common among a fairly large number of women in this country. 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.

Women with a full and strong constitution should be moderate in their use of food; they should eat nothing but vegetables and herbs. Furthermore a pregnant woman should always be kept in a cheerful and calm state of mind. All violent emotions endangered the life of her foetus and could cause a miscarriage.

As soon as there were any signs of an impending miscarriage, the woman should lie on a bed with her head low and keep herself as quiet and calm as possible. All her clothes should be loosened and she should not be covered with counterpanes or blankets, but much rather with a thin sheet or coverlet. Her nourishment should be bread or rusks soaked in water, milk with rice, barley and suchlike.

Should her strength allow and a lot of blood has not been lost by heavy bleeding, one should immediately bleed ten ounces from the arm. Should she begin to bleed heavily, bedsheets folded in half and soaked in cold water must be placed over her abdomen and repeated as often as they started to dry. If this did not suffice, a bottle of red wine or vinegar could be poured into a bucket and used in the prescribed manner. Her drink should be barley or rice water with lemon juice. Every three hours she should be given a good knife-point of finely ground potassium nitrate with ten drops of Hoffman's pain-killer in a cup of barley water. If plagued by diarrhoea or vomiting she should be given bread soaked in water with a little ground cinnamon. This would seldom fail to achieve the objective.

One should not, however, after every prescribed precaution to prevent miscarriage had been taken, discourage pregnant women from carrying out their usual business. It could even have the direct opposite effect. Lack of exercise did not only weaken the body, but often caused a large excess of fluid and these were the two main causes of miscarriage.

About confinement

In this section of the chapter Dr. Häszner'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. For the most part those who have given birth to two or three children consider themselves midwives, apart from the great number of Hottentots, half-breed Hottentots and slave women who are employed for the delivery of female Hottentots and slaves. 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 ...

“People always say that necessity is the mother of invention, and this I admit, but necessity does not mean that one can attempt an occupation of which you have no knowledge and on which the lives of two people depend, just as you would not give a watch to be repaired by someone who is not a watch-maker. He knows that it is a watch and sees how it is made, but does not know where it is broken or how to repair it. The same applies to our midwives. She sees the body, the opening which nature made for us to enter the world, but about the internal structure where there is a lack of strong contractions knows nothing, and then by the use of harmful medicines has still not meddled enough. She has the appellation of midwife and sets to work encouraging such poor creatures to ill-timed efforts, then should contractions weaken or cease, she tries to strengthen them by the use of even more destructive medicaments. She cannot imagine that nature can do without her help. However, when the labour is long and difficult, in order to prevent infection, a small basin of blood can be drawn from an arm or a foot or an enema administered. Should the natural process of birth be delayed, a physician or qualified midwife must be called in as soon as possible. However, in the greater part of Nederlands Africa this is

impossible, as most of the inhabitants of the outlying districts are without doctors and even if they were available, many of them would, out of foolish modesty, or not wanting to offend the old woman attending her, or as often happens, when such patients are treated in a barbaric fashion, the midwives refuse to call in a doctor, as they do not want to be called to account and such poor creatures, both mother and child, must then end their lives under the cruellest treatment and pain.

“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, etc: which most of the time cause deadly infections of the uterus. These unnecessary deaths can be prevented if one or two competent women in each district could receive instruction from a qualified midwife and then teach other women, including slaves or Hottentots who show an interest. Many babies whose necks were broken because of ignorance or rough treatment, could have have lived to give happiness to parents and whole families, and grow up to be useful members of the community.”

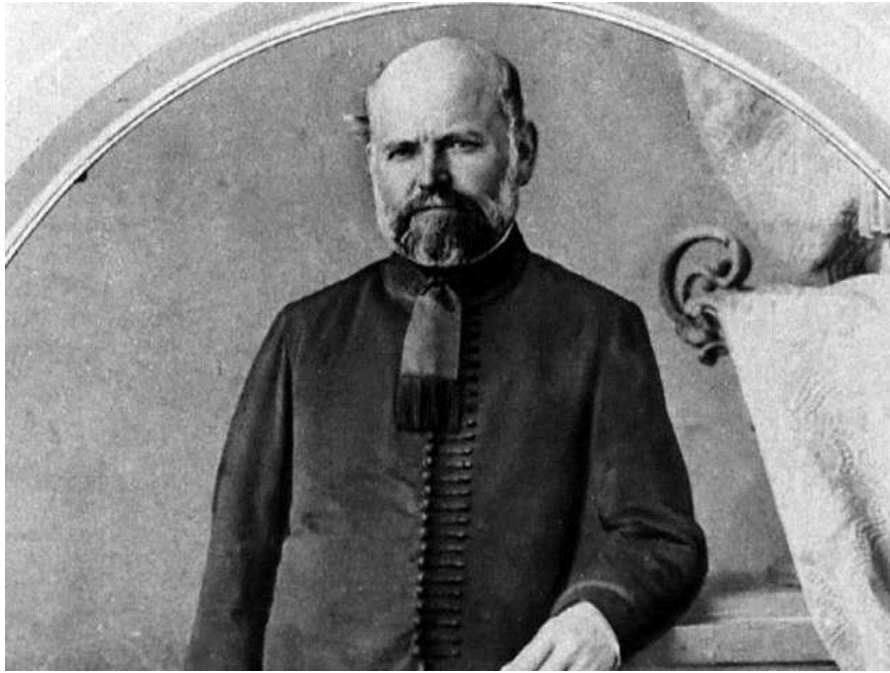
Häszner went into considerable detail about the symptoms and deadly effects of puerperal fever, which started with pain in the lower abdomen, which increased at the least touch because of the swelling and tension, a raging temperature, rapid pulse rate, light-headedness, sometimes continuous vomiting, then hiccoughs, the discharge of a reddish, stinking fluid from the uterus and an unquenchable thirst – and then, inevitably, death.

He considered that to a large extent ignorance and ill-treatment by self-appointed midwives was 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, 30 years after Häszner'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 Häszner 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.



Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis was a Hungarian physician and scientist, now known as an early pioneer of antiseptic procedures. Described as the "saviour of mothers", Semmelweis discovered that the incidence of puerperal fever could be drastically cut by the use of hand disinfection in obstetrical clinics

Although Dr. Semmelweis was qualified in Medicine and Surgery, prejudice led to him being relegated to running the less desirable department of obstetrics. But this was a most fortunate outcome for womankind. He 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. That poison is now known to be the bacteria called *Group A hemolytic streptococcus*.

It is interesting to know that Dr. Semmelweis's insistence on clean hands for deliveries found a reverberation in the country where Häszner 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.

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

As for Häszner, when he left the employ of the VOC he went on to acquire the warmbaths at Caledon, which he ran very successfully. At the time of his death at the age of 56 on Sunday 20th August 1820, his inventory showed that he had ammassed 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, 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 original buildings of l'Arc d'Orleans are beautifully preserved and are on the old farm portion; these include the original Cape Dutch manor house (built in 1777) and a second house and shed, built in 1747 and 1783 respectively.

The homestead on l'Orleans was comfortably furnished with quality furniture, crockery, glassware, silver, two family portraits (which were not to be auctioned) and any number of surgical instruments and medicines; in one of the rooms there was a gold pocket watch which his widow said her late husband had told her belonged to his expatriat daughter [this was handed over to her on 5 April 1826].

This was obviously a very busy establishment which even had a smithy and a mill. The lodge at the warmbaths contained among other things 17 tables, 28 chairs and ten beds. There were more also more than 50 slaves listed in the inventory to help keep this enterprise alive.

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 too, 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.

Childbirth-related deaths have occurred for as long 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

1. MOOC 8/1-75: Inventories of the Master of the Orphan Chamber
2. MOOC 6/2: Death registers
3. VC 6/3/2: Baptism registers
4. MOOC 14: Estate accounts
5. MOOC 14/34: Johann Friedrich Häszner: *Huijslijk Geneeskundig Handboek*
6. De Villiers & Pama vol. I-III
7. Heese, J.A., & Lombard, R.T.J: *South African Genealogies*
8. Malherbe, D.F. du Toit. *Family Register of the South African Nation*.
9. Semmelweis saved lives with three words: wash your hands. *Health*, 15 May 2015.
10. <https://www.google.com/search?q=ignaz+semmelweis+biography>
11. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Africana_Library_Kimberley_012.jpg
12. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johan_Isaac_Rhenius
13. <https://www.heraldlive.co.za/lifestyle/leisure-franschoek>