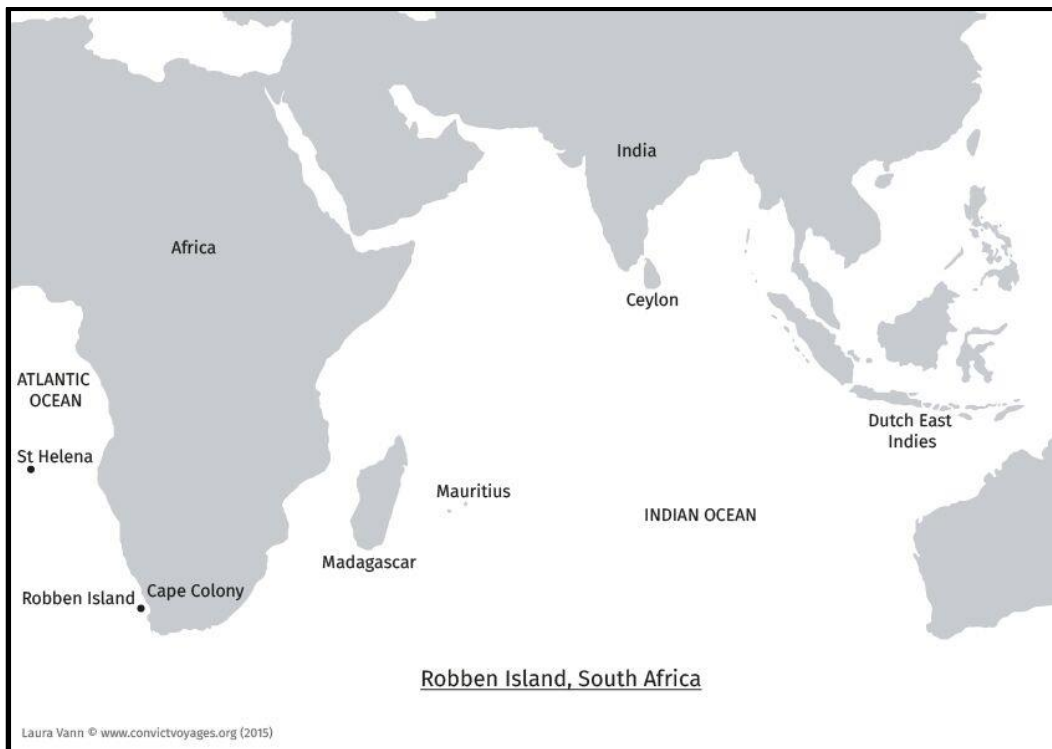


South Africa: Robben Island

Clare Anderson with Harriet Deacon

The English East India Company (EIC) made a brief but disastrous attempt to send convicts to Robben Island in 1615, but it was the Dutch who transformed it into a prison, when Jan van Riebeeck established it as a place of banishment in 1657. Lying almost 7 miles from the mainland, the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC) sent their locally convicted Khoikhoi prisoners, soldiers, exiles and slaves, and increasingly during the eighteenth century political dissidents and Muslim clerics from the Dutch East Indies. By 1750 the island was extraordinarily cosmopolitan, holding Africans (Khoikhoi and San), Chinese, Indonesians, Madagascans, Indians, and probably Arabs. They worked cutting stone and burning shells for lime, both of which were used for public works in Cape Town. Robben Island was at this time part of a multi-directional circuit of convict transportation. The VOC banished convicts from the Cape to Holland, Batavia and Mauritius, and the Cape received convicts from the Dutch East Indies. Some remain very well known, including Hadje Mattarm who was exiled in the Cape in the middle of the eighteenth century.

The British took control of the Cape Colony in 1795 and again in 1806, and as in other acquisitions from the Dutch – Demerara, Essequibo and Berbice (Guiana) and Ceylon – they inherited a system of Dutch Roman law. This included the punishment of banishment out of districts and towns, or out of colonies, rather than the sending of offenders to overseas penal sites, as was the case in metropolitan Britain. The British retained on the island Dutch-era prisoners, and continued to use it for prisoners sentenced to long terms: military, political and criminal. During the early nineteenth century Robben Island played a key role in the so-called pacification of the Cape Colony. It was used to imprison black leaders from the eastern and northern frontiers, including those convicted in the aftermath of the frontier wars (1799-1803, 1818-19). By the 1820s there were around fifty prisoners there, including slaves, Khoi and free blacks, and they had been sentenced for between 6 months, 14 years and life. All except the Europeans lived in one room of a barracks, and though they were issued with one suit of clothes each year, they were not given hats, bedding, blankets or soap. A former military officer oversaw the establishment; he was responsible for mustering prisoners and could inflict flogging or solitary confinement. An elderly Malay slave, himself serving a life sentence, was in charge of the prisoners. At this time they either worked in quarrying, and cutting and polishing stone; or were hired out to the island's contractor to work as bakers, builders and herdsmen. Liberated Africans, or "Prize Negroes" captured from illegal slave vessels after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, and apprenticed into servitude in the Cape, were similarly employed there. There survive some dramatic accounts of convict resistance. In 1820, a group of prisoners, including Khoi who had been banished after the Third Frontier War (1799-1803), seized weapons, and fled in whaling boats. Several drowned, but some were recaptured and were either executed, sent back to Robben Island, or transported to the Australian penal colony of New South Wales.



During the period up to the 1840s, the majority of the one hundred or so prisoners were African, and there were smaller numbers of Malays and European soldiers. Some were from Mauritius and St Helena, and had been ordered to serve out their sentences in the Cape. Until 1835, when they were all removed to Cape Town, women serving criminal sentences were also kept on the island, numbering at most 10% of the total.

As the decades went on, the British started to think about using Robben Island within larger scales of punishment. For example, they used the island as a holding station for transportation convicts. In the early 1840s, when there was a reorganization of convict labour gangs in the Cape Colony to do hard labour on public works projects, there was a desire to render Robben Island a place of dread (paralleling the penal stations of Australia's Van Diemen's Land), and so it was reserved for runaways and refractory prisoners. In 1846, however, the prison was closed altogether. Until the 1880s, however, some political prisoners (mainly isiXhosa chiefs from the eastern Cape, and Korana leaders from the northern Cape) were imprisoned in huts located at the northern end of the island.

From 1846, the Robben Island site was transformed into a hospital, lunatic asylum and leper colony. At its peak, the latter held 1,000 inmates, though all the medical institutions were closed by 1931.

Used as a military training base and radar station during the second world war, Robben Island resumed its penal role in the 1960s. Between 1961 and 1991, it was used as a maximum-security prison for over 3,000 political prisoners, including leaders of the African National Congress and the Pan African Congress, who had been sentenced to imprisonment by the Apartheid regime. The most famous such prisoner was Nelson Mandela, who was incarcerated there for 18 years. The prison closed in 1996, and in 1999, it became a UNESCO World Heritage Site. With the tour guides former political prisoners, it is now a popular living museum.

Further Reading

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Harriet Deacon, "Patterns of Exclusion on Robben Island, 1654-1992," in Alison Bashford and Carolyn Strange (eds), *Isolation: Places and practices of exclusion* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 152-72.

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Paul Truter, "The Robben Island Rebellion of 1751: A study of convict experience at the Cape of Good Hope," *Kronos*, 31 (2005): 34-49.

Kerry Ward, *Networks of Empire: Forced migration in the Dutch East India Company* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Julia C. Wells, *Rebellion and Uproar: Makhanda and the Great Escape from Robben Island, 1820* (Pretoria: Unisa press, 2007).

Resources

Robben Island Museum: <http://www.robben-island.org.za>

Robben Island, World Heritage List: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/916>

Long Walk To Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela (2008)

A Free Mind: Ahmed Kahrada's Notebook from Robben Island (ed. Sahn Venter) (Johannesburg: Jacanna, 2005).