

# WHITE POOR *but*



**Essays on the History of Poor Whites  
in Southern Africa 1880–1940**

**Edited by Robert Morrell**

4146

MISCELLANEA SPECIALIA 8  
UNISA 1992



WHITE BUT POOR

Essays on the History  
of Poor Whites  
in Southern Africa  
1850-1940

Edited by Robert Morrell

University of South Africa  
Pretoria

# WHITE BUT POOR

## Essays on the History of Poor Whites in Southern Africa 1880–1940

Edited by Robert Morrell

University of South Africa  
Pretoria

© 1992 University of South Africa

First edition, first impression

Second impression 1995

ISBN 0 86981 729 9

Printed by the University of South Africa

Published by the University of South Africa, PO Box 392, 0001 Pretoria

© All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means – mechanical or electronic, including recordings or tape recording and photocopying – without the prior permission of the publisher, excluding fair quotations for purposes of research or review.

Cover design: Jo Orsmond, Audio Visual Centre, University of Natal, Durban.

Cover photographs from E. G. Malherbe Collection, Book 2 of manuscript album of photographs from the Carnegie Commission, 1929, Killie Campbell Africana Library, University of Natal.

# Contents

|  |      |
|--|------|
| Preface  | xi   |
| Introduction: The poor whites, a social class and a racial problem in South Africa – De Frelant  | xiii |
| Chapter 1: The poor whites of Kimberley, Teyateyan, 1870–1900: residence, accommodation and class struggle – Robert Munnell  | 1    |
| Chapter 2: The Orange Free State and the Republic of 1914: the influence of industrialisation, poverty and poor whites – John Sutherland                                 | 23   |
| Chapter 3: 'God let our arm raise the heathen people' and white woodlifers in the southern Cape forest area, c. 1800–1920 – Robert Grundlingh                            | 43   |
| Chapter 4: Time to talk: classless whites and poverty in the northern Natal countryside, 1800–1900 – Verne Harris  | 67   |
| Chapter 5: Clipping a way into the <i>For Tamarin and Ashleigh</i> and conceptions amongst the Afrikaner poor of the Kimberley and its environs, 1820–1860 – Tim Coombes | 75   |
| Chapter 6: White workers' labour in South Africa, 1873–1900 – Gordon Fale  | 101  |
| Chapter 7: Blacks, immigrants and poor whites in Johannesburg, 1890–1934 – Susan Palmer  | 115  |
| Chapter 8: Migrant labour versus substantial town whites: industrialisation and the shaping of policy in Rhodesia in the 1880s – Philip Snygar                           | 139  |
| Chapter 9: Expulsion and Southern Rhodesia's poor whites, 1890–1900 – Rob Christie   | 161  |
| Notes  | 171  |

# Contents

|   |             |
|---|-------------|
| <b>Preface</b> .....  | <b>xi</b>   |
| <b>Introduction:</b> The poor whites; a social force and a social problem in South Africa – Bill Freund .....   | <b>xiii</b> |
| <b>Chapter 1:</b> The poor whites of Middelburg, Transvaal, 1900–1930: resistance, accommodation and class struggle – Robert Morrell .....  | <b>1</b>    |
| <b>Chapter 2:</b> The Orange Free State and the Rebellion of 1914: the influence of industrialisation, poverty and poor whiteism – John Bottomley .....                                 | <b>29</b>   |
| <b>Chapter 3:</b> 'God het ons arm mense die houtjies gegee': poor white woodcutters in the southern Cape forest area, c. 1900–1939 – Albert Grundlingh .....                           | <b>40</b>   |
| <b>Chapter 4:</b> Time to trek: landless whites and poverty in the northern Natal countryside, 1902–1939 – Verne Harris .....   | <b>57</b>   |
| <b>Chapter 5:</b> 'Digging a way into the working class': unemployment and consciousness amongst the Afrikaner poor on the Lichtenburg alluvial diggings, 1926–1929 – Tim Clynick ..... | <b>75</b>   |
| <b>Chapter 6:</b> White railway labour in South Africa, 1873–1924 – Gordon Pirie .....  | <b>101</b>  |
| <b>Chapter 7:</b> Slums, segregation and poor whites in Johannesburg, 1920–1934 – Susan Parnell .....   | <b>115</b>  |
| <b>Chapter 8:</b> Minute substance versus substantial fear: white destitution and the shaping of policy in Rhodesia in the 1890s – Philip Stigger .....                                 | <b>130</b>  |
| <b>Chapter 9:</b> Education and Southern Rhodesia's poor whites, 1890–1930 – Bob Challiss .....   | <b>151</b>  |
| <b>Notes</b> .....  | <b>171</b>  |

## List of contributors

**John Bottomley** lectures in the History Department at the University of Bophuthatswana. He holds a PhD from Queens University which he obtained with a thesis entitled 'Public policy and white rural poverty in South Africa, 1881–1924'. He has lectured at a number of Southern African universities, including the University of Natal, as well as at Queens University, Canada.

**Bob Challiss** completed a DPhil at the University of Zimbabwe and published part of his research as a supplement to *Zambezia* in 1982 under the title *The European educational system in Southern Rhodesia, 1890–1930*. He has taught at many schools and colleges in Zimbabwe and was also a research fellow at the University of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe from 1974 to 1982.

**Tim Clynick** recently moved to Queens University, Canada, to undertake research work for his doctorate. Before this he lectured in the Department of History at the University of Bophuthatswana. He completed an MA thesis at the University of the Witwatersrand on the diamond diggings in the Western Transvaal. A chapter on this subject was included in the volume of essays edited by Belinda Bozzoli, *Class, community and conflict: South African perspectives* (Ravan, 1987).

**Bill Freund** is a graduate of Chicago and Yale, where he wrote a PhD thesis on the Cape in the Batavian period. He has lectured at Kirkland College in New York State, at Ahmadu Bello University in Nigeria, at the University of Dar es Salaam and at Harvard, as well as having been a research officer at the African Studies Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, before joining the University of Natal as Professor of Economic History. He is author of *Capital and labour in the Nigerian tin mines* (Longmans, 1981), *The making of contemporary Africa* (Macmillan, 1984), and *The African worker* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

**Albert Grundlingh** is the author of two books: *Die 'hendsoppers' en 'joiners': die rasonaal en verskynsel van verraad* (HAUM, 1979) and *Fighting their own war: South African blacks and the First World War* (Ravan, 1987). He has also published articles on Afrikaner historiography and the relationship of South African historical writing to education. He presently teaches at the University of South Africa.

**Verne Harris** is an archivist in the South Africa Archives Service. Currently a specialist in record management, he served his apprenticeship in the Natal Archives after completing an MA degree (History) at the University of Natal. He

has published articles and reviews on archival, historical and other subjects and is editor of the *South African Archives Journal*.

**Robert Morrell** has taught in departments of History at the universities of Transkei, Durban-Westville and Natal (Durban). He is currently working in the Education Department, University of Natal (Durban). He completed an MA thesis at the University of the Witwatersrand and has published a number of articles on aspects of agrarian history in the Transvaal.

**Susan Parnell** lectures in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. She researches historical and contemporary housing problems in South African cities and has published a number of articles on these subjects.

**Gordon Pirie** is a lecturer in Human Geography at the University of the Witwatersrand. His teaching and research is in the field of transportation, and he has published many journal articles on his particular interest, the social relations of transport.

**Philip Stigger** undertook research on aspects of Zimbabwean history before serving as an administrative officer in Tanzania for seven years to 1965. He then joined the Department of History at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, Canada. Although his publications focus on Zimbabwe in the 1890s, he is interested in the entire colonial period there and in Tanzania.

## Preface

This collection had its origins in the environment of the History Workshop at the University of the Witwatersrand. In the early 1980s social history was being encouraged through the History Workshop. Numerous studies, inspired by the pioneering work of Colin Bundy on African peasants, were beginning to appear. Many of these works made use of oral history and most attempted to bring to life the hidden lives of the African 'underclasses'. In contrast to the vigorous efforts made to uncover the history of the black poor, there was a strange silence hanging over the history of the poor whites.

South African history, at least in the liberal and radical traditions, has often been written against a backdrop of intellectual and political opposition to apartheid. The tendency this induced was for writers to focus on the group which laboured under the worst excesses of the South African social order, the dispossessed and exploited blacks. Put bluntly, writers expressed their sympathy for, and political affinity with, the exploited and oppressed members of society via their research. Although things began to change during the second half of the 1980s, few English-speaking writers were inclined, in the climate of ongoing violence and repression, to write empathetically about white Afrikaners, even if historically this group had experienced the deprivations that the development of capitalism entailed.

My own research work in the Eastern Transvaal drew me to examine the plight of unproductive, small-scale white farmers in the early twentieth century. Few other people were at that time focusing their research on this class. In 1985, as I became aware of the increase in research activity on poor whites, I began to collect the essays that appear in this collection. None has been published before. My chapter and that of Albert Grundlingh first saw the light as History Workshop conference papers in 1984 and 1987 respectively. John Bottomley gave a version of his chapter as a seminar paper to the African Studies Institute at Wits in 1982 and covered another angle of the subject in his 1987 History Workshop paper. At least three of the other contributions (Clynick, Parnell and Pirie) were affected by the climate of the History Workshop which pervaded Wits University's academic life in the 1980s.

Unavoidably this collection suffers from omissions. Regionally, the Cape is under-represented. The absence of a piece on the Western Cape particularly, is regrettable. Although I tried to solicit work on Mozambique, Namibia and Swaziland I was not successful and the comparative insights such work would

have provided are thus denied us. I am very aware that the collection lacks a gender perspective. During the gestation period of this book it looked as though I would be able to include a piece on poor white women, but this was not to be. Poor whites in literature, poor white culture and the poor white experience (which could be reconstructed via exhaustive use of oral evidence) are all notable absentees. Despite these limitations, I like to think that collectively these essays offer a multi-dimensional and nuanced view of the poor whites.

The production of *White but poor* was a painfully long process. Some of those who offered chapters were unable to complete their contributions. Others found that the demands of academic life interfered with writing and work was thus often produced haltingly. Many of the contributors were separated from me by vast distances and communication was not always easy and invariably slow. Various publishers held on to the completed manuscript for months before declining to publish. In one case the manuscript disappeared in the post and was never recovered!

In preparing this publication I have incurred debts of gratitude to people who have encouraged me and shared their wisdom and level-headedness. Albert Grundlingh was a staunch supporter and it is true to say that without him, this collection might never have appeared, or at least would have appeared much later. Bill Freund never allowed my interest to flag, Mike Morris gave me courage in the initial phases, Vishnu Padayachee helped me to negotiate the middle passage and Doug Hindson helped me to persevere towards the end. I have to thank the contributors for producing their work and having the patience to wait for the act of publication to be completed. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the Department of Education, Natal University, Durban which assisted in a variety of ways when deadlines were very tight.

The concept for the cover of this book was developed with the assistance of Costas Criticos and Alison Gillwald. The artwork was done by Jo Orsmond of the Audio Visual Centre, University of Natal, Durban. I would like to place on record my gratitude to them. The photographs come from the E. G. Malherbe Collection housed at the Killie Campbell Library, University of Natal, Durban. I thank the librarians for their help.

**Robert Morrell**

**Durban**

**February 1991**

## Introduction

# The poor whites: a social force and a social problem in South African history

*Bill Freund*

There exists an international stereotype, dearly beloved in anti-apartheid literature, that all South African whites consist of the slave-driving but idle rich who sip sundowners at poolside and exist entirely on the backs of a conquered and abused black proletariat. All of the essays in this volume insist that in fact 'white society', to the extent that it has any meaning at all, consists and consisted of deeply differentiated, sometimes antagonistic classes whose fragile unity under a segregated society represented a difficult political achievement that needs discerning and explaining. Re-examining the 'poor white' issue sets the stage for a reassessment along these lines, particularly as we finally watch segregation and apartheid wane.

In this volume, we get a chance to look at a substantial number of studies of southern Africans located in a variety of regions who were known to their contemporaries, for it is mainly focused on the first third of this century, as 'poor whites'. As Robert Morrell reminds us in his essay, the term 'poor white' is not a natural one but one that has been socially constructed and is elusive. Of what significance is it to distinguish whites from other poor people? What do we really mean by 'poor' anyway? The point is that 'poor white' constitutes in fact a particular ideological construction that cannot be taken for granted or assumed. This collection does not generally concern itself, however, with debating the validity of the concept of 'poor whites'. Instead, it concerns itself primarily with the poor white question in two ways. The first and more obvious is as part of a deeper and wider investigation of the political significance of social class more generally in a period of long-term crisis in South African history. This crisis followed the Mineral Revolution attendant on the development of the diamond and then gold mines from the end of the nineteenth century through to the Great Depression. Older community structures based in the countryside were ruthlessly broken up while a new, often harsh urban environment expanded very rapidly. The 'poor whites', largely Afrikaners, formed in this crucible.

Secondly, this collection is inspired by the development of a school of social history in South Africa concerned with investigating and restoring to dignity the lives of ordinary men and women and the communities that they built. In this project, it cannot be legitimate only to investigate the history of black South Africans. In fact, whites have received some attention from social historians. In his remarkable two-volume social and economic history of the Witwatersrand published in 1982, Charles van Onselen devoted considerable attention both to white immigrants from Europe and to the rural white poor, thrown up onto the Reef vortex by the force of late nineteenth-century capitalism. In the recent (1987) History Workshop collection edited by Belinda Bozzoli, *Class, community and conflict*, no fewer than six out of seventeen essays concern the social history of white South Africans. Whites on the Witwatersrand figure importantly in Luli Callinicos' *Working life 1886-1940*, part of her beautifully illustrated people's history of South Africa. This volume develops a neglected theme much further. White historians are in fact looking here at their own roots and trying to explore their own past in new ways that are intended to illuminate the fabric of historical development. Such an examination may be superficially unfashionable and even painful, more so than the evocation by whites of the struggles of the African victims of the system.

### **The making of the poor whites**

It is clear from the work of such historians as Colin Bundy and Robert Ross that class differentiation and poverty existed within the colonial population at the Cape of Good Hope back into the eighteenth century at least. Recently, in a pioneering and suggestive book called *The African poor*, John Iliffe has proposed a kind of historical watershed. Before that watershed, poverty can essentially be defined negatively in terms of lack of access to resources, particularly land or social networks through which basic economic activities took place. This was poverty in a pre-capitalist context: the poverty suffered by victims of drought or disease, calamitous warfare or extrusion from the social group. After the watershed, 'the new poor, the propertyless and conjuncturally unemployed' become increasingly important.<sup>1</sup> In a capitalist society, poverty is structured and defined differently and the spread of market values in colonial Africa represented a great historic shift.

Iliffe enhances his material with considerable South African evidence. Going back to early colonial times, colonists on the frontier, although they had little in the way of material encumbrances and lived an unendurably simple life by the standards of sophisticated travellers who encountered them, had access to basic resources and were not socially defined as poor or as poor whites. The presence of poverty did not necessarily mean that poor people formed

themselves into, or self-consciously behaved as, a class in any socially antagonistic sense.

Poverty took numerous forms in the South African countryside. In his Transvaal-based essay, Morrell points to one obvious division, that between poor farmers in a poor land, the situation of his northern Middelburg families, notably in Mapochs Gronden, on the one hand and on the other, dependants on the farms of those richer than themselves, which was the position further south in a more fertile and developed region. In an impressively systematic way, Verne Harris, exploring northern Natal (which in fact also formed a part of the South African Republic before the Anglo-Boer War) establishes a typology for no fewer than twelve sorts of white farmers that refines these categories and reveals the complexity of economic differentiation within a small population.

The simplicity of life on the far frontier, especially in very arid countryside where adapting to nature took great foresight and skill, was long ago captured in his Trekboer trilogy by P. J. van der Merwe, who used the contemporary lives of Namaqualanders in the 1930s to try to understand Cape frontier conditions a century and more earlier. Another distinctive community of the poor, that of the Knysna woodcutters of the southern Cape, is assessed in this volume by Albert Grundlingh. Their damp and difficult-to-penetrate living environment had always discouraged African cultivators or pastoralists, few of whom had ever lived there. The forest afforded a simple, largely subsistence existence for a group of colonial people, arriving in the eighteenth century from more fertile ground. They may have appeared extremely poor to outsiders but also had a certain pride and group solidarity that flowed out of their self-reliance. It is also interesting that these old communities practised relatively little colour discrimination and included a rather undifferentiated spectrum from white to coloured in terms of contemporary South African terminology. This was in fact the situation as well in the early towns where poorer single men from overseas who were unable to attract propertied wives from the settler population married or established liaisons with women of colour very frequently well into the nineteenth century. Vivian Bickford-Smith has recently underscored the vagueness of the colour line amongst the Cape Town poor even at the end of the century.<sup>2</sup>

From the eighteenth century onwards, white farmers were present who owned no land of their own but had some relationship of clientage or tenancy with landowners. These so-called 'bywoners' were sometimes younger relations, sometimes overseers of labour, sometimes objects of charity, sometimes victims of exploitation, depending on their resources and relationships. Harris explores the range of possibilities that existed. At times, 'bywoners' and white squatters were extruded from the land but until the Mineral Revolution, their

proletarianisation proceeded very slowly. Gordon Pirie suggests in the course of his essay in this volume on railway workers that until the 1890s when circumstances brought them to work for a wage, their labour was expensive and irregular, unsatisfactory to employers.

The much sharper intrusion of capitalist social relations into the South African countryside from the late nineteenth century dramatically intervened in this situation. The successful farmer began to confront the dependent farmer in a more overt class relationship. The poor farmer who was so largely self-subsistent was forced to meet cash payments for basic needs and relate to creditors, merchants and the state in new ways. Most of the essays in this volume show a developing class antagonism amongst South African whites during this period as the poor came to feel their poverty in a new way in contradistinction to a developing bourgeoisie. In the Knysna forests, systematic capitalist exploitation by the Thesens and others, sustained by a stratum of well-paid white artisans and white-collar workers, changed forest life for the worse. On the Maize Belt in the Orange Free State, the gap between the capitalising, successful farmers and the 'bywoners' yawned.

Especially following the Anglo-Boer War, significant numbers were pushed off the land entirely and sought a new life in the towns. The first decade of the twentieth century, during part of which the mining economy stagnated, was perhaps the most intense one for combining rural and urban poverty as witness the picture painted by the Transvaal Indigency Commission of 1906–1908. In the city, the newcomers encountered immigrant workmen from Europe, often immiserated in times of economic decline, as well as people of colour, competing for the same unskilled jobs. Forced urbanisation brought with it new social problems and an often traumatising pressure to adapt rather drastically to a new way of life. Susan Parnell gives us some graphic descriptions of poverty, of overcrowding and squalor in Johannesburg, under these conditions. However, new opportunities were also thrown up by the increasingly wealthy society at large, opportunities for which competition could be stiff and bloody. At this point, we have crossed John Iliffe's watershed. Poverty has altered fundamentally in character and become linked to direct exploitation and proletarianisation, although older forms of poverty persist. This, he argues, has tended to be the hallmark of African poverty in the twentieth century as elsewhere in the modern world.

## **Twentieth-century politics and the poor white question**

The 'poor whites' were in a sense up for grabs now. The historical possibilities ahead of them were several and the question of how to win them over and

regain their loyalties in a class society exercised all the energies of competitive elites and ambitious politicians. They were as well a potentially dangerous and untamed mob, a threat to the propertied. A series of massive strikes, culminating in the Rand Revolt of 1922, suggested the possibility of a unified working class that could threaten capitalist hegemony in South Africa. Frederick Johnstone, Rob Davies, Dan O'Meara and David Yudelman are amongst those who have written books about early trade unions, workplace struggles and the political battles for the affiliation of workers who, even when they were not badly paid, felt placed in an extremely vulnerable and insecure class niche. The militancy of early twentieth-century white workers is well known and this volume has avoided recapitulating this familiar theme.

However, the question of politics remains a central one to its authors. In 1914, some Afrikaner nationalists took advantage of the outbreak of World War I to rise against the Union government. It was South Africa's equivalent of the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin. John Bottomley shows the extent to which the 'Rebellion' represented the aspirations of the poor and landless, at least in one region of the Highveld (true as well of Morrell's capital-starved 'boere' of the northern Middelburg district), an interesting revelation particularly given Albert Grundlingh's earlier thesis that linked the resentments of a deprived poor white class rather to the 'joiner collaboratorist' phenomenon elsewhere during the South African War of 1898–1902.<sup>3</sup> There was thus no direct, automatic link between Afrikaner revolt and struggle from below. The correlation between class feeling and particular political affiliation was never simple in South Africa. Class oppression made for social antagonisms that various causes could seize upon. Today some of the most deprived black South Africans, residents of shantytowns and migrant hostels, often become the footsoldiers of relatively conservative movements such as Inkatha, in a contemporary parallel.

The ultimate nightmare of the ruling class was a class movement that would transcend the race line and unify the poor and oppressed, white and black, a nightmare that both Rhodes and Smuts expressed at times. Rob Turrell's study of the Kimberley diamond fields suggests that these themes were already being played out by the 1870s and 1880s.<sup>4</sup> Indeed it was a strike supported by both whites and Africans in 1884 that was crucial, in his view, in the decision of a consolidated capitalist mining interest there towards radically separating the working class out between a migrant, compounded black community and a white community able to enjoy a settled family life and reasonable quality housing in a company town setting.

This practically suited important sections of the bourgeoisie and fitted well with the racialist fatalism of social Darwinism that was so much a part of the international intellectual climate of the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries. Biology, it was assumed, was history and 'race' determined culture. Grundlingh and Parnell, amongst others, capture some of the rhetoric of those who claimed to fear the peril of racial mixing and degeneration from amongst the writers, the churchmen and the politicians of the age. They were far more effective than the few voices of those who aimed at lowering the racial divide in the name either of a legally colour-blind and incorporative Cape liberalism which had been a powerful inheritance from colonial Victorian days but was increasingly in decline or, more interestingly, working-class socialism, a perspective understood and increasingly urgently pursued by the most far-sighted leaders of organised labour.

However, it is too simple to think that intensified racism was a plot from above. It clearly was part of something constructed as well from below. The relationship between poor white and black could be complex yet for the most part white workers struggled towards the creation of what Stanley Greenberg in his comparative study *Race and state in capitalist development*<sup>5</sup> has termed a bounded working class. Racial exclusion became a class demand as whites felt threatened by the large, alien, increasingly deracinated and potentially politicised black population. Some people that might be classified as 'poor whites', as John Bottomley indicates for the Free State, Tim Clynick for the Transvaal diamond fields and Verne Harris for northern Natal, did rely on the crude exploitation of even poorer blacks. Yet Bottomley, like Tim Keegan before him,<sup>6</sup> shows that there is no straightforward way to explain why the Land Act of 1913, which cut away the rights of black sharecroppers in 'white' South Africa, as well as established a racial division of the land, would inexorably be supported by poorer whites on economic grounds alone. The sharecropping system actually made poorer white farmers more viable under conditions where they alone could be registered as landowners. It is only in far broader terms that a racial ideology of uplifting the 'volk' as a whole made economic sense.

In their struggle to capture the poor whites, political movements were torn between the need to sponsor redistributive, if not socialist, policies, and their continued commitment to capitalist profitability which in turn buttressed the fiscal viability of the state which they meant to control. The Union government of Louis Botha and J. C. Smuts from 1910 to 1924 had its populist side but is usually associated with rather overtly pro-capitalist policies. Thus the growing tendency for unemployed white men to look to the state railway network as a source of unskilled jobs was checked in the post-World War I slump when the railways in the Smuts administration worried about their profits and stopped hiring. The war had brought about enormous demand for South African products and stimulated a boom that benefited the poor. In its aftermath,

however, economic crisis again acutely raised the question of poverty amongst a white voting population.

It is commonly assumed that the Pact government, which brought to power in 1924 Hertzog's Afrikaner Nationalists together with Labour in a coalition aimed at defending the national economy, promoting the interests of the white working man and farmer and championing the poor white, changed all this radically. In reality, the situation was a good bit more complicated. David Yudelman has insisted that both Smuts and Hertzog were leaders of successive phases of a complex historical process of 'capturing' the white working class for a capitalist order in South Africa. Certainly, the Pact government, although eager to reverse Smuts's policies and hire large numbers of whites on railway and public works jobs, was very concerned not to do anything deleterious to capitalist interests generally. This is an important point in the essay Tim Clynick has written about the diamond diggings that were discovered in the south-western Transvaal in 1926 which at first seemed to offer to the desperately poor whites, both urban and rural, a chance to make it as independent diggers. It soon became obvious that the only good living on the diamond fields would be made by a handful of merchants, buyers and land-owners. Political rhetoric aside, the Pact government was unwilling to go against the needs of the diamond industry for restricting overall production in the interests of upholding prices.

Similarly, according to Albert Grundlingh, the poor woodcutters of the Knysna forests voted Nationalist but they gained no obvious material advantages as a result. In other sectors, the situation was somewhat different. Thus Robert Morrell believes that state patronage and aid to agriculture genuinely offered something concrete to the poorer white farmer with land in Middelburg even though he too insists that the Nationalists were in no sense the 'organic' party of white workers or farmers. Yet the 'poor whites' never found another political home nor did they join forces with the poor more generally. The failure of the poor whites to cohere effectively as a class rather gave the Nationalists their chance and over time they actively and systematically courted and won the allegiance of poor and working class whites while continuing to promote South African capitalism.

The Pact government — despite its rhetorical support for a so-called civilised labour policy that would force capital to hire workers at wages fit for white men, wages that might provide what a railway worker spokesman in 1918 called, according to Gordon Pirie, 'the liberty of white existence; to thrive and to progress' — actually did little to bring white men into jobs held at low wages by women or children and by those of colour in the private sector. A huge gap continued to exist between the lives of the well-paid skilled male workman and

the unskilled white worker. The 1925 Wage Act, according to an extensive study by Ian Phillips, largely served to retain the existing wage levels although it may have acted against the occasional particularly exploitative firm, rather than to make any qualitative changes in the structure of wages or the labour market.<sup>7</sup> Radical intentions to raise all unskilled wages on the hotly debated Australian model were shelved.

Under the Pact government, many white men got jobs from the state itself. This would include policemen and soldiers, foresters and post office employees but the railway sector was particularly important. The railways after 1924 reversed their earlier policies and radically increased their employment of unskilled whites who often replaced African and Indian workers. As Pirie reminds us, however, they were not exactly labour aristocrats. Their pay was kept sufficiently low as to discourage featherbedding and to prevent the system from becoming uneconomic.

What one expert called the 'American system' for dealing with the poor, that is to say resettlement on the land, was fashionable amongst the uplifters of the 'poor whites' early in the twentieth century. To this end the state created forester communities and agricultural settlements were established by the Dutch Reformed Church to bring the volk back from Babylon, its humiliations, temptations and horrors. Back to the land was the watchword for a campaign to redeem the lost sons and daughters. However, it became increasingly clear that such schemes could not really restore prosperity or independence to those who had already been thrown off the land decisively, nor were they genuinely supported from below. Harris writes that the dependent white farmer virtually disappeared in northern Natal from the 1930s, most vanishing into the urban context apart from a fortunate minority that could parlay state aid into transformation as capitalist farmers. For the rest, the state was less prepared to assist after the demise of the Pact.

Instead, the future lay in the acquisition of skills and education and in the conquering of the city with its distinctive ways, as Susan Parnell shows. That was recognised in the end by the Carnegie Commission volumes, considered the magisterial study of poor whiteism in the 1920s, and the solution that harmonised best with the needs of capitalism in South Africa. In the urban context, moreover, the only way that Nationalist policies actually could carry through proposals to segregate the urban working population and clear out slum conditions was to develop systematic state housing schemes. This in fact largely occurred in the wake of the Great Depression, with its collapse from the moderate prosperity of the 1920s into massive economic crisis, not under the Pact at all but surprisingly under the Fusion government of Hertzog and Smuts (an admirer of the heretical economic reformer Lord Keynes).

From the point where South Africa departed from the gold standard in 1933, local industry quickly recovered from the Depression and boom conditions were under way within a couple of years. Agriculture remained depressed, reinforcing the gap between urban and rural. Of course, the unskilled urban migrant to town could not necessarily take advantage of new opportunities but his sons and daughters could. The private sector could make use of literate white foremen and skilled workmen while the state used education and labour policies to give potential supporters advantages. The long period of uncertainty and struggle gave way, particularly after the arrival of the restructured National Party into office in 1948, to the apartheid years. Apartheid has usually been interpreted by radical scholars in terms of the political economy of control over black workers but it represented as well the triumph of the poor white strategies of the politicians for whom it was a crucial element in the classless white populist discourse of the new era.

## **Wider perspectives**

In this volume, the history of the 'poor white problem' in South Africa can be more clearly delineated by two essays which look at the Rhodesian situation. From the writing of Philip Stigger, it is clear both that the rather precarious existence of the first whites in Rhodesia could have collapsed into poverty and that fear of the emergence of a situation identical to that in South Africa was an important motivating force for the Rhodesian state in British South Africa Company (BSAC) days (1890–1923). Yet Stigger is particularly concerned to emphasise that there really hardly was an equivalent social problem in Southern Rhodesia. This is partly because of the absence of an indigenous (as he calls it) white population attached to agriculture there, by comparison with South Africa, and partly because the BSAC made sure that whites had easy access to cheap land. At the peak of the Depression, Stigger shows that in fact the Southern Rhodesian state adopted policies that paralleled those south of the Limpopo very well, protecting whites through racist legislation and institutions and the introduction of ameliorative measures, even including the provision of public service employment at low pay. He shows that eventually in Rhodesia, too, the real future for the poorer whites lay in the towns.

R. J. Challiss points moreover to the importance, in pursuing this argument, of formal education. He seconds the shrewd judgment of the Southern Rhodesian premier Godfrey Huggins, who wrote that 'I ... admit that although our youth may be able to play Rugby Football and to preserve their white skins with rifles and differential legislation ... if they survive, it will be by nothing except superior education.' Challis traces the growing commitment of settler society to improving the quantity and quality of white education, both in providing

white male youth with particular skills and in helping to form a white Rhodesian culture in which all felt a part. This commitment was not established unconditionally without struggle. In the early years, there was opposition to the idea of spending much public money on education for the hoi polloi and a special problem lay in the existence of a poor Afrikaans speaking rural minority which resisted schooling, especially in English. By the 1930s, the commitment was largely generalised, backed up by the provision of a more and more articulated institutional structure and indirectly by the channelling of schools for Africans into directions that would block African competition for qualifications and nullify their overwhelming numerical majority in the territory. Poor whiteism in Southern Rhodesia lacked the intensity of the South African article but nonetheless the Rhodesian case is salient because it witnessed an even more refined response. It would be interesting elsewhere to look further afield at how poor white and equivalent social strata were dealt with and how they made their way in somewhat more distant but still very relevant circumstances, say in the Portuguese colonies of southern Africa or the sugar islands of the Indian Ocean.

The white bounded working class of South Africa could be fitted into conditions that made for capital accumulation on a very successful basis for a long time. However, from the 1970s, this has been less and less the case. Under the banner of reform, the National Party has abandoned its previous efforts to protect all whites with a racist safety net. If it is true that the creation of this net was vital to apartheid as a system, it must be equally true that this shift marked the beginning of a general shift away from apartheid. On the right end of the political spectrum, the Conservative Party and, even more unequivocally, radicals such as Eugene Terre'blanche of the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB) and Arrie Paulus of the Mine Workers' Union, attacked the government in the 1980s on exactly these grounds. The AWB run soup kitchens for the white poor and fulminate against the 'Geldmag' (Money Power). Superficially, this might be thought to herald a potentially successful counter-attack in defence of the bounded white working class.

I would suggest that this revival of old-time white populist politics and the intensification of class conflict amongst whites lacks the strength to destroy the dominant state trend. However, F. W. de Klerk has committed himself even further than P. W. Botha to the interests of the middle class of all colours in South Africa and specifically to the interests of business. Even the Conservative Party is anything but anti-capitalist. Still less could protection for all whites on racial lines help to solve the accumulation crisis in the current international economic context. It is perhaps in observing this kind of contrast between then and now, as well as the emphasis this book lays on the complex politics of

class in southern Africa that makes a study of the poor whites most relevant to the present. Moreover, the study of class politics in white South Africa can also illuminate the class politics of a non-racial future South Africa and the way in which a post-apartheid regime tackles the massive problem of poverty in an economically stagnant society, characterised more than ever by drastic economic differentiation.

## 1900-1930: resistance, accommodation and class struggle

Robert Mornet

The eastern Transvaal district of Middelburg housed a large population of poor whites until 1910 and beyond. They associated with mining, trading and business, but also with early Africans who suffered similar conditions of poverty as themselves. While Afrikaners over time lost their ability to compete in the large cities, concentrated in areas of mineral wealth, the district's poor whites for the most part were secure employment and political influence from the days of the National Party.

The long-run and short-term development patterns of the poor whites tended to obscure the processes of class struggle and individual as they attempted to secure a life for themselves in the rapidly changing landscape. This chapter attempts to show how the nature of capitalist relations and the actions of the state fundamentally define 1900-1930, prevented white social and economic mobility, and also argue that such progression was made not only by a particular section of the poor whites which continued to pursue a life of agriculturalism. The struggle between accommodation and resistance from poor whites concerning conditions which became increasingly proletarianised, while the state played a part in that process of class polarisation, the political movement of Afrikaner nationalism tended to contradict those class divisions under anthropological trends. The major feature of this process was the growth of racism as a tool which demarcated borders of ethnic solidarity and class superiority.

### Who were the 'poor whites' and what was the 'poor white' problem?

'Poor white' is an elusive term. Usually used to refer to a certain section of the white population in the past largely, in most general terms, it was to all whites who were poor. To this broad and third-class label should be added a narrower

# Chapter 1

## **The poor whites of Middelburg, Transvaal, 1900–1930: resistance, accommodation and class struggle**

*Robert Morrell*

The eastern Transvaal district of Middelburg hosted a large population of poor whites until 1930 and beyond. They coexisted with strikingly wealthy white landowners, but also with many Africans who suffered similar conditions of poverty as themselves. While Africans over time lost their ability to survive off the land and were condemned to lives of miserable poverty, the district's poor whites for the most part won secure employment and political influence under the wing of the National Party.

The long-run (and sometimes exaggerated) success of the poor whites tends to obscure the processes of class struggle that unfolded as they attempted to carve a life for themselves in the inhospitable capitalist landscape. This chapter attempts to show how the onset of capitalist relations and the actions of the state (particularly before 1924) prevented wide-scale and significant economic improvements. It also argues that such progress as was made was specific to a particular stratum of the poor whites which continued to pursue a life as agriculturalists. This stratum became economically distanced from poor whites occupying positions which became increasingly proletarianised. While the state played a part in this process of class differentiation, the political movement of Afrikaner nationalism tended to conceal these class divisions under an ideological mantle. The major feature of this process was the growth of racism as a code which cemented bonds of ethnic solidarity and racial superiority.

### **Who were the 'poor whites' and what was the 'poor white problem'?**

'Poor white' is an elusive term. Usually used in colonial contexts where blacks were in the vast majority, its most general applicability was to all whites who were poor. To this broad and bland description should be added a narrower

meaning. As Jean Branford points out, the term has a 'derogatory' ring to it.<sup>1</sup> This emanated from among the ruling classes who looked with disdain, dislike and at times alarm at the white proletariat. Yet the poor whites were a fractured group. Charles van Onselen, in his study of the Witwatersrand's poor Afrikaner population between 1890 and 1914, has shown how divided they were. On the one hand, they were self-employed people providing services or involved in petty commodity production (e.g. brick making) and on the other, they were the truly destitute without visible means of subsistence.<sup>2</sup> While our understanding of the processes which marked white proletarianisation has been much improved, our knowledge of similar processes in the countryside remains sketchy. In an attempt to go some way towards rectifying this situation, this chapter aims to analyse the rural poor white population in class terms. In this task the concept of 'labouring and dangerous' classes which Van Onselen employed in the urban context will have to be employed with sensitivity and caution.<sup>3</sup> There is a danger that descriptive categories of this kind will not be able fully to reveal the structural basis of class differentiation.

The poor whites in the countryside differed from their urban brethren in many ways, most importantly in that they retained some access to land. This was profoundly, though not uniformly, to shape their response to the spread of capitalism. While poor whites struggled in various ways to cope with the challenges that changes in agriculture placed before them, the state was itself grappling with what it saw as the 'poor white problem'. There were two aspects of this problem. Agriculture was unproductive and unprofitable. From the Milner administration onward efforts were made to raise productivity with measures that included encouraging poor farmers to produce more and thus pull themselves out of their poverty.<sup>4</sup>

The other aspect of the problem concerned the political threat posed by poor whites. In order to deal with this threat failed farmers were offered new opportunities, jobs were created and relief provided. The intention was to convert 'dangerous' class members into conformist class members. Neither the state nor capital was able to give this problem the attention it deserved because of the other demands placed on resources. The transformation of agriculture and the restructuring of native policy (including the streamlining of the mines' labour recruiting system, for example) both received priority. For this and other reasons the poor white problem was not solved immediately and lingered on for another two decades.

This chapter will attempt to show how a divided poor white population developed, how different poor white strata acted politically, and how the state intervened in these developments.

## The period 1875–1907

Although there is a paucity of research on the social composition of the ZAR's Boer population in the mid-nineteenth century, there are indications of early impoverishment. The existence of white poverty and a 'disreputable' class in the ZAR was manifest as early as the 1850s in the Boer settlement of Zoutpansberg. By the 1870s the instances of poverty had become more widespread and by the 1880s there was a significantly large group of landless burghers. The dimensions of the problem continued to increase through the next five decades.<sup>5</sup>

In Middelburg some of the first evidence available on poor whites is to be found in the history of war against the local Africans. In 1876 the ZAR called up a commando to attack Johannes Dinkwanyane, a Pedi convert based at Mafofolo. There was much reluctance to participate in this campaign. Many reasons have been put forward to explain this, including Boer objections to President Burgers' leadership. More recently Peter Delius has argued that many Boers refused to go on commando because this disrupted their farming. This was probably a pressing consideration but another possible explanation was the existence of many poor farmers who refused to fight because the prospects of loot against the redoubtable Pedi were bleak.<sup>6</sup> When the Boer campaign collapsed in August 1876, Boer soldiers were still needed to man the new forts in the area. Volunteers were only attracted by offers of 2 000-morgen farms in the Leolu Mountains and free ammunition, meat and grain for six months. In addition they received £5 salary a month and horses.<sup>7</sup> Although P. H. Bisschoff does not state so directly, it seems as though the services of poor whites were here being purchased.

In 1883 a Boer commando utterly defeated the Ndzundza Ndebele. This victory, together with the imperial victory over Sekhukhune's Pedi in 1879, left large areas available for occupation. There was also a need to create an armed buffer zone against possible future African attack. In trying to populate Mapochs Gronden, the area concerned, the ZAR sought initially also to obtain revenue by selling off the plots. There was little chance of any sales taking place, given the poverty of the burghers, and so those who had served in the campaign were provided with small plots of eight morgen which, after protests, were increased to twelve morgen in 1884. Once these poor whites had been settled and the chance of an African rising had diminished, they were left to eke out a meagre existence. Instead of providing assistance, the ZAR constantly harassed plotters. £8 was demanded for registration of ownership and threats of eviction were made against those without title deeds.<sup>8</sup> As with the twentieth-century poor whites, the Mapochs Gronden settlers were regarded as a problem by the state. Stanley Trapido aptly remarks, 'it is incon-

ceivable that burghers with large landed and other interests would have been neglected in the way in which the Mapoch settlers were.<sup>9</sup>

The settlers went backwards. Few were able to become viable farmers and most increasingly turned to part-time work as transport-riders, labourers, carpenters. Many settlers were unable to pay their 18s annual tax and less than 10 per cent owned more than one or two cows.<sup>10</sup>

While many of the settlers persevered with farming and attempted to expand their holdings, many others began to drop out. Increasingly their lives reflected growing disillusionment. Their houses were miserable shacks and their clothing often in tatters. One settler remarked rather exaggeratedly that they 'walked around naked'. Drunkenness and carousing got so bad that the local store which sold liquor was closed down.<sup>11</sup> Inhabitants looked to the government for rescue. Numerous petitions for assistance were drawn up. None was successful. Dissatisfaction with their lot and anger at the government did not immediately find organisational expression or surface as a coherent social response. It was the development of the Witwatersrand in the 1890s and the creation of urban and industrial job opportunities that provided these poor whites with a focus for their feelings of alienation. No longer would they be forced to remain in the countryside. Johannesburg, the city of gold, beckoned.

The South African War accelerated the spread of poor whiteism. As E. L. P. Stals puts it, the war 'drove the bywoners from the farms to the burgher camps and from the burgher camps to the towns'.<sup>12</sup> According to Stals 15 000 Boers became uneducated labourers or landless 'bywoners'. Those who remained on the land were 'totally ruined'.<sup>13</sup> Although Milner's Reconstruction administration poured money into agriculture, it neglected the interests of poor farmers and those worst hit by the war.<sup>14</sup> Consequently in the years following the war the Transvaal Legislative Assembly was bombarded with petitions most of which complained about hard times and the failure of the British administration to provide aid. Paul Rich has suggested that these measures were part of an attempt to weaken the poor Boer farmers so that they would be 'swamped by large-scale English settlement'.<sup>15</sup> Milner's hopes for an English-dominated countryside never materialised.<sup>16</sup> But a result of his agrarian programme was that more and more Boer farmers became impoverished.

In 1907, when the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) decided to establish its own settlement, the state decided to assist by purchasing the necessary land. The De Lagersdrift labour colony was thus born. Destined to receive only stinting government aid, it became the focus of the 'poor white solution' in Middelburg for the next thirty years.

## Agriculture and class differentiation

During the period under discussion the geographical location of poor whites in the district altered. From early on the rugged bushveld on the borders of Pediland was the home of many poor farmers. The flat, rich highveld around the town of Middelburg was the domain of the wealthy farmers. On their farms lived the 'bywoners' who enjoyed various types of lease agreement. Once displaced, these 'bywoners' tended to migrate to Mapochs Gronden and De Lagersdrift in the hope of maintaining their agricultural lifestyle. Even here, though, the areas available to them shrank as capitalised farmers opened up the area with large irrigation schemes. Other 'bywoners' were concentrated in the sandy area around Wolfefontein, to the south of Middelburg town. Here farming was not profitable nor conducive to heavy capital outlay and land-owners continued to allow 'bywoners' to remain. A final group that was on the margins of poor-whiteism could be found on the headwaters of the Steelpoort River on plots on the subdivided farm Witpoort. Here simple irrigation techniques allowed many to remain solvent, though there was nevertheless a high rate of failure.

It was difficult in twentieth-century South Africa to be a successful farmer. No longer was a 3 000-morgen farm a guarantee of comfortable life. Capital now was required. New techniques and technology had to be utilised. Credit in the early years of the century was tight and farmers found that without capital they could make little progress. Some farmers like Esrael Lazarus, the mealie and potato king of Kinross, and J. D. Heyns, Middelburg's member in the Legislative Assembly (MLA) and owner of a number of rich Highveld farms, succeeded in overcoming the obstacles. They prospered and were able to expand their operations, buy new farms, employ wage labourers and experiment with hybrid seeds and stock. But many others fell on hard times. They began passing mortgage bonds over their properties. Debts mounted as agricultural prices stayed low and natural calamities bit deep. Some of the first victims of this process were the white 'bywoners'. Rich farmers had no place for them as all available land was used for cultivation or pasturage. The small farmer was also forced to get rid of 'bywoners' in order to remain solvent. The use of 'bywoners' was expensive, especially when compared with African labour tenants, and increasingly 'bywoners' found themselves unwelcome. Discarding 'bywoners' did not always save struggling farmers and before long many were forced to sell up and lease smaller properties. Here too agriculture proved an uncharitable profession and former land owners began to experience poverty. The farmers who became smallholders or sharecroppers were committed to remaining on the land and believed in the chances it offered. There were instances of success to justify their belief in the viability of farming.

In 1920 a cultivator from Mapochs Gronden testified before the Unemployment Commission:

There is a man here who through the drought has been squeezed out of Uppington [sic]. He lost all his sheep ... that man [now] gets his natives and his draught animals and his men and everything from the owner who lives in Belfast ... the owner is making £400 clear profit and the bywoner also has about £400.<sup>17</sup>

Success stories such as these bolstered confidence in agriculture and kept near-destitute farmers on the land. But in reality once farmers had lost their land, life was a real struggle. The Witpoort smallholders earned £50 a year, barely enough to cover lease repayments.<sup>18</sup> And many were even worse off than this.

In the district of Middelburg I made the acquaintance of a very sympathetic type of old Transvaler, 82 years of age and still a good horseman, who had lived practically all his life on the land of other people. He once held a 'burgher-right' farm, but promptly sold it for £6. ('And that for paper money', he added himself.) A little later he owned a few irrigable plots in the village of Nylstroom and cultivated these for several years. But suddenly, when his young orange trees were just beginning to bear, he abandoned this land, and he took no steps when later he learnt that the plots were to be sold by auction for overdue rent. For many years he farmed with stock on other people's land and finally obtained an allotment on Mapochs Gronden. After the South African War he sold this plot and lived for a while on the church colony of De Lagersdrift. When about 60 years of age he decided to try his luck in Rhodesia and bartered his cattle for a span of donkeys, but just before reaching the Limpopo he changed his mind and turned back. Today he is living with his children, who are all poor.<sup>19</sup>

The fortunes of failed farmers varied but by and large they appear to have stayed on the land. Even the impoverished 82 year old mentioned above did not seek refuge in the city.

For 'bywoners' the descent into poverty was also rapid. In the nineteenth century 'bywoners' occupied a respected position within Boer society. 'There were many men, owners of good farms, who were only too glad if you came and stayed with them. You might have well been a wealthier man than the owner and "you were equally boss".<sup>20</sup> By 1908, however, the Transvaal Indigency Commission reported that 'bywoners' had all but become a 'separate and inferior class of society'.<sup>21</sup> In 1920 the weak position of 'bywoners' was

confirmed. P. Bothma, a Mapochs Gronden sharecropper, gave evidence to the Unemployment Commission:

Q. If you have not got land here how do you exist, how do you make a living?

A. We have a hard time. One lives this way and another that way.<sup>22</sup>

As Verne Harris shows, the word 'bywoner' refers to people who had very different types of agricultural relationships.<sup>23</sup> In Middelburg it is important to distinguish between discretionary 'bywoners' who were successful farmers even though they leased land, and those who were 'bywoners' out of necessity. The latter category were in subordinate positions in agriculture; they were dictated to by farm owners and were increasingly prone to eviction. For this category of person there was no prospect of landownership. As early as 1914 a farmer offered the opinion that 'many white people now do not have any great expectation of having ground themselves in the future'.<sup>24</sup> Fortunes declined steadily. A Middelburg farmer, Sarel Eloff, vouched for this in 1920:

Q. Do many poor people come into Middelburg for instance from outside areas?

A. Yes, they do come in.

Q. And what happens when they come in?

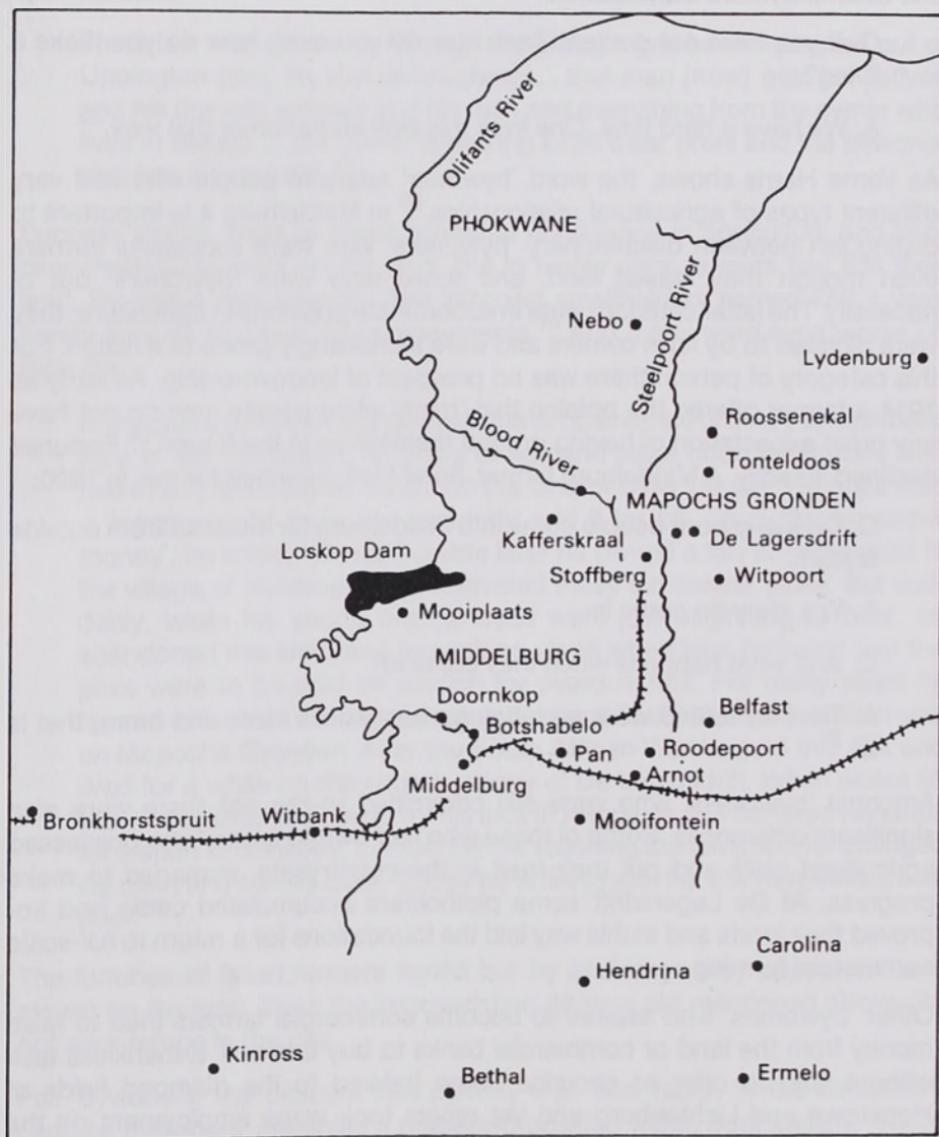
A. They try to find work and they go backwards more and more, that is all.<sup>25</sup>

Amongst 'bywoners' who were still committed to the soil there were also significant differences. Some of those who had owned farms, who possessed agricultural skills and put their trust in the countryside, managed to make progress. At De Lagersdrift some plottolders accumulated cattle and improved their lands and in this way laid the foundations for a return to full-scale commercial farming.

Other 'bywoners' who aspired to become commercial farmers tried to raise money from the land or commercial banks to buy farms – a thankless task without land to offer as security. Some trekked to the diamond fields of Hopetown and Lichtenburg and yet others took wage employment on the railways or wherever they could find it all in the hope of remitting money to save their threatened agricultural enterprises. Although these tactics were rarely successful many persisted in the vain hope of a windfall or good fortune.<sup>26</sup>

Many others were not prepared to accept the discipline of the De Lagersdrift colony or the confines of a small plot and saw little chance of becoming

## Central Eastern Transvaal – 1930



commercially successful. Many such people lived in Mapochs Gronden. Far from Middelburg or any other white town, they practised a mixed economy of hunting, transport riding and sharecropping which allowed them relative independence. They avoided the demands of landlords and the clutches of debtors and tried to rebuild the frontier life of the earlier Afrikaner settlers. Their choice was nothing new in the Transvaal. In 1876/77, for example, the Thirstland trekkers had set off in search of frontier conditions in South West Africa (Namibia). As Neil Parsons notes, 'these trekkers were landless burghers ... who had followed the old trekboer life of hunting and herding which was fast disappearing in the Transvaal as the land passed into private ownership'.<sup>27</sup> When 'pioneer conditions' ceased to obtain in Mapochs Gronden<sup>28</sup> or when the burden of small plot farming or sharecropping became too much, the option of trekking was again considered. Mobility was not a problem; few owned land or possessed many cattle.<sup>29</sup> As late as 1923 therefore there were reports of Middelburgers trekking off to Mozambique in search of pioneer conditions.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to those who had put their faith in the land, there were many who made little or no progress at De Lagersdrift or Mapochs Gronden. This class was described by a Department of Lands official:

There is another class — not as a rule the fixed 'bywoner' but the semi-townsman, the transport rider, and the diamond digger who, whatever treatment is meted out will fail and do what they can to outwit the Government ... leniency to this class is wasted: of gratitude there is little; and honour in the matter of keeping promises is almost unknown amongst them.<sup>31</sup>

To this 'class' of person can be added those who had lived in towns and returned, for whatever reason, to the countryside. As we shall see below, efforts were made in the late Reconstruction period to move poor whites out of the towns and into the countryside.<sup>32</sup> There were major problems associated with this. A Lands Department inspector outlined the position:

The 'poor white' who had tasted town life gave a great deal of trouble ... they seemed in some cases to be quite indifferent as to what happened to the stock [leased from government] and the wrongful disposal of the latter did not seem to be regarded by many of them as a serious offence.<sup>33</sup>

White proletarians resettled on the land were clearly not enamoured with life in the countryside. Nor were they taken in by the state-sponsored country idylls. They did not like the rigours of agriculture nor the discipline enforced by the DRC at De Lagersdrift and the Lands Department at Mapochs Gronden. More often than not the reluctant proletarian settler would defy authority by leaving

his/her allotment and then, by slow degree, would trek back to the city. In the process government equipment and loan cattle would be sold to pay off debts and the pursuing state debtors would be skilfully evaded.<sup>34</sup>

Exact figures concerning the return to the cities are not available, but numerous Lands Department reports testify to white migration. The Rand seemed the most common destination though the Western Transvaal diamond fields were not far behind.<sup>35</sup>

The difficulties of rural life and the experience of the cities had the effect of developing in proletarian settlers and disenchanted 'bywoners' habits that were horrific to the more respectable members of the community. Apart from the lack of respect for property (which manifested itself, among other ways, in the unlawful sale of government goods and theft) some Middelburgers took to gambling and became drunkards. Stols, a Mapochs Gronden resident, for example, 'distilled peach brandy by inverting one "kaffir" pot over another and drank the stuff as it trickled out'.<sup>36</sup> Such anti-social behaviour was probably the result of a disillusionment with country life. Despair and aimless recklessness was paralleled in many cases by a surly and defiant attitude towards authority. C. C. Scheepers, a De Lagersdrift settler, for example, was 'not prepared to obey the regulations of the colony in that he absolutely refused to dip his cattle when he was told to do so. He encouraged other settlers, who had hitherto been obedient, to defy the regulations as he did, and he was therefore an entirely undesirable person'.<sup>37</sup>

In this section I have given a materialist foundation to the description of poor whites by examining their different relationships with the elements of production. Non- or only partial access to the means of production permitted poor whites only a tenuous ability to subsist. Those included in this category would be people still possessing instruments of production, but who either lacked the capacity to use them successfully, or who could not get access to the means of production. We could also include those with access (often limited, but not necessarily so) to the means of production but without the necessary labour, or capital, or instruments of production to make a living. People experiencing these material conditions might float from job to job, trying transport-riding, casual wood-cutting, ploughing, share-cropping, semi-independent cultivation on rented land, or some form of wage labour. Theirs would be a twilight existence between the lives of a peasant and a proletarian. The other section of the rural poor white population consisted of people still trying to rescue themselves from poverty, fighting the proletarian option by pouring their remaining resources into the land. These two categories, often hazy and overlapping, were the material basis for the distinction of 'dangerous' and 'labouring' classes.

While one group still believed that their salvation lay in agriculture, the other no longer saw agriculture as a way out of its predicament. The latter group was disillusioned with life and unable to find a niche in society. Increasingly alienated from government and society, these poor whites drifted on the edges of the lumpenproletariat, never quite becoming full-scale criminals and retaining a glimmer of hope that the state would restore to them the fruits of respectability and a place in society.<sup>38</sup>

## Poor white policy and rebellion, 1907–1915

In 1907 the De Lagersdrift colony was set up by the DRC. Eight years later a rising broke out among Middelburg's 'dangerous' whites. In between these years, the Union of South Africa was established and a period of drought and depression experienced. Union had little effect on Middelburg's poor whites, but the drought and depression affected them a lot.

In 1907 the DRC's Commission for Poor Whites (CPW) established De Lagersdrift as a partial attempt to remedy the poor white problem. Lord Milner, Governor of the Transvaal, had done very little to address this question, with the exception of setting up some settlements for demobilised soldiers and destitute burghers. These had met with minimal success. In the meantime the problem of poor whites in the urban areas grew worse. This was partially alleviated by an agreement between the Het Volk and the Chamber of Mines after the 1907 strike to permit the entry of poor Afrikaners into the industry.<sup>39</sup> Some 2 000 to 3 000 found immediate employment at the expense of ousted, radical European workers. Nevertheless the urban poor white problem persisted and together with the danger it was perceived to pose for Afrikaner 'volksseenheid' prompted the DRC to involve itself more fully.<sup>40</sup>

Initially the CPW used De Lagersdrift as a solution to the urban poor white problem. Urban Afrikaners were offered plots (rentfree for the first year) and assistance. The first intake of settlers arrived late in 1907 and came predominantly from the Witwatersrand. Before the year was out many had returned to the city. Those who remained found the colony regulations irksome and friction soon developed. The failure of crops gave impetus to desertion.<sup>41</sup>

The initial failure of the colony to tie white proletarians to the land and apparent state apathy saw a rise in anti-government feeling amongst poor whites. Het Volk, the Afrikaner nationalist party, had not received universal support at its inception in 1903<sup>42</sup> and its inability to rescue poor whites after it had taken power in the 1907 election deepened feelings of disenchantment that were already well developed.<sup>43</sup>

After Union things got no better at De Lagersdrift. The new government refused to bail out the DRC. Debts rose and the CPW sought to recover its position by raising rents in 1913. In addition it began to eject unproductive and rebellious settlers since these were deemed to be a threat to the success of the settlement as a whole. From this point on efforts to save the urban poor whites by programmes of rural resettlement were abandoned. Instead energy was concentrated on helping destitute 'bywoners' who had better prospects of success. Although settlers showed little ability to transform themselves into viable small-holding farmers, and the rate of desertion continued to be high, there was a constant flow of new settlers into the colony. These new arrivals were not from the cities but were 'bywoners' who could no longer obtain a 'sitplek'.<sup>44</sup>

The condition of farmers outside De Lagersdrift was no better than inside the colony. Evictions of 'bywoners' continued and struggling smallhold or indebted farmers made little headway in shoring up their positions. Credit was a major problem. A co-operative was established at Middelburg to assist in this regard. An instant flood of credit applications indicated the serious predicament of many farmers. The co-operative was not able to solve the problem of credit shortage: instead, after 1914 the government began putting the brake on the provision of credit which it believed was irresponsibly liberal.

Meanwhile in the cities the flow of Afrikaners into mining was accelerated by the 1911 Mines and Works Act which created a job colour bar that reserved certain skilled and semi-skilled jobs for whites. The gold-mining industry was at this time the scene of rising white labour militancy. In 1913 and 1914 major strikes occurred. Afrikaners were clearly involved in these strikes but it is a matter for conjecture whether their militant worker response to capitalism either had an effect on rural forms of resistance, or, more directly, whether it affected the 1914 Rebellion.

In October 1914 the Rebellion broke out in the northern Orange Free State and western Transvaal after an officer in the Defence Force, S. G. Maritz, had deserted to the German forces in South West Africa. For a long time the Rebellion has been treated by historians as the product of Afrikaner Republicans inspired to rebel by the government's decision to fight the Germans. Recently David Yudelman has argued that the rebels of 1914 shared with the gold-mine strikers a common alienation from both the state and imperial capital.<sup>45</sup> This is an important observation but Yudelman fails to explore it further. Consequently no analysis of the class position of the rebels is attempted.

It might appear strange that research on Middelburg should shed light on this question, because the eastern Transvaal is not normally considered to have been affected by the Rebellion. J. J. Alberts, MLA for Standerton, testified to the Judicial Commission of Enquiry into the Rebellion that 'there was no unrest among the people in these parts. No rising occurred among the people in Standerton and Middelburg, and there was no spirit of rebellion in the eastern parts of the province so far as I know.'<sup>46</sup> Rodney Davenport followed this evidence when his article on the Rebellion omitted any reference to unrest in the eastern Transvaal.<sup>47</sup> In a sense, these interpretations are correct for General C. H. Muller's rebels only penetrated as far as Bronkhorstspuit where they were defeated on 7 November 1914 by government forces.<sup>48</sup>

Yet, scarcely one and a half months later, the police in Middelburg reported 'persistent rumours ... of further trouble when the Lydenburg, Carolina and Middelburg commandos mobilise here'. These rumours were not without foundation. Plans were being made by the Middelburg poor to form a 'Rebel party' of 450 men, 'most of whom are from Middelburg North towards Mapochs Land', and to march on Middelburg where the Dutch flag would be hoisted. A major point at issue was the SWA campaign and the leaders of the agitation threatened to 'shoot any person who volunteers for the front'. On 12 January 1915 a meeting took place at which it was decided to march on the Middelburg Charge Office and release a prisoner there. The march was a shambles and the 200 marchers were broken up by seven armed policemen. The leaders were arrested and eight men were charged with sedition and 107 for refusing to serve in SWA.

Although the Rebellion is normally considered to have ended in December 1914, Eric Rosenthal comments that rebels continued to surrender until February 1915 and that the 'very last man under arms was only caught on March 23'.<sup>49</sup> Under these circumstances it is possible to see the Middelburg rising as a part of the 1914 Rebellion though an account for its late spread is still awaited.

The Middelburg rebels came from the poorest areas of the district — Mapochs Gronden in the north and Gloria/Wolvefontein in the south — and were not the people who longed for a life in the countryside. Rather they were semi-rural proletarians with little prospect of full employment either in the towns or the countryside.<sup>50</sup> This appears to be consistent with the composition of rebel forces elsewhere.<sup>51</sup> Historians have often missed this point by looking too closely at the leadership of the Rebellion and not closely enough at the rank and file.

General de la Rey, one of the planners of the Rebellion, was involved in putting down the miners' strike in July 1913. General Beyers acted against the 1914 strikers. And General de Wet, leader of the OFS rebels, frequently expressed disapproval of strikes and worker militancy. The lack of sympathy for the plight of white workers can be explained with reference to the class position of the generals. They were members of a class of notables who had been unseated in the South African War and replaced by Randlords at the apex of power. While, in the Transvaal, notables gained access to power through their support of the SAP and their inclusion in the Gold and Maize alliance, OFS notables were excluded. They therefore turned to armed struggle to re-establish themselves as part of the ruling power bloc. Their followers, on the other hand, were poverty-stricken men of the soil with an axe to grind against both capitalism and British imperialism. As De Wet said, many of his followers were not 'gentlemen' but 'slumdwellers'. They showed their dissatisfaction with their position not only by joining the rebels but by looting when given the chance.<sup>52</sup> It is not surprising that Johannesburgers, unemployed or marginally employed, should have identified with the struggle of their rural counterparts. Stals points out that they made no secret of their sympathy for the Rebellion though they never actually supported it.<sup>53</sup>

The rebels were for the most part the products of Milner's policy to keep poor whites in the countryside, just as they were the victims of mistaken Afrikaner nationalist belief in the virtue and viability of life in the countryside. They were thus only partially proletarianised and as such possessed a schizoid approach to life — pulled at one moment towards the bright lights of the cities and the next towards the verdant pastures of the platteland. But neither vision materialised and they became disappointed both by the absence of opportunities in the cities and the poor prospects of farming. They were a class in limbo and thus were unable to identify with, or fully support, the interests of striking Rand workers. Although both were oppressed by capital, workers and poor whites had different relationships: workers were engaged in a struggle to secure and strengthen their positions as wage-earners, poor whites on the other hand were struggling to retain their economic independence and avoid becoming subordinated to capital. As Yudelman states, workers and poor whites faced 'capital and the state on separate occasion and alone'.<sup>54</sup> State policy going back to Milner, the uneven development of capitalism and ideological remnants of a country idyll combined to prevent a united and concerted attack on the state in the second decade of the twentieth century.

The failure of the Rebellion did not end the opposition of Middelburg's poor whites to the state, but it did change the direction. Five months after the rising the National Party (NP) held its first meeting in the Middelburg district at

Tonteldoos, the capital of Mapochs Gronden. Two NP speakers, Joubert and Moll, condemned the Botha–Smuts government in particular and the British in general. 'All the rights of Afrikaners are being trampled and destroyed by the government', they alleged, and then harked back to the South African War by reminding their audience how 'the women and children were murdered and forgotten'. Finally they injected a local note by insisting that the rebels had been unfairly punished. This political activity was carefully monitored by the local police especially as Middelburg's magistrate, R. F. Aling, feared that 'harmful results' would arise because of 'the peculiar class of people to whom they [the comments] are addressed'. Aling need not have worried. From 1915 onward the district's poor increasingly looked to the NP and the white Parliament for their salvation.<sup>55</sup>

The NP was not the organic party of poor whites. Far from it. Its leaders were drawn from the former class of notables. Farmers and landlords dominated in the organisation, though later on members of the new petty bourgeoisie began to make an impact. For all this, the NP struck a resonant chord with poor whites. It was committed to 'building a nation with words'. In addition it challenged 'British imperialism' (which crudely translated into opposition to Hoggenheimer, the Unionists and 'Sappe') and appealed to familiar and heroic images derived from the Afrikaner past.<sup>56</sup> In the absence of any rival body to represent their interests, poor whites worked with the NP, seeking through it to express their discontent. Much of their dissatisfaction stemmed from the onset of capitalism and its hard-nosed business ethic which broke down traditional ties of rural community and gave birth to a landless class. Race prejudice shrouded this reality and the NP's identification of blacks as the reason for the poor white problem therefore proved very appealing.

## **The separation of poor whites from blacks**

Becoming a poor white meant not only becoming poor, it also involved a change in class position and world view. Contemporary observers described this transition as people 'losing their self-respect and their characters'. This in turn led to the spread of 'lazy sickness', a 'disease' which well-to-do farmers disparagingly accused poor whites of suffering from.<sup>57</sup>

Changes in the world view of poor whites contained two potential threats. Those who bucked authority and failed to work conscientiously challenged the state's efforts to install a work ethic in the growing labour force. Secondly there was a danger that poor whites would continue to defy or challenge the state. This might take at least four forms: a rural rising of dispossessed whites, a white proletarian revolt in the cities, a combination of the two, or a non-racial

class alliance against the state. The first two scenarios were acted out in 1914 and 1922, the third came close to realisation in both those years, yet the fourth and potentially most serious was avoided. An explanation for the absence of an alliance between impoverished blacks and whites in the countryside is the purpose of this section.

A development that greatly worried state officials was cohabitation between different races. In 1909 some English settlers in the Waterberg established themselves among Africans and, according to a Sub Native Commissioner (SNC) began 'breeding a tribe of half-caste children'.<sup>58</sup> Such instances were in fact rare but they invoked, in the mind of the official, images of black-white co-operation which could lead either to a joint uprising or to the long-term destruction of the white race.<sup>59</sup>

In the late 1910s poor whites began moving into areas previously occupied exclusively by Africans. They were forced to do this as the frontier of capitalist farming in the district began expanding northward, eroding as it did the last havens of poor white occupation. Although poor whites, like whites in general, regarded Africans as inferior, there was the danger that some who had been thoroughly alienated from the white community would countenance some sort of social or political co-operation to add to the already substantial economic interaction with Africans that existed.<sup>60</sup> Alternatively there was the possibility of poor whites aggravating relations with Africans. Cases were, for example, reported of poor whites employing Africans and then, to avoid paying them, treating them so badly that they ran away. This kind of behaviour was consistent with notions held by the 'Bushveld community' which Leipoldt described as 'at heart imbued with the same sentiments towards the natives as their forefathers who were slave-owners ... the native is a chattel to be treated as such'.<sup>61</sup>

Whites, but particularly poor whites, liked to blame their agricultural failure on African competition. In 1913 the Natives Land Act had in part been motivated by such arguments.<sup>62</sup> After 1913, with the supposed threat of peasant competition removed, poor white farmers continued to battle. There were obvious reasons for this. South African agriculture was inefficient and farmers in general experienced severe profitability crises. In attempting to overcome this, farmers became more market conscious and competitive. This led to the eviction of 'bywoners' and small plots became less profitable. Poor whites blamed some of their misfortune on big farmers and the SAP, but they reserved their major grievance for blacks with whom they now earnestly began to compete for resources.<sup>63</sup> They argued that the platteland was undergoing 'verswarting'. A typical example of this is to be found in the Carnegie Commission (1932). 'In Pretoria and Middelburg, Transvaal, "bywoners" and also

government officials stated that the Kaffirs on bushveld farms (who have to work only 90 days) are often more prosperous than most of the poor white farm population but that a white man never gets a chance on these farms.<sup>64</sup>

Ernest Stubbs, influential Rustenburg Magistrate and Native Commissioner (NC), and the Native Affairs Department (NAD) played upon white fears and advocated segregation in the 1910s and 1920s.<sup>65</sup> Rejecting arguments for gradual racial integration, Stubbs warned South African whites of the 'tightening coils' of African society which would ultimately crush white civilisation if Africans were allowed to share in the system.

Parallel to Stubbs's view of segregation was the state-sponsored idea that settlement in the countryside was the best available means to solve problems of dislocation or, to put it another way, the poor white problem. While Stubbs urged that rural areas be set aside for exclusive African occupation, other government officials argued the need for rural areas to be freed for the resettlement of whites. There was of course competition for land between white capitalist farmers and poor whites, but there was some agreement on the need for pure white zones of settlement. Although many poor whites were not interested in a life in the countryside, the state persisted with its plans to solve the poor white problem in the rural areas.<sup>66</sup> As Barrington Moore points out, this was a not uncommon state response to social crisis. In the early 1930s, for example, the Nazis sought to prevent peasants from uniting with workers by presenting 'the romantic image of an idealized peasant, "the free man on free land" ... stressing the point that, for the peasant, land is more than a means with which to earn a living; it has all the sentimental overtones of Heimat to which the peasant feels himself far more closely connected than the white collar worker with his office or the individual worker with his shop'.<sup>67</sup>

In the urban areas Colonel Stallard was pushing a similar line.<sup>68</sup> As Sue Parnell shows, the supposed corrupting influence of Africans on whites was here too one of the reasons for the intensified attention paid by urban authorities to end integrated urban areas in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>69</sup> It should not be forgotten, however, that a vigorous campaign for racial legislation (job colour bar) was also being waged by white miners. This together with poor white demands for protection from black competition in the countryside must also have influenced state policy.

Policy towards poor white and African in Middelburg followed the trend set in the cities. NAD officials monitored race relations and only permitted white entry into the reserves where the applicant was deemed not to be an 'undesirable person'.<sup>70</sup> In some cases, where the NAD had doubts about the calibre of an applicant, limitations were imposed. In 1925, for example, a prospector was

'expressly forbidden to trespass in Native kraals and lands'. NAD officials in the district were particularly concerned about the effects of poor white–African interaction and did all they could to prevent it. In 1927 a blacksmith was refused a licence on the grounds that it was 'undesirable for Europeans verging on Poor Whites, to settle permanently in Native Areas'. In 1928 a similar ruling was made when a group of poor whites attempted to buy a farm cheaply in the reserve. The NC advised against the sale saying 'it was bound to lead to friction sooner or later as has been proved over and over again in these parts'.<sup>71</sup>

The efforts of the NAD were successful. Their administrative barriers to the reserves were reinforced by ideological barriers. Racist beliefs amongst rural Afrikaners in such things as telegony – that is, sex with an African could leave the blood of a white tainted forever – discouraged most whites from pursuing closer relations with blacks.<sup>72</sup>

Another reason for the failure of an alliance between black and white to emerge was the role played by the NP in emphasising racial differences. In 1913 Tobie Muller, an Afrikaner Nationalist, made this typical statement: 'Against the natives every white man was one, no matter whence he came.' The NP's first Programme of Principles in 1914 echoed the same theme: 'The foundations of our welfare rest on the unity of the European population.'<sup>73</sup> Support for the NP and its policies was cemented when General Louis Botha called out the citizen force against the rebels in 1914. Botha's action was seen as 'rank treachery to the Afrikaner cause' and served to detach Afrikaner support from the SAP. This support was retained by the emotive commitment to keeping the 'white man from becoming a white nigger'.<sup>74</sup>

In the town of Middelburg the racial issue that attracted most concern was the 'Asiatic menace'. In October 1919 a branch of the Transvaal Whites' Protection League (TWPL) was established which brought together both NP and SAP supporters. Its object was to protect 'the natural rights and legitimate interests of all persons of the Transvaal against Asiatic encroachment'. Its support came largely from white traders in competition with Indian traders. The effect of the movement was, according to the *Middelburg Observer* commentator, 'Wireless Whispers', to render 'political differences as dead as the proverbial doornail'. There were Middelburgers who did not support the TWPL. Some of these people shared houses with Asians and coloureds and, according to 'Wireless Whispers' subscribed to Bolshevism. They were a 'threat to the prosperity of the country', he wrote. While a minority of poor whites resisted the racist overtures, most did not. By the early 1920s the racial problem had become a rallying point for the vast majority of whites. In 1923 a weapons display was greeted deliriously by the district's white inhabitants because it

would 'be an object lesson to the native population who out number us here by 50 to one'. In March 1924 the NP and SAP decided to act jointly against the 'racial menace'. The obsession of local whites rose to fever pitch in July when a white nurse was raped. The 'Black Peril' was on everyone's lips and the local newspaper reported 'an intense craving for revenge'. Revenge was duly obtained when a month later an African, protesting his innocence to the last, was sentenced to death.<sup>75</sup>

The 'Black Peril' was much exaggerated.<sup>76</sup> In Middelburg there were few other instances of open opposition to white supremacy that could be construed as 'Black Peril'. In the north Africans engaged in incendiarism against the intrusion of white farmers (December 1924) and to the west African coal miners went on strike (September 1927). It was the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa (ICU), however, that engendered the greatest panic. Farm workers belonging to the ICU began to challenge white authority and in the township the ICU urged Africans to ignore the racist laws which, for example, prohibited African use of the sidewalks. The *Middelburg Observer* reflected the feelings of townspeople by asserting that the ICU was 'plainly Anti-White'.<sup>77</sup>

African defiance of labour demands, increased instances of crop and stock theft, and competition for resources (grazing and wood) led to the blame for all ills being placed on Africans. In 1927 poor white property owners in the reserve complained that 'the influence of natives on our folk is extremely injurious'. In 1928 De Lagersdrift settlers called for the establishment of a police station because of 'difficulty with natives'.<sup>78</sup> It is perhaps not coincidental that these complaints came at a time of heightened ICU activity and during the African National Congress presidency of the communist-leaning J. T. Gumede.<sup>79</sup>

It was on the issue of race that white farmers, white workers and poor whites found a common way to articulate their otherwise diverse class interests. White miners had made their most dogmatic statement on race in 1922 when their slogan was 'Workers of the World unite for a White South Africa'. In Middelburg's coal mines anti-black sentiment based on a struggle over jobs was equally present.<sup>80</sup> At least on this issue the NP and South African Labour Party could feel close. The result was the Pact's election victory in 1924. Just as important was the emasculation of white labour and the taming of poor whites. With Africans presented and perceived as enemy number one, capital was able more freely to mould a compliant supportive class.<sup>81</sup>

## The Rand rebellion and the Pact period

There have been few instances in South African history of dominated classes organising across the town-country divide. The ICU managed it in the late 1920s and the ANC arguably managed it in the 1950s, but by and large, organisation has been basically either urban or rural. In retrospect it can be seen that rural and urban poor whites failed to unite. Yet there were times when the chasm between the two fractions seemed bridgeable. The question is thus raised: what was the relationship between rural poor whites and urban white workers and the unemployed? Immediately one frames the question a host of problems crop up. As has been pointed out, there were deep divisions amongst rural poor whites. The same was true for the urban proletariat where the original divide between skilled and unskilled workers became blurred to be replaced by other divisions reflecting different sectoral and political positions. So one has to beware of making generalisations that gloss over these differences. One also has to avoid the mistake of assuming two hermetically sealed spheres of town and countryside.

Despite these qualifications there are hints of a closer relationship between urban and rural poor whites. This was based on similar class interests which in turn led to a shared antipathy for the SAP. While both rural and urban poor whites were committed to a white-dominated state neither was satisfied with the economic grip of the Randlords or the political power of the SAP. The NP capitalised on this and began drawing enthusiastic support from the white poor who had hitherto only expressed intermittent interest in party politics. In 1921 Smuts toured the Transvaal rural areas in an attempt to garner support. He was met with considerable hostility, which he put down to the fact that 'the landless bywoner is very definitely attaching himself to the Nationalist cause'. There were good reasons for this tendency. The agricultural policies of the Smuts government did not help poor or landless farmers. The government-supported co-operative scheme in which the rural poor placed great hope proved a big disappointment. In Middelburg the co-operative could not and would not meet the credit demands of its poor members. There were other dissatisfactions too – over the price of maize offered to producers and over 'middlemen' costs. The local NP MLA, J. D. Heyns, exploited these grievances when he visited De Lagersdrift to campaign for the 1921 election. He increased his majority in that election.<sup>82</sup>

As poor whites consolidated behind the NP there were also moves to narrow the gap between the NP and the SALP which was strong in the coal-mining areas around Witbank. In January 1920 the NP and LP discussed the possibility of a joint candidate to stand against the SAP and although the parties eventually put forward their own candidates, these negotiations did suggest

that there was common ground between them.<sup>83</sup> Whether such commonality was enough to dispose supporters of the two parties to ally only the crisis of 1922 would determine.

At the end of 1921 Witbank's white coal miners went on strike. Since 1919 they had been in constant conflict with management and the deteriorating economic climate heightened tension. A general strike was called on 1 January 1922 and in anticipation of violence police patrols were called out. Scab labour was threatened by the strikers and in February there was an attempt to sabotage the Witbank rail bridge. By the end of that month the prospect of open and armed defiance on the coalfields as well as on the Rand looked likely. A huge cache of dynamite was discovered in Witbank and the number of attacks on scab labour grew.<sup>84</sup>

On 10 March martial law was declared. The Middelburg district, which until 1925 included Witbank, was one of the affected areas. It is not clear whether troops were used against the coal miners but by 16 March the rebellion had been crushed.

The state's military response to the 1922 rebellion is clear in general terms: the citizen force and commando units were mobilised and deployed against the strikers. What is less clear is which units the state utilised and the problems associated with this choice. In Middelburg the loyalty of poor whites to the SAP government was questionable. Given the experience of 1915 it was not inconceivable that they might join the strikers. It is not surprising therefore to find that the Middelburg commando was absent from the list of commandos which served. Yet men in Middelburg, who may have belonged to other units, were called up to serve. At least eight of these men were charged for refusing to serve. Six were discharged on technicalities.<sup>85</sup> The government was not inclined to be lenient to strikers and their supporters and these discharges may have been prompted by a desire to avoid acting against those who had wide-ranging support among poor whites. Local discontent with government military policy was most clearly obvious in the case of a 'farmer' from the poor Hendrina area who attempted to raise a commando to help the Rand strikers. The general dissatisfaction of the district's population with government action was expressed in parliament by J. D. Heyns shortly after the 1922 rebellion. 'He hoped the Minister would not always be calling up the people from the country districts adjacent to the Rand to deal with disturbances there.'<sup>86</sup>

There are also signs that the district's poor had sympathy for the strikers' stand against authority, though it is unlikely that they knew enough about the conditions in the mining industry to specifically identify with the strikers. Furthermore their struggles were in basic ways quite different and without a



*Above: Transporting wood for sale in Potgietersrust. Below: This 'bywoner' supplemented his income by taking local children to school (E. G. Malherbe Collection, Killie Campbell Africana Library, University of Natal)*



strong organisation to link these, it was unlikely that they would specifically be related to the 1922 Rand upheaval. At De Lagersdrift some settlers, described by disapproving government officials as 'the other kind of man', were active in the first three months of 1922 defying the DRC management. C. C. Scheepers, one of those involved, was expelled in February 1922. He was described as an 'entirely undesirable person'. Inspired possibly by the climate of unrest at the time, Scheepers resisted his removal though eventually moved to a smallholding in Rustenburg. Scheepers was not alone in his stand and Nilant, the official historian of De Lagersdrift, observed that unco-operative behaviour was common at this time.<sup>87</sup> It is difficult to determine whether settler fractiousness at the colony was merely a spontaneous development arising out of a long history of dissatisfaction or whether it had some organisational base. A government report at the time suggested that this was possible. It stated that 'commercial travellers and hawkers are known to be employed in exploiting the country side (by spreading "Bolshevism")'. Whether this was the case in Middelburg is not clear, but what is important is that there was sympathy for strikers amongst rural poor whites, particularly those who appear to have belonged to the 'dangerous classes'. Equally importantly, sympathy was not translated into concrete action.<sup>88</sup>

There are a number of possible explanations for this phenomenon. The national structures of the NP refused publicly to commit the party to support the strikers and therefore deprived its rural supporters of an organisational link with the strikers. Its leadership, Afrikaner notables, had little sympathy for the strikers. And NP membership which was drawn from many classes, both urban and rural, dictated that it could not openly side with the strikers. Nevertheless it did initially contemplate some form of support and later on actually provided food and other necessities. A. G. Oberholster, who has documented this, argues that the NP stood back from unconstitutional protest but that some Afrikaners, particularly those who had rebelled in 1914 and were involved in the stillborn second and third rebellions (1916, 1918), were intimately involved in 1922. J. J. Pienaar, a former rebel, for example, met and planned military strategy with leaders of the strike commandos, many of whom were NP supporters. There were even rumours of an attempt to raise a commando in Lichtenburg to come to the aid of the strikers.<sup>89</sup>

Another explanation should be sought in the lingering suspicion that the city harboured 'volksvreemde elemente' and Bolshevism.<sup>90</sup> Before the establishment of the NP in Middelburg, the district's poor whites had no organisational focus. Traditional explanations for the aversion of 'the Afrikaner' to any type of co-operation or organisation have frequently referred to the strong spirit of individualism created by frontier conditions. There is an alternative

explanation. Middelburg's poor had shown interest in, and support for, rural organisation in the district. The early Farmers' Association and the co-operative had both attracted a poor white following, yet neither was the organic creation of the poor whites (both were inspired and dominated by big farmers) and both failed. They were therefore not inherently opposed to organisation per se. The stumbling block was the divided nature of the poor white population. Small plottolders, successful sharecroppers and those still believing in the viability of a country life were scornful of their poorer and disenfranchised colleagues. They called them the 'irresponsible' ones and accused them of 'losing their self-respect and their characters'.<sup>91</sup> Such conflict bedevilled organisation-building. A better-off Mapochs Gronden resident said in 1920, 'I cannot see a chance of co-operating ... I cannot work with a lazy man.' And party-political differences, possibly founded on the same class divisions, also came to the fore. In 1930, when an attempt was made to establish an agricultural co-operative in Mapochs Gronden, E. de Souza of the NP objected to the involvement of a Mr Op't Hof. 'We ... don't want anything to do with Op't Hof ... that man is secretary of the SAP's district organisation ... and works entirely in his own interests and towards his own goals.'<sup>92</sup>

The district's organisational void was filled by the NP. The party was able to accommodate the radical demands of its poor white constituency up to a point. It stressed the racist aspects of poor white dissatisfaction and toned down or diverted the class aspects. This was evident after the 1922 strike when the NP branches in Middelburg and Witbank came out strongly in support of the strikers. They demanded that both the strikers and those who had refused to bear arms against them be treated leniently. The pragmatic politics which led to the NP/SALP election Pact and general election victory in 1924 concealed the consolidation of NP electoral support and the ossification of class lines. The NP bound its supporters more and more tightly to itself and conversely reduced the likelihood of either rural support for the SALP or the emergence of an alternative organic political party representing the dispossessed. By mid-1924 De Lagersdrift and Mapochs Gronden were NP strongholds.<sup>93</sup>

Even as support for the NP grew, reminders of the past cropped up to colour the relationship between party and supporters. Middelburg's poor were not blind followers of NP policy and frequently pressed their MP, J. D. Heyns, to act on their behalf when they felt their interests to be threatened. In 1926, for example, the SA Police began cracking down on illegal stills in Mapochs Gronden. The inhabitants approached Heyns who took up the issue in parliament. 'They are arresting poor people and although they are not innocent yet they have been brought into temptation.' Heyns relied on the poor white vote and ensured that this dependence was translated into a defence of their



*Residents of Mapochs  
Gronden (above) and  
Tonteldoos (right).  
Many of these people  
earned cash by  
working for  
neighbouring Africans  
(E. G. Malherbe  
Collection, Killie  
Campbell Africana  
Library, University of  
Natal)*



interests. This had the effect of putting him into a position where he often criticised his own party.<sup>94</sup>

The growing support for the NP<sup>95</sup> was paralleled by state efforts to rid the countryside of the 'dangerous classes'. At De Lagersdrift the Pact government attempted to stamp out non-agricultural activities like transport-riding which were regarded as the preserve of the 'dangerous classes'. The CPW was given power by the state to evict 'anybody who wantonly spreads a revolutionary spirit in the settlement or who is guilty of agitation'. These measures succeeded for between 1928 and 1929 nobody was brought for disciplinary action and settlers were described at last as 'desirable citizens'.<sup>96</sup>

Punitive measures against poor whites in the countryside were softened by the state's civilised labour policy which extended white employment opportunities in the cities.<sup>97</sup> Up to 1924 industrial employment of whites had been dropping. The 1923 Hildick-Smith judgement had consolidated the move away from the job colour bar. The Pact government turned this trend around. The 1925 Wage Act, the 1926 Mines and Works Amendment Act and the 1927 Customs Tariff Act all helped to entrench white workers in their jobs.<sup>98</sup> Rural poor whites could now look far more optimistically to the cities. In a sense the civilised labour policy brought the 'dangerous classes' out of the twilight and for the first time gave them a firm footing in the cities.<sup>99</sup>

The NP also assisted co-operatives, provided credit, streamlined the marketing system and expanded agricultural support services. Aid to agriculture had its political rewards. In 1927 when General Kemp, the Pact's Minister of Agriculture, addressed a meeting in Middelburg, there was a 'conspicuous absence of opposition'. Two years later, when General J. B. M. Hertzog visited the town, he was greeted by 'a very large number of his supporters, hundreds of whom were unable to attend because the venue was packed out'. By 1930 the NP had attracted support from the big farmers as well and was speaking authoritatively for the district's entire white population.<sup>100</sup>

The entrenchment of the NP was to some extent made possible by the transformation of the poor white population. The development is not easy to show as most of the evidence is impressionistic. One indication is the rate of 'bywoner' ejections recorded in the Civil Judgement Book of Middelburg's magistrate.

Table 1<sup>101</sup>

| No. of evictions | 1918 | 1919 | 1920 | 1921 | 1922 | 1923 | 1924 | 1925 | 1926 | 1927 | 1928 | 1929 |
|------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
|                  | 1    | 3    | 2    | 8    | 9    | 2    | 3    | 2    | 1    | 10   | 1    | 3    |

What these figures show is that the rate of ejection did not rise uniformly. Indeed, with the exception of 1927 the Pact years show few evictions. These figures are significant when one considers the rise of the poor white problem (300 000 in 1932) and a rising rural population, despite the flight to the cities.<sup>102</sup> If more people were getting poor, it is reasonable to suppose that more were being evicted, yet these figures suggest that this was not so. In fact two things were happening. The Pact made it possible for more people to own smallholdings and thus convert themselves from 'bywoners' into landowners.<sup>103</sup> These smallholdings, however, were not profitable and many became poor all the same. Secondly, the definition of poor was changing. 'Bywoners' obviously continued to exist but instead of constituting the bulk of the poor white population, in the late 1920s and early 1930s – the period of severe drought and depression – it was the smallholder that swelled the number of poor whites.<sup>104</sup> And, as I have argued, these smallholders were very different from the 'bywoners' and the 'dangerous classes'. This is reflected in the decline of white rural unrest. At De Lagersdrift, for example, settlers became less troublesome. An 'irresponsible spirit' still prevailed in some quarters in 1926. The secretary of the settlement described this acidly as 'a general attitude of "not wanting to pay" [rent] rather than "not being able to pay"'. Evictions, however, tapered off and by 1927 there was little evidence of the presence of 'dangerous classes'. Some elements of these classes had moved on, while others had been transformed into a 'labouring class'.<sup>105</sup>

The reasons for these changes are to be found in the slow development of capitalist agriculture. While rich farmers like Darras and Patrojohn (wheat) and Lazarus (maize and potatoes) expanded their operations and displaced 'bywoners', there still remained many farms which offered 'sitplekke'. W. J. Grobler, for example, owned ten farms. He allowed white sharecroppers on these farms and used white labour for construction work on his property. In addition much state land was made available for smallholders and this gave those committed to an agricultural future a stake in the land.<sup>106</sup> For those disillusioned with farming there were urban job prospects, a fact confirmed by a 1925 Lands Department report. 'The settler who has a value in the labour market quite apart from farming is ... the one to give up [farming] first.'<sup>107</sup>

For many who remained on the land it was clear that the bounty of farming was limited. There was little prospect of their children finding a future in agriculture. Education thus became a symbol of hope.<sup>108</sup> A Mapochs Gronden 'bywoner' commented, 'For the poor man there is nothing to do but to see that their children are taught all the trades in the world.' The state was keen to promote education particularly as it believed that this would help to solve the poor white problem. J. D. Kleynhans, Secretary of the Transvaal Agricultural Union and

part of a government delegation to Middelburg, said in 1922: 'To prevent farmers drifting to towns, this could only effectively be accomplished by education ... What they [farmers] wanted was "School Farms".' He argued further that only education could 'ensure the predominance of the white race'. Between 1909 and 1921 three schools were erected in northern Middelburg. In addition the DRC erected an industrial school at De Lagersdrift in 1917 though it was only staffed in 1925.<sup>109</sup> Education may have provided the recipient with skills and better employment opportunities, but in all likelihood it also contributed to the hold of the NP over the rural population. As Dan O'Meara has pointed out, the Broederbond controlled the Afrikaner Teacher Association in the 1920s and used it 'to influence the cultural lives of many Afrikaans-speakers'.<sup>110</sup>

By 1930 an alliance based on opposition to the capitalist state between rural poor and urban workers had ceased being possible. The Pact between the NP and SALP ended the year before and a wedge had been driven between the rural 'dangerous classes' and the white urban wage-earners. This development was consolidated during the 1929 'swart gevaar' election when white workers and poor whites were conditioned 'into believing that the Africans and not capital were their real enemy'.<sup>111</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to insert class into the heart of an analysis of the poor white problem. It argues that poor whites were divided into 'dangerous' and 'labouring' classes and that these divisions had a basis in different relations of production and differing experiences of the onset of capitalist agriculture. Although it is important to realise that such class divisions were not rigid and that there were shifts in class position, it is equally important to stress that these divisions were real and manifested in the political behaviour of the actors. For the 'dangerous class' this involved opposition to the state on a number of levels; from individual defiance to collective resistance. Despite sharing much in common with unemployed urban poor whites and something in common with white wage earners, rural poor whites never managed to forge an anti-state alliance with their urban counterparts. Changes in rural class structure brought on by the spread of capitalist class relations and by state intervention (aid to productive or potentially productive farmers and mild sanctions against unproductive quasi-proletarians) undermined the chances of a wide-ranging alliance. As important was the role of the NP in attracting poor white support, in converting class antagonism into race antagonism<sup>112</sup> and finally, after 1924, in assisting poor whites in the country to become land owners and in the cities to become wage earners.<sup>113</sup>