

Chapter 2

The Orange Free State and the Rebellion of 1914: the influence of industrialisation, poverty and poor whiteism

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*Die sprinkaan en die droogte
is swaar op onse land
en wat van ons moet worde
is bowe my verstand*

*Die geld is ook te danig skaars
en die koffie word so duur
die vreemde banke is ons baas
en die 'intres' vreet soos vuur¹*

But already in the long drought many of these people had lost what little they had and rebellion does not seem such a serious thing to desperate men.²

The first armed insurrection by whites in South Africa in this century took place in 1914. The 1914 Rebellion has been widely attributed to the influence of Afrikaner nationalism. This chapter, however, suggests that burgeoning rural poverty and dissatisfaction with the government amongst poorer agriculturalists provided a strong class basis for the Rebellion. It does not claim that a class explanation is sufficient in itself, only that this dimension is important and until now has been largely ignored.

By the late nineteenth century a crisis was already looming in the lives of many agriculturalists. We now know that the economy of the Orange Free State had reached a crisis point in the 1890s.³ Widespread dispossession had occurred as a result of a sustained process of capital accumulation in agriculture. This

accumulation followed the opening of the diamond field markets during the 1860s, and the corresponding crystallisation of classes and development of state structures. By 1896 there were already 2 363 heads of families too poor to purchase their own weapons.⁴ The South African War (1899–1902) was both to reveal just how far societal dislocation had progressed and to accentuate that process. During the latter part of the war, some of the landless, particularly in the Transvaal, enticed by inflated Imperial promises that they would be given farms after the conclusion of hostilities, flocked to fight under the banner of the Union Jack. These 'joiners', as they came to be called, are to be distinguished from the 'hendsoppers' who merely remained neutral, and in many cases were drawn from a wealthier class.⁵

In 1907 Milner's post-war reconstruction came to an end. In that year the republican *Oranje Unie* party won the first election of the century in the Orange Free State. Interpretation of this event has tended to stress the ease of the electoral victory, and by extension, the homogeneity of the OFS population.⁶ Yet here too, recent research has provided new insights. It has been shown that the 1907 election was not the easy victory it appears, with the republicans merely resuming their task of governing. Instead, the republicans only succeeded in creating a power base once the reconstruction government was seen to have failed either to relieve the distress of the people or to provide acceptable compensation for war damage. The republicans initiated intensive efforts at reconciliation. Those targeted were English-speakers, poor whites and 'protected burghers'. The latter were Free Staters who had been provided with British army protection during the South African War, either because they remained neutral or because they actively fought for Britain. The *Oranje Unie* portrayed itself as non-racial and non-partisan and promised job-creating programmes and labour colonies for poor whites.

It appears that the creation of an Afrikaner anti-republican party was made impossible by the intensity of feeling in the post-war Free State. In terms of contested seats in that election the republicans secured 59 per cent of the vote, whilst the opposition Independents and the Constitutional Party took 41 per cent of the vote. This election was far from a walkover. It confirms the advanced state of political, and by implication economic, differentiation amongst the white population of the Free State.⁷

In 1910 the Union of South Africa came into being. The new Botha–Smuts government proved over-eager in the eyes of many to co-operate with imperialism and the Randlords against the 'have-nots'. Whilst political rhetoric continued to focus on the war fought between two nationalisms, the precarious existence of many agriculturalists focused antagonism on the government. The South African Party (SAP) appeared to place agriculture low on its

list of priorities. In 1912 came the Botha–Hertzog split. The views of these politicians conflicted on imperial association. They also diverged on the slogan 'South Africa First', which encapsulated rural dissatisfaction and perceptions of government neglect. The following year burgher commandos were mobilised to deal with a strike of mineworkers on the Rand. This served to confirm the impression among poorer white farmers that the SAP government favoured mining capital at the expense of urban and rural poor whites.

The Rebellion and subsequent interpretations

It is against this background that the Rebellion occurred. The first phase began on 9 October 1914 when Lieutenant-Colonel S. G. (Manie) Maritz, district staff officer of the frontier region with German South West Africa, went into rebellion. The 'Maritz Rebellion' was relatively unsuccessful, and Maritz was unable to generate much support for his cause in the Cape. He was considering disbanding his forces when rebellion broke out in the two former republics and convinced him to continue the struggle. The rebellion by Maritz influenced the second phase of the Rebellion which began on 22 October 1914. The leaders of this phase were C. R. de Wet, who mobilised rebel commandos in the Free State, and C. F. Beyers, former Commandant-General of the Union Defence Force, who led rebel forces in the Transvaal. Another important rebel leader in the Transvaal was Major J. C. G. Kemp, officer commanding the 1 400 men in the defence force camp at Potchefstroom.

During November 1914 rebel resistance in the Free State collapsed. The following month government forces overran the Transvaal and in January of the following year, rebel resistance in the Cape was overwhelmed. It was subsequently revealed that 190 rebels and 132 government troops had been killed. The official estimate (which is probably too low) of the number of men who went into rebellion was given as 11 472, of whom 7 123 came from the Free State, 2 998 from the Transvaal and 1 252 from the Cape.⁸

The established interpretation of the Rebellion clings to a homogeneous vision of the *volk*, and sees the 'imperial connection' as being responsible for the aberration of Afrikaner fighting Afrikaner. According to this viewpoint, when the First World War broke out, thousands of patriots, still deeply bitter at the South African War and anxious for a true Afrikaner republic, shrewdly judged their chances against a weakened Britain, and rose against a government which no longer reflected their interests.⁹

Yet, even at the time of the Rebellion there were those who believed that the motives for the Rebellion were more base and less idealistic, as in two letters Merriman wrote to Smuts in December 1915: 'I refer to the question of the *Poor*

White ... this question constitutes a great and growing evil ... recent events both in the rebellion, and in the elections that followed, must have convinced even the dullest of us ... of the dire possibilities that lie before us from this course.' In a further letter written on the same day he expanded on the theme: 'These wretched folk are the rank and file of a Nationalist brigade ready for any mischief. They are the raw materials in which the Predikant, the country attorney, all the carpetbaggers and Graeculi esuventes of the Bar work.'¹⁰

Many of the magistrates agreed with Merriman. A. M. Baumann, a law agent in Winburg, noted that very few of the larger landowners joined the rebellion, and that the rebels were mainly people heavily in debt and youngsters, 'but not men of substance and standing'.¹¹ A. J. Brand, son of the late president of the Free State and magistrate of Lindley, was even more forthright; 'the class of people who joined the rebels did not bother much about politics they were on the "loot": that was their object. They were not people of standing or responsibility.'¹² Similarly, Raymond Harley, the magistrate of Winburg, told the Judicial Commission on the rebellion that 'Conroy [a rebel leader] had been canvassing very acutely for recruits in the northern part of the district ... most of his recruits were gentlemen whom he found it necessary to equip with new clothes and boots ... At that time he had half a dozen men with him who could be called wealthy and influential, but the great majority of his followers were of the bywoner class.'¹³

The established interpretation resolutely ignored evidence that the rebellion was also a class response to societal dislocation. In terms of available evidence it is possible to view the rebellion as the reaction of marginal farmers, 'bywoners' and poor whites to the ruinous post-war economic environment, and to the very real threat of dispossession and the forced trek to the cities.

Some contemporaries were aware, if only at the rudimentary level revealed above, that the existing economic environment was a major factor in the rebellion. The process of white rural impoverishment, which had already reached crisis proportion prior to the South African War, was exacerbated in the post-war period. Landownership became increasingly insecure. Those farmers who were left with neither purchasing nor borrowing power to make a fresh start were frequently forced to sell their farms. The high incidence of bonded property also left farmers vulnerable in a post-war climate of economic depressions, poor seasons, low prices and a depleted stock population.

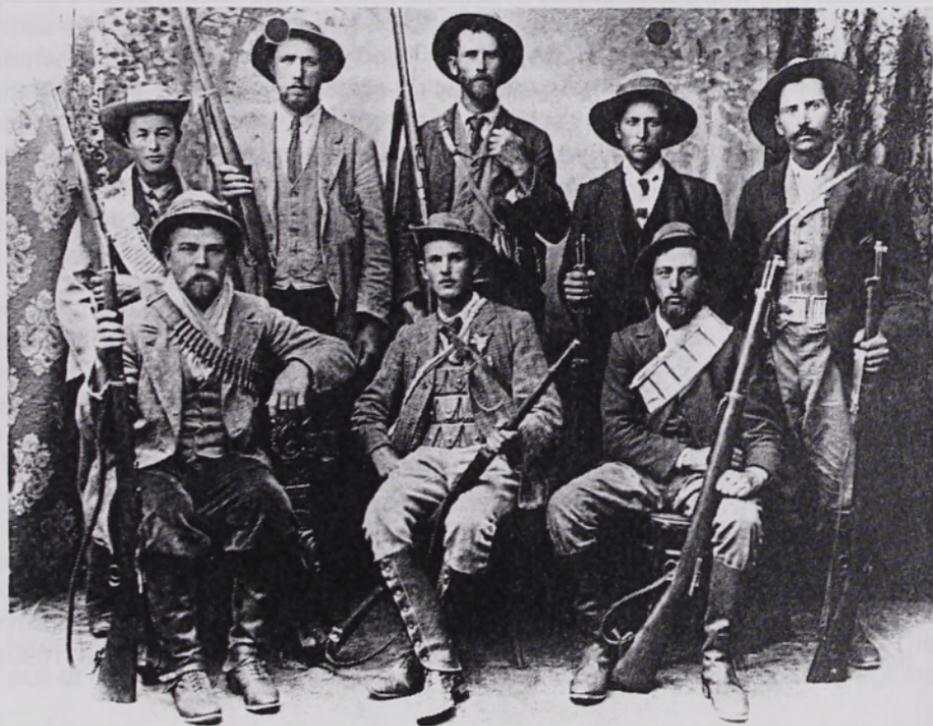
The position facing the landless 'bywoners' and poor whites was even more precarious. Land had become a scarce resource in the Free State and the option of acquiring land was only available to those with substantial capital resources. The landless were therefore forced into competition with black

workers, either as sharecroppers or labourers on the land of others. Being a less profitable and tractable workforce, this was a losing struggle with only eviction ahead.¹⁴ Fears of proletarianisation and forced migration to wage labour in the towns, therefore, coincided amongst marginal landowners and the landless. It was this ubiquitous fear together with growing resentment against the government for failing to ameliorate the situation which was to play an important role in the rebellion.

Ecological diversity: Why the southern and eastern Free State remained neutral whilst the north went into rebellion

After the fighting had ended Hertzog noted that the rebellion had been confined to 'those six of seven districts' in the north-eastern Free State; to a few districts in the north-western Transvaal including Lichtenburg and Wolmaransstad, and to the north-western Cape.¹⁵ An explanation for this phenomenon is to be found in the regionally uneven process of rural transformation.

Burghers from Ladybrand during the Rebellion of 1914. Back: C. J. Muller, P. Muller, G. Delport, Joubert, E. Kriel. Front: Lourens, -, Joubert (Transvaal Archives Depot, Photograph 21592)



The Free State is divided into three specific regions distinguished by greatly differing rainfall rates, broad changes in soil fertility and widely divergent agricultural utilisation. The three regions are the pastoral southern Free State including such districts as Bethulie, Boshoff, most of the Bloemfontein district, Edenburg, Fauresmith, Jacobsdal and Philippolis. The second region is that area in the east, along the Caledon River, the so-called 'Conquered Territory'. Included in this region are the districts of Ficksburg, Ladybrand, Rouxville, Smithfield, Wepener and Thaba 'Nchu.¹⁶ In contrast, the third region, the northern Free State, is a primarily arable region and includes such districts as Bethlehem, the other parts of the Bloemfontein district, Frankfort, Harrismith, Heilbron, Hoopstad, Kroonstad, Lindley, Senekal, Vrede, Vredefort and Winburg.

The most pronounced distinction between the three regions was to be found in the eastern Free State. Here the fertile grainlands presented some farmers with the opportunity to generate and accumulate capital, whilst others were rapidly dispossessed. In the 'wheat granary' of the republic, agricultural land was the most expensive, and consequently farms were smaller and more closely settled than elsewhere in the Free State.

In his work *De ondergang van een wereld* (1903) J. Visscher, the Dutch socialist who was subsequently to become editor of *The Friend*, described the process of class formation in this region. He pointed to the emergence some thirty years before the South African War, of a class of wealthy farmers whom he called *heerenboeren* or gentlemen farmers. According to Visscher, the wealth and security conferred by fertile landholdings in the east led to the growth of a class distinguished from the other Free Staters. He pointed to the acculturation of this class, to their overseas education and to the adoption of the English language in their homes, as a reflection of a more sophisticated and cosmopolitan outlook.

By the time the South African War broke out, societal transformation was so advanced in this region that it had little in common with either the pre-industrial past or its politics, in the form of republicanism. As a result, the highest percentage of 'protected burghers' during the war was to be found amongst the burghers in this region attempting to protect their assets. Of the six eastern districts some 53,1 per cent or over half the population fell into this category.¹⁷ The east was to remain to a large extent an observer in the rebellion.

The southern Free State was also a region which experienced profound social dislocation prior to the war. Here the close proximity of the diamond fields and the opening up of large internal markets led to far-reaching social transformation. The collapse of the hunting/trading/trekking economy by the 1890s,

together with the pastoral nature of farming in the region which required greater investment to succeed, led to differentiation in status and wealth, and to landlessness becoming 'a decisive determining factor in the process of class differentiation'.¹⁸ In the south the larger capitalised farmer was favoured over his poorer brethren. This was because of the pastoral nature of farming which is both capital intensive and risk laden. The Free State was subject to recurrent droughts which, in this type of agriculture, 'destroy not only the cost of labour of one year, as in arable farming, but also a considerable part of the capital'.¹⁹ The smaller farmers whose capital was wholly tied up in their stock were particularly vulnerable to natural depredation, and to the loss of their land should they lose their animals. In addition, the pastoral nature of agriculture in this region meant that only wealthier farmers, capable of affording the relatively high stock prices, were able to expand their operations to take advantage of the Kimberley and Witwatersrand markets.

Rural transformation was an ongoing process in the southern Free State. As early as the 1850s the economic boom in sheep farming encouraged accumulation and dispossession.²⁰ In later decades the process was hastened by the influx of wealthier farmers from the Cape and eastern Free State, attracted by the market potential of pastoral agriculture in the wake of the mineral revolution.²¹ Dispossession thus occurred over a long period. Prior to the 1890s the availability of cheap land elsewhere meant that resistance to the process of rural transformation was minimised by the out-migration of marginal farmers. Looking back over the process of rural transformation and dispossession in the southern Free State, the census of 1920 noted 'the decrease in population ... could only be attributed to the fact that certain of the more prosperous farmers have bought up all the farms coming into the market during the past few years and used them as cattle farms, thus displacing one or more European families ... the chief factor was the tendency of farms to change hands at high prices and to come under the control of progressive farmers.'²²

Following the war, the process of accumulation and dispossession accelerated in the south. Land hunger encouraged a new wave of settlers, whilst speculation and government land purchases drove up prices. Between 1904 and 1911 the Free State as a whole experienced a 29,6 per cent increase in white rural population, and a 9,12 per cent increase in urban population.²³ Yet after 1911, even this enormous influx could not mask the exodus of farmers from the southern districts. Between 1911 and 1921 each of the southern districts recorded a decrease of more than 10 per cent in their white population.²⁴

During this period many marginal farmers, 'bywoners' and poor whites were forced to move into the peripheral and more arid regions of the country. The pull of lower land prices and the harsh conditions in these less fertile regions

led to their becoming pools of discontented Free Staters, nurturing grievances against a government which they believed had failed them. It was these areas, along with the northern Free State, which were to go into rebellion. Between 1904 and 1911 the population of Kenhardt in the north-western Cape increased by 78,29 per cent, whilst the population of the south-western Transvaal including such areas as Lichtenburg and Wolmaransstad increased by 40,43 per cent.²⁵ Discussing the influx of Free Staters into the Lichtenburg District, the postmaster told the rebellion commission: 'About that time a number of Free Staters trekked into the Lichtenburg district, and greatly influenced political opinion there. That was in 1914. Ground was then being sold at unprecedented high prices in the Free State, and they were selling out and buying twice as much land with the money in Lichtenburg as they had in the Free State. They also brought their Free State ideas with them of course ... I think the influx of Free Staters brought the people over to the rebels' side. Of course every Free Stater brought into the district was against the Botha government.'²⁶

Resistance to social transformation did not surface in the southern and eastern Free State, this process having taken place gradually during the fifty years of white settlement prior to the South African War. In the north, however, the unfavourable consequences of capitalist development emerged suddenly and starkly after the war and were magnified by a threatening economic environment.

The northern Free State with its largely arable agriculture was the most backward region prior to the South African War. Neither the discovery of diamonds nor the Rand goldfields had shaken the area out of its lethargy. In the 1890s much of the produce arriving on the Rand 'was still in fact the produce of Basutoland' despite the fact that the northern Free State was the closest Free State region to the Witwatersrand.²⁷

The capitalisation of agriculture which occurred in the rest of the Free State was more limited in the north. This was because prior to the 1880s there was only a small market, at Harrismith, for the arable produce of the north.²⁸ Poor roads and competition from black producers in Basutoland, and white producers in the 'Conquered Territory', limited the opportunities offered by the diamond fields. This, in turn, restricted societal dislocation and provided the landed and landless in these districts with a more secure environment. This meant that while a class of *heerenboeren* did not emerge, neither did a class of white proletarians. The region's class composition was somehow frozen but the most common member was the poor 'bywoner'. The resident magistrate of Lindley, when discussing the population of his district, wrote, 'There is no doubt that this is one of the poorest districts in the Colony, the majority of the population being 'bywoners'.²⁹ Those who lived in the Wilge River subdivi-

sion, for instance, which included parts of the Frankfort, Bethlehem, Vrede and Harrismith districts were referred to as 'Riemslanders', a term which was synonymous with their being 'Takhare', or poor backwoods people.³⁰

The fact that this region was less sundered by societal transformation is also revealed by the greater commitment amongst northerners to republicanism during the war. Vredefort had the smallest number of 'protected burghers' in the republic, some 9 per cent of the population were of this class — thereafter Kroonstad with 16 per cent, Lindley 17 per cent and Vrede with 17,5 per cent 'protected burghers'. Three districts had higher proportions of 'protected burghers': Harrismith 19 per cent, Bethlehem 25 per cent and Winburg with 28 per cent.³¹ However, the reasons for the higher percentages in these districts was due to the presence of the 'Prinsloo surrenderers'. On 29 July 1900 General Marthinus Prinsloo surrendered to the British along with some 3 000 burghers, mainly northern Free Staters. Ordinarily these men would have been classified ex-combatants or 'ex-burghers', but they fell within the terms of an amnesty offered by Lord Roberts, and thus became entitled to consideration as 'protected burghers'. Their position being unique does nothing to undermine the view that the north showed a greater commitment to the republican cause in the South African War, than the rest of the Free State.

Rural transformation and social dislocation in the OFS; the growing post-war crisis in the northern Free State

In the twelve years from the end of the war to the Rebellion, the northern Free State became subject to intense pressures as rural transformation accelerated. The capitalisation of this arable region, made possible by the potential of the Witwatersrand market, led to a rise in land values, to the crystallisation of classes and to increasing dispossession. At the same time a conflux of factors specific to the nature of arable farming in the north also undermined existing society. In the past under-capitalised farmers and the landless had long found their means of survival in land-subdivision and black sharecropping. Following the war, however, these former societal supports were to evolve into factors precipitating dispossession.

In the post-war period subdivision amongst heirs according to Roman Dutch law increased, despite the repeal of such legislation in 1901. Impetus was given to subdivision by deaths of landowners during the war, and by the need for liquidity after the war.³² Yet, more often than not, subdivision in the post-war economic climate was a short-term expedient purchased at the cost of long-term security. Smaller units were frequently uneconomical for those marginal farmers unable to move away from traditional extensive farming methods. The

final step on the road to dispossession was often the bonding of subdivided properties. This left farmers dependent on the prevailing economic climate, which became increasingly harsh during this period. As landownership became more insecure, sharecropping turned into a means of survival for marginal farmers. With the intense need for capital and labour in the post-war period, sharecropping offered a modicum of income for a minimum of effort and expense. It was now that white 'bywoners' were being dispossessed to make way for black labourers, their families and stock. During this period, however, a labour shortage threatened many of the smaller farmers, because the larger farmers and land companies were in a better position to attract and retain labour.

The situation intensified after Union, when political agitation began for legislation to restrict the independence and prosperity of black peasants. This agitation was initiated by larger farmers, who sought to pry loose the reserves of black labour tied up on the extensive holdings of land companies. This agitation, however, also posed a threat to the great mass of little men; the smaller landowners on subdivided farms, the tenants and 'bywoners' for whom a supply of labour meant their security, social standing and survival on land. The 1913 Land Act with its ambiguities and inequitable application only served to add to the sense of grievance focused on the government, for failing to provide an adequate supply of labour for all.³³

A variety of other pressures were to assail farmers in the north. A continuous period, from 1910 onwards, of prolonged drought, severe hailstorms, loss of crops and stock, left agriculturalists unable to meet their debt repayments. The distressed economic climate, which developed as a result of the 1913/14 labour unrest and fear of war in Europe, led to the money market calling in unserviced bonds. Concurrently, produce prices slumped and consumer prices escalated. The rapidly deteriorating conditions led to pleas for government support. A state moratorium on debt was called for, and the government was warned that 'people who are in debt and cannot pay become quite desperate when sued'.³⁴

The government was not prepared to intervene at this stage, although Parliament was set to discuss the situation during the disrupted 1914 session. In denying any tangible form of assistance to farmers with only mortgage foreclosures ahead, the government was ensuring that they had little to lose in rebellion. The escape route of selling up and migrating elsewhere was also denied to struggling farmers once the money market crashed in 1913. Thereafter buyers were unable to obtain bonds. Plummeting land prices resulting from the credit squeeze meant that sales would not realise the capital to cover existing bonds. These costly bonds had been negotiated during earlier years

of land hunger and price inflation. It was now that starvation became visible and labourers were for hire at 2s 6d per day, where poor whites had formerly refused to work for 5s per day.³⁵

In their desperate search for some form of political support large numbers of Free Staters turned to the English-dominated Labour Party which was forcefully promoting economic grievances. 'Remarkable progress' was achieved in the Free State, and in the Transvaal, where Labour gained a majority in the provincial elections.³⁶ The appeal of this party was to wane, however, when it dropped its 'bread and butter' focus, in order to reassert its pro-Imperial sentiments following the outbreak of the First World War. The political success of this predominantly English-speaking urban party on the Free State platteland reveals the desperation of Afrikaners alienated from the government and threatened with dispossession by a deteriorating economic environment.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to show that the established interpretation, portraying the Rebellion as the patriotic response of a homogeneous republic, united by a hatred of all things British, is largely monocausal. According to this interpretation the rebels were people prepared to sacrifice everything for their ideals. Yet, closer examination of the regions which went into rebellion reveals that the predominant motive was not only self-sacrifice but also self-preservation. The rank-and-file rebels were largely motivated by a determination to preserve their very existence against the destructive effects of societal transformation. They were people forced into rebellion by desperation, trying to avoid losing a hold on the land, and being forced to migrate and become labourers in the towns. As contemporaries noted, many had lost what little they had, and rebellion did not seem such a serious thing to desperate men.

Chapter 3

'God het ons arm mense die houtjies gegee': poor white woodcutters in the southern Cape forest area, c. 1900–1939

Albert Grundlingh

This chapter focuses on a particular group of 'poor whites' who eked out an existence in the southern Cape forest belt. Although their history goes back to the eighteenth century, this overview concentrates mainly on the first four decades of the twentieth century. An attempt is made, in the first place, to outline the material conditions under which the woodcutters lived, and secondly, to analyse those forces which to a large measure shaped the socio-economic environment and context of their lives.

The indigenous forest of the southern Cape, located along a narrow coastal strip and stretching for about 200 kilometres between George and Humansdorp, was the main source of income for generations of woodcutters. Knysna, between George and Humansdorp, was the principal centre of the timber industry. Despite high rainfall, poor quality soil militated against agricultural and pastoral diversification. Consequently, until well into the twentieth century the economic life and structure of Knysna revolved around the timber trade. Deep valleys and gorges, nearly impenetrable forests and the steep Outeniqua Mountains rendered access difficult and contributed to the relative isolation of the area in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was only with the construction of a railway line in 1928, and tarred roads during World War II, that this situation changed markedly.

From the earliest days of the Dutch East India Company and white settlement at the Cape, there was a demand for timber. Once the forests in the vicinity of the Peninsula had been depleted, attempts were made to obtain timber from further afield. The eastward movement of the Dutch colonists facilitated this

search and in 1711, with the initial settlement of the Outeniqua Mountain area, news of vast forests in the area was relayed to the authorities in Cape Town. The inaccessibility of the area handicapped trade, but after the completion of a road from Swellendam and the establishment of an official 'timber post' in 1772, the situation began to improve and there was a gradual influx of settlers intent on making their living from the forests. The founding of towns in the Cape interior during the nineteenth century increased the demand for wood for the construction of buildings, and the trade also benefited from the Great Trek which boosted demand for oxwagons. The discovery of diamonds in Kimberley and gold on the Reef as well as the expansion of the railway network acted as a further powerful stimulus, since timber from the George–Knysna area was used for mining props and railway sleepers.¹

The timber trade was intimately connected with the general growth of the South African economy, and the twentieth-century industrial expansion of the country ensured an increasing market for timber — especially during the First World War, when South Africa was cut off from foreign imports and local manufacturing developed rapidly. Subsequently the timber industry experienced serious fluctuations, particularly during the depression of the early thirties, but there was always the demand, albeit limited, for railway sleepers to fall back on.²

The favourable market for timber during the First World War coincided with the increase of the white population in the George–Knysna–Humansdorp districts from 18 623 in 1911 to 23 179 in 1921. Many of the newcomers to the area were evicted 'bywoners' from the semi-arid neighbouring Karoo districts across the Outeniqua Mountains. These districts (Prince Albert, Willowmore, and Oudtshoorn in particular) experienced a severe economic crisis after the ostrich feather slump of 1913/14 and a crippling drought in 1916 so that the surviving larger landowners were disinclined to keep 'bywoners' on their farms. The forest and coastal belt was a haven for such poor whites from the Karoo.³

Moreover, besides the opportunity of earning a living as woodcutters, it was also in another way relatively easier for the poverty-stricken fugitives from the Karoo to survive in this area than in the unyielding territory across the mountain. As a local notable testified to the 1920 unemployment commission:

George is a poor man's district, it is the home of the sweet potato on which the poor generally live ... The poor can live on sweet potatoes which cost them very little, and the result is that people are apt to flock in from the poorer districts in times of drought for that reason. At present we are, I might say, almost full up with people who have come in during the last few years owing to the severe droughts in the Karoo districts.⁴

The sweet potato was easy to cultivate in the sandy soil, and it became the staple diet of the destitute classes in the area who were unable to afford more nutritional food.⁵

There were various, and at times overlapping categories of poor whites in the forest region. Some were in state employ on forest settlements such as Jonkersberg and Bergplaats in the George district, and Karatara in the Knysna district, while others worked the forests independently and only occasionally assisted on the plantations as casual day-labourers. The forestry settlements were started during and shortly after the First World War as relief schemes for the urban unemployed and the rural casualties of drought. In January 1926 there were 1 865 white men, women and children on these settlements. The men, totalling 363, were used mainly in the construction of roads to open up plantation areas and in preparing the ground for afforestation schemes. Married men received 7s 6d per day and single men 5s 10d. These wages were somewhat higher than the approximately 5s that white day-labourers obtained in the area.⁶

Woodcutters working an assegai tree into pieces from which spokes were prepared (Millwood House, Knysna)



The establishment of these forestry settlements was not simply inspired by humanitarianism. Karatara and Bergplaats were founded in 1922 in direct response to the strike of that year on the Rand. Removing the 'dangerous classes' from the 'pernicious influences' in Johannesburg and resettling them elsewhere was a deliberate state strategy to assist in blunting the strong challenge from the white working class on the Rand. In Parliament, General J. C. Smuts clearly explained his objectives:

I think it will ... be to the advantage of the country to move away from the Witwatersrand, at any rate, part of the population that has accumulated there in recent years. I think we are all agreed that the Rand is not the best environment for the thousands of people who have flocked there from the country side ... The best kindness, the greatest service the Government could do to these people would be to take them away. Take them away to irrigation works elsewhere, settle them on afforestation colonies ... Get them away from surroundings which have been very bad for them and worse for the country.⁷

Officially the forestry settlements were considered the ideal environment for the 'rehabilitation' of 'misguided' and 'fractious' elements on the Rand. On these settlements, which were 'off the beaten track and amidst the most beautiful scenic surroundings', the settlers were placed under the 'guidance of persons interested in their welfare'. Under these 'idyllic' conditions it was hoped that they would make a fresh start with 'a healthy outlook on life'.⁸ It is doubtful whether disgruntled ex-urban dwellers found their new rural setting quite as congenial, and it is equally unlikely that they 'reformed' according to the wishes and desires of the state. The regular flouting of regulations and instances of abscondence seem to indicate that the wishes of the state remained unfulfilled.⁹ Others who stayed might also have found the discipline and strictly controlled work environment irksome and even oppressive, but were prepared to tolerate these as the price of security and a degree of permanency.

However, the majority of poor whites in the area found themselves outside the plantation settlements. They constituted the bulk of the woodcutting population and were largely dependent on the indigenous forests for their livelihood. Many of them viewed the forests as a providential gift; one woodcutter expressed this general sentiment simply and evocatively: 'God het ons arm mense die houtjies gegee.'¹⁰ Some of them were descendants of the early eighteenth-century Dutch pioneers, while others were relative newcomers who, having failed to make a living elsewhere, turned to woodcutting as a last resort. Among the woodcutters there were also a few descendants of British immigrants who had been unable to succeed on the land, as well as a small

number of Italian immigrants and their descendants. The latter had originally been brought out by the Cape government from Turin in 1879 as part of an ill-conceived scheme to start a silk industry near Knysna. The scheme had failed, mainly because of a lack of mulberry leaves to feed the silkworms, and in course of time some of these immigrants drifted into the ranks of the woodcutter community.¹¹

In 1913, the Forest Act required that all woodcutters working in the indigenous state forests had to be registered. Some 1 200 men did so and no new names were allowed on the list. A registered woodcutter was officially supposed to derive his main source of income from working the timber allotted to him by the state, else his name could be deleted from the list and his licence revoked. A woodcutters' board, consisting of the magistrate and a number of local luminaries, closely monitored the situation in co-ordination with the Forestry Department. In addition, any woodcutter found guilty of contravening one of the numerous forestry regulations could be deprived of the right to work in the forests. Natural attrition, and the actions of the board, meant that the number of registered men had dwindled to 557 by 1929.

Besides the registered woodcutters in state forests, there were those who worked in privately owned forests. Estimates of the number of these unregistered men vary, but in the late twenties they probably slightly exceeded the registered woodcutters. Whereas the average annual income of registered woodcutters in the twenties was between 30 and 40, unregistered woodcutters were generally even poorer. At times they were obliged to act as assistants for those working in the state forests.¹²

Very few woodcutters actually owned fixed property. Most of the registered woodcutters rented small plots at a nominal fee from the state. Unregistered woodcutters on private estates usually had to work the surrounding forests on behalf of the landowner, and they were liable to be evicted if they tried to dispose of the wood on their own. In general the woodcutters did very little in the way of cultivating other produce for the market. The smallness of their plots, the poor quality of the soil, lack of capital, and the limited local market (which was in any event supplied by the larger farmers) meant that they resorted to subsistence farming, with sweet potatoes as the staple product. For their cash income they remained entirely dependent on the forests.¹³

The woodcutters' inability to farm commercially, and the seasonal nature of the forestry activities, often led to accusations of laziness and indolence, qualities which were sometimes regarded as endemic to poor whites in general.¹⁴ In reality, however, the work the woodcutters performed and the conditions under

*Old woodcutter
plying his trade
(Millwood
House, Knysna)*



which they toiled were most arduous. 'Their work, be it felling, slipping or sawing is laborious in the extreme,' a sympathetic observer wrote in 1911:

... hard, rough, exhausting work, for the most part in a damp cold forest where the rainfall is excessive, where the paths are pools of mud and slush, where the undergrowth is forever damp and wet, where the sun is forever hidden. In sweat besodden clothes they toil and sleep and sleep and toil. A more fatiguing work, a more unhealthy occupation cannot be imagined. It is often in the most inaccessible places that the woodcutter has to conduct operations: along the slopes of steep mountains, in the bottom of deep kloofs, he has to fight his battle with the sturdy, unmanageable monsters of the woods. To see a heavy log slipped out of a deep gully

and dragged to the sawpit, inch by inch, by long teams of crawling, groaning oxen, along slippery, slushy, almost impassable slip paths, is a never to be forgotten sight.¹⁵

After a spell in the forest, the woodcutter came home to little more than a corrugated iron or wooden shack, consisting of two rooms with a clay floor and a kitchen. His large family – in the thirties the average family consisted of eight children – meant unhygienic, overcrowded living conditions and often hunger. The woodcutter nevertheless considered his male off-spring as an economic asset who, after a rudimentary schooling, could at the age of 14 or 15 years, or even earlier, assist him in the forest. The main task of the elder daughters was to help their mother with the burden of childcare and house-keeping. In the early twentieth century very few women accepted wage labour – they usually married early and remained part of the woodcutter community – but in the twenties, in the era of the Pact government, an increasing number of daughters left home either for domestic service in town, or for factory work in the larger and expanding industrial centres such as Port Elizabeth. In general, though, the woodcutter families lived an isolated and insular life, cut off from 'civilising' influences and attached to the forest and their particular life-style.¹⁶

It is important to emphasise that desperately poor as the woodcutters undoubtedly were, they did not represent the lowest stratum of the contemporary poor white population. They were not in the same category as the 'dangerous lumpenproletariat class' which existed on crime, handouts or both. The woodcutters were self-employed, willing and able to work, but often lacked the necessary capital, training and, most important, the opportunity to benefit from their labours.¹⁷

Although the 'woodcutter problem' was comparatively small in relation to the overall 'poor white question', which involved some 300 000 people in the early thirties, the woodcutters were nevertheless a distinct feature of the social composition of the area. In the early twentieth century three classes can be discerned amongst the whites in the forest belt: firstly, the landowners, forest-owners, merchants and professional men; secondly, and below them, those in permanent employ as artisans, clerks and other intermediate functionaries; and thirdly at the bottom of the social pyramid ('at a judicious distance and knowing how to keep their place') the poor whites. There was a considerable social distance between the underprivileged and the more well-to-do, the latter often treating the poor with contemptuous disdain.¹⁸ The wealthy and the destitute lived in two worlds as if they had nothing in common, but in a historical-materialist sense the social relationship between the two was inti-

mately intertwined and riven with conflict. There was, in fact, as will be seen, a direct correlation between the riches of the one and the poverty of the other.

If there was a growing gap in conventional social terms between the wealthy and poor in white society, there was much less of a racial divide between poor whites and the coloured population in the area. Of the total number of registered woodcutters in 1913 (some 1 200 men), about 195 men (17 per cent) were considered coloured. There was no difference in the material conditions between the coloured and poor white woodcutters. Independent coloured woodcutters worked under the same circumstances and regulations as whites in the forests and shared the same physical privations as well as outlook on their work and environment.¹⁹ Occasionally, whites might have employed coloureds to help them, but the reverse also occurred. In the immediate aftermath of the South African War, for instance, discharged coloured muleteers from the British army moved into the Knysna area from mission stations at Bredasdorp, Mossel Bay and Bethelsdorp, and in an attempt to benefit from rising timber prices at the time, hired local poor white woodcutters to assist them in collecting wood.²⁰ Admittedly some white woodcutters might have resented this fact,²¹ but ultimately hard material realities blurred and undermined attitudes of presumed superiority. One expression of this communality is to be found in a petition of 1907 to the Cape government calling for a greater allocation of trees, and signed by 118 woodcutters of whom 63 were coloured. Significantly the petition closed with an appeal for assistance, 'whether we are English, Dutch or Coloured'.²²

Coloureds and poor whites furthermore shared the same residential areas. At Suurvlaakte in the George district, at Ouplaas and Soutrivier close to Knysna, and at the Craggs, Harkerville and Kraaibos deeper in the forest, both groups occupied their smallholdings on the same conditions, and according to an investigation in 1933, lived 'cheek by jowl' and regarded each other as 'complete equals'. Under these conditions marriages across the colour bar might, at times, have meant social advancement for whites. In 1933 it was reported 'that there are white girls who are only too glad to become the wives of coloured men, whom they have known since childhood and who were more prosperous than the girls' own white parents'.²³

This situation was viewed with considerable alarm by the moral watchdogs of the Afrikaner *volk*, such as *dominees* and others who involved themselves in the issue. Their concern about the 'fallen fellow-Afrikaners' became an important element in the general response to the poor white question in this region. Testifying before the select commission on white unemployment as early as 1913, the Rev. A. D. Luckhoff, who was particularly interested in the woodcutters, considered the coloureds a major obstacle in the advancement of the



Tree shelter or 'skerm'. Bushcutters went out on Sunday evening or Monday morning to work, returning on Friday afternoon. They lived in 'skerms' made of corrugated iron built into a tree in case of prowling elephants (Millwood House, Knysna)

poor whites. 'The question would not be so urgent if we did not have the coloured population here,' he argued, 'but the fact of our having the coloured population here and the fact that they are advancing in every direction ... makes the situation so very serious. If we did not have that question, the poor white problem would not be so serious. It would almost solve itself.'²⁴ As a response, the Dutch Reformed Church initiated various relief schemes, including church settlements for the white poor only.²⁵ These settlements, however, only accommodated a small minority of the impoverished whites, and in the thirties the issue of the poor and their relations with the coloureds in the forest belt became part of the broader Afrikaner economic mobilisation aimed at, amongst other things, the eradication of white poverty. In particular, Dr H. F. Verwoerd, at the time professor in psychology and sociology at the University of Stellenbosch and a prominent academic during the economic 'volkskon-

gres' of 1934, emphasised the 'grave danger' of 'racial mixing' in the area and the necessity of 'racial separation' as a prerequisite for the 'upliftment' of the woodcutter population.²⁶ However, neither the white poor nor the coloureds were particularly perturbed about the situation, and although some of the whites moved away after they had improved their financial position, it was only in the fifties, after the advent of National Party rule, that these mixed residential areas were destroyed by official decree.

Timber merchants and woodcutters

In trying to account for the poverty of the woodcutter population, it is of little explanatory value to adopt the notion that they were 'prisoners of their culture', which implies 'that once a people has acquired a pattern of behaviour more suited to the past, once they have been imbued with values and norms of a bygone age, they can simply not adapt themselves to a modern economy'.²⁷ On the contrary, the impact of 'modern economy', and more specifically merchant capital in the area, had more to do with the poverty of the woodcutters than their supposed innate 'backwardness' and 'laziness'.

While accepting that merchant capital differs qualitatively from industrial capital and is involved at the level of exchange rather than the level of production,²⁸ in the southern Cape forest region it was, in the absence of any significant local industrial economic base, powerful enough to exert a decisive influence on social relations. Indeed, if the early Randlords on the Witwatersrand were central in the shaping of the socio-economic environment in the Transvaal and beyond, the timber merchants, sawmill owners and general dealers (often rolled into one) were the financial giants of the forests and, though on an obviously smaller scale, of comparable importance in determining the contours of the social landscape in the area.

By far the most prominent timber merchant was the firm of Thesen and Company. The Thesen family came to South Africa in 1869 from Stavanger in Norway after their shipping business in Norway had suffered badly because of the Danish-German war of 1864. Originally they had intended starting anew in New Zealand. However, after they had docked their ship, the *Albatros*, for repairs in Cape Town they came into contact with the Swedish-Norwegian consul and merchant C. A. Akerberg, who informed them about the shortage of ships along the South African coast. The interest of the head of the family, Arnt Thesen, was aroused. Akerberg put the Thesens in touch with some Cape merchants who wanted cargoes delivered along the coast, including the port of Knysna at the time. Knysna, a small town of some 200 whites at that time, is situated on a lagoon protected by a narrow channel with towering cliffs on

either side. The scenery, which is reminiscent of Norway and its fjords, appealed to the Thesens. But more importantly, the economic potential of the large forests close by attracted them and in April 1870 the family decided to settle in Knysna. They established a profitable relationship with Akerberg who handled the timber carried from Knysna, and in turn supplied the Thesens with general merchandise for the area.

When Arnt Thesen died in 1875, the leadership of the company passed to the fourth son, Charles Wilhelm, who vigorously expanded and diversified the business: a whaling venture was established, additional ships were purchased, large tracts of land suitable for farming and tree-planting were acquired, and a short railway line was built into the Knysna forests for the transportation of timber. Charles Thesen also extended his influence in other directions. At the age of twenty-five he became a member of the first municipal council of Knysna and later served as mayor for two periods (1890–1893 and 1921–1924) and at times also acted as a justice of the peace as well as chairman of the local chamber of commerce. In addition he served on the divisional council for many years, and between 1925 and 1928 was chairman. He also had a brief spell as member of the Cape Provincial Council.²⁹ Under Charles Thesen's direction, and especially through his combination of extensive interests with an array of public positions, the company became a powerful and dominating force in the region. Not without reason it was asserted in 1939 that the Thesens had 'the district in the hollow of their hands'.³⁰

Charles Thesen pursued profits single-mindedly and relentlessly. 'As a timber merchant', he frankly stated in 1920, his sole concern was 'to turn over the money as quickly as one can'.³¹ Not surprisingly, he was noted for his 'shrewd mastery of detail and money'.³² More research needs to be done on the financial growth of the Thesen company, but in the early 1970s it was a multi-million rand concern.³³ However, the accumulation of such wealth, with the timber trade as its main and original base, was not accomplished without casualties. Much of the wealth which accrued to the Thesens and other smaller timber merchants did so at the expense of the woodcutter population. Between 1776 and 1939 the forests yielded timber to the value of at least £50 million and the bulk of this amount was obtained in the period 1880–1939, which coincided with the emergence of the timber merchants.³⁴ Very little of this money found its way into the pockets of the woodcutters, and the timber merchants and other middle-men were the main beneficiaries. In 1911, in an unusually candid statement, H. Ryan, assistant district forest officer at Knysna, made the connection between capital accumulation and indigency in the forest region abundantly clear. Charles Thesen, according to Ryan, was 'the principal member of a class which, by its absorption of the profits attending

the timber industry, has been chiefly responsible for the impoverishment of the woodcutter'.³⁵ Equally pertinent was the observation, 27 years later, of A. J. Werth, National Party member for George, that the 'firm of Thesen are people who want to buy the timber as cheaply as possible. They are the people who throughout the whole history have never yet done anything to help these people [woodcutters] out of the forest. Their object is to get rich out of timber and they have, as a matter of fact, succeeded.'³⁶

There were considerable profits to be made in the timber trade. In his evidence before the unemployment commission of 1920 R. Burton, chief conservator of forests in the area, explicitly stated that 'the profit of the merchant is a most substantial one'. He further explained that 'if you would take in Johannesburg the price of wagon wood sold there, and contrast that with the prices paid to the woodcutter here, you would see that there is a very large margin of profit'. Upon being asked whether he had made sufficient allowance for the transportation and other costs incurred by the merchant, he replied: 'I have taken that all into consideration, and I still consider that the profit made by ... the timber merchant is a most substantial one.'³⁷ In 1929 it was calculated that the timber merchants worked on a profit margin of at least 400 per cent.³⁸

The established timber merchants like the Thesens had a virtual monopoly over the timber trade, and went to great lengths to protect their dominance. Attempts on the part of others to break their stranglehold met with uncompromising opposition. For instance, in 1927 J. van Reenen, a local farmer, erected a sawmill on his property and planned to bypass the merchants by organising the woodcutters into a co-operative society, encouraging them to sell their wood to him instead of to the established merchants. The woodcutters would have benefited in that a percentage of the profit would have been distributed amongst the members of the proposed co-operative. This scheme, which had the potential to erode the interests of the established merchants, ran into formidable problems even before it could be launched. Through the 'powerful influence' of Thesen in particular, the threat of competition was swiftly eliminated. Van Reenen found that his credit at the Standard Bank suddenly dried up, and that the manager of the other bank in town, the National Bank, also refused him credit facilities. It later transpired that the established merchants had closed ranks and exerted such pressure that the two bank managers, not wishing to antagonise their largest clients, were disinclined to assist Van Reenen.³⁹

It is also necessary to look at the system of exchange which enabled the merchants to keep the woodcutters in perpetual bondage. Although the licensed woodcutter was entitled to buy standing timber from the government,

he had to compete with the agents of timber merchants and mill owners who obtained concessions to buy timber at the annual auction sales.

This resulted in the agents regularly outbidding the woodcutter. In order to acquire trees the woodcutter then had to turn to the merchant who only ceded his right to the timber on the stiffest conditions. Usually these conditions meant that the merchant was not only compensated for the auction dues and license fees which he incorporated into the agreement, but that the woodcutter was also bound to deliver the timber (either in log form or processed into required articles like felloes, spokes or naves) to the merchant. In addition the timber merchants often doubled up as shopkeepers. By making cash advances or allowing credit for general merchandise in return for a substantial supply of timber, the shopkeeper-cum-merchant's hold over the woodcutter was further strengthened.⁴⁰

The way in which merchant capital operated on the ground clearly left the woodcutter in a most vulnerable position. Rev. Luckhoff vividly (if somewhat ungrammatically) described in 1911 how the merchants benefited at every turn:

The woodmerchant and millowner are the parties for ever on the safe side, which ever have a big pull over the competing woodcutter. They have the pull over the woodcutter when the latter comes to them for advances with which to buy timber in the forest, and when they can make their own conditions. They have the pull again when the woodcutter comes to them with his finished and worked up wood as to the only market. They have the pull a third time when, after deducting the advances, or the licences and auction dues taken over from them by the woodcutter, they can give the balance in retailed foodstuffs that have been bought at wholesale rates.

The effect of this relationship was, Luckhoff continued,

... that the woodcutter is for ever under, and under he must remain so long as the existing conditions remain. He is continually in debt, he falls deeper and deeper into debt, he is forever in the power of the merchant and there is little or no prospect of getting out of bondage.⁴¹

It is abundantly clear that the material conditions of the woodcutters were largely determined and shaped by the operation of merchant capital in the area.

This was, in the main, a development which occurred after the discovery of minerals in the interior and the subsequent growth of industrial South Africa. To a great extent woodcutters did their own marketing before diamonds and gold transformed the South African economy. During that period they had

been correspondingly better off. An elderly woodcutter remembered in 1933 that in earlier days, before about 1886, they used to load their wagons with wood which they sold at Riversdale, Swellendam and as far afield as Worcester. 'One wagon brought in £50, and a trek of 18 wagons thus meant £900. Those were the days,' he recalled.⁴² However, few woodcutters possessed sufficient capital and resources to meet the increased demands and higher distribution costs which accompanied the changing economic order after the 1870s and 1880s. Although some of them did try, even as late as 1913, to market their own wood,⁴³ the emerging timber merchants who had the necessary means and contacts rapidly displaced those woodcutters who marketed their timber independently.



*Old woodcutter
(George Museum.
Photograph: Dr F.
le Roux)*

Despite the debilitating effect of merchant capital on the woodcutter population, they showed a marked resistance to wage labour. They 'proudly declined to accept employment, preferring to continue work in their beloved forests with ... a very small income — but as independent operators'.⁴⁴ Through their spirit of independence, however tenuous this might have been in objective terms, they managed to stave off proletarianisation. 'Forest workers love the forest and are proud of the fact that they are not daily-paid men. That is the ... one thing which still makes them strong in the midst of poverty,' A. J. Werth observed in 1939.⁴⁵ Similarly, they spurned state-initiated attempts to relocate them on the various land-settlements developed for poor whites during the twenties.⁴⁶

The merchants were not the only group with whom the woodcutters had to contend. Throughout the four decades under review the Department of Forestry was responsible for the conservation of the area, and it exerted considerable pressure to displace the woodcutters, claiming that the forests were incapable of supporting the existing number of woodcutters and that their uneconomical methods were rapidly depleting the indigenous forests. The struggle between the state and the woodcutters can be dated back to at least 1913 with the introduction of the Forest Act. One clause, mentioned already, determined that all woodcutters had to be registered and that no new names could be added after the initial registration. Since the number of people on the list declined annually and additional registrations were disallowed, the registration clause marked the beginning of the end for the woodcutter population working in the indigenous forests.

Another clause introduced a lottery system which replaced the existing auctioning of trees and this meant that each woodcutter would be assured of at least one tree. It was hoped that the lottery system of allocating trees might increase the woodcutters' income, but in actual fact it had little effect on the powerful hold of the merchants over the woodcutters.⁴⁷ In effect then, the woodcutters failed to benefit from either clauses of the 1913 Act. Any possible gains they might have made through the new allocation system were quickly eroded through the power of the merchants, and the registration system also worked to their detriment. In real terms, a slow war of attrition was being fought against the woodcutter community. The intention of the 1913 Act was subsequently made clear by a former director of forestry when he wrote that 'the ultimate object was the eventual extinction of the woodcutters'.⁴⁸

The final demise of the woodcutters came in 1939 when the number of those registered had dwindled to 256. Through the Woodcutters' Annuity Act of that year they were granted an annual annuity of £25 and at the same time forfeited the right to work in the forests. This Act, A. J. Werth noted in Parliament in 1939,

'was the end of a chapter of history in those parts, and it terminates an old established settlement of people ... They are an interesting class of people with a highly developed sense of independence and self-respect. But now ... they are placed in the humiliating position, according to their conception, of labourers.'⁴⁹

The Department of Forestry, however, rejoiced that the 1939 Act brought to 'a close the long drawn out struggle between the forest service and the woodcutters'. It was not an easy victory though; through the 'ballot box'; as forestry officials ruefully admitted, the woodcutters had for three decades successfully politicised their own interests.⁵⁰ The woodcutter community was a sufficiently important interest group in the constituency for politicians to take note of their demands. In the 1915 election, for example, the woodcutter vote was seen to be a crucial factor which assisted the National Party in winning the seat from the South African Party.⁵¹ The woodcutters had, not surprisingly, very little conception of broader national issues and were almost exclusively concerned with 'bread and butter' issues. On these issues the woodcutters did not hesitate to make politicians aware of the interests of the community. Thus after the advent of the Pact government in 1924, M. Bouwer, a woodcutter from the Knysna district, expressed the hope that they would not be disappointed in the new administration and that the Woodcutters' Board, controlling registration, would be more lenient. 'We always take the trouble to walk long distances to vote,' he informed General J. Kemp, Minister of Agriculture and Forestry, in 1925, 'because we have always heard that things would be better if we had another Government. I hope that will be the case.'⁵² Despite the fact that the woodcutters consistently voted for the National Party, their support could not be taken for granted. In the 1930s they even considered putting up an independent candidate to protect their interests.⁵³ This idea failed to materialise, but it emphasises their recognition of the power of the vote and their readiness to act accordingly.

The fact that the woodcutters toyed with the idea of an independent candidate also demonstrates that the National Party was not necessarily the organic representative of poor whites in the area. At best the National Party merely mediated on behalf of the woodcutters. Seen in the broader context of the thirties and the mobilisation of Afrikanerdom during these years, the National Party needed the poor whites just as much, if not more, than the poor whites needed the party. As P. le Roux has argued in a recent paper on poor whites, whatever sympathy the Nationalists might have had for poor Afrikaners, it was decidedly also in their material interest 'to be seen to be fighting the cause of the poor white'.⁵⁴ In this sense there was a degree of validity in claims of United Party spokesmen during the debate on the Woodcutters' Annuity Act of 1939

that the Nationalists who vigorously opposed the act wanted 'to pose as champions of the poor' and 'want to use the forest workers not to satisfy the needs of the workers, but ... because they [the Nationalists] have the assurance that they can depend on the support of these people'.⁵⁵

Beyond that, it is true that the National Party accused the United Party, in the debates on the Act, of serving the 'big capitalists' in the area,⁵⁶ and that these accusations were essentially valid. However, this does not mean that the National Party was really anti-capitalistic. As both R. H. Davies and D. O'Meara have demonstrated, the National Party's espousal of 'status quo anti-capitalism' was little more than rhetorical and cynical, and the 'left face' of the party was deliberately turned to attract the 'small man' and the poor.⁵⁷

And finally, the significance of the National Party's failure to save the woodcutters independence should not be exaggerated. Ultimately the woodcutters, despite their resilience, could not hold out indefinitely. The contours of their lives and work were shaped by potent forces which, in the final analysis, were as unstoppable as they were inimical. Indeed, 'God might have given the poor the wood', but it was a gift which others more powerful coveted in the service of Mammon.

Chapter 4

Time to trek: landless whites and poverty in the northern Natal countryside, 1902–1939

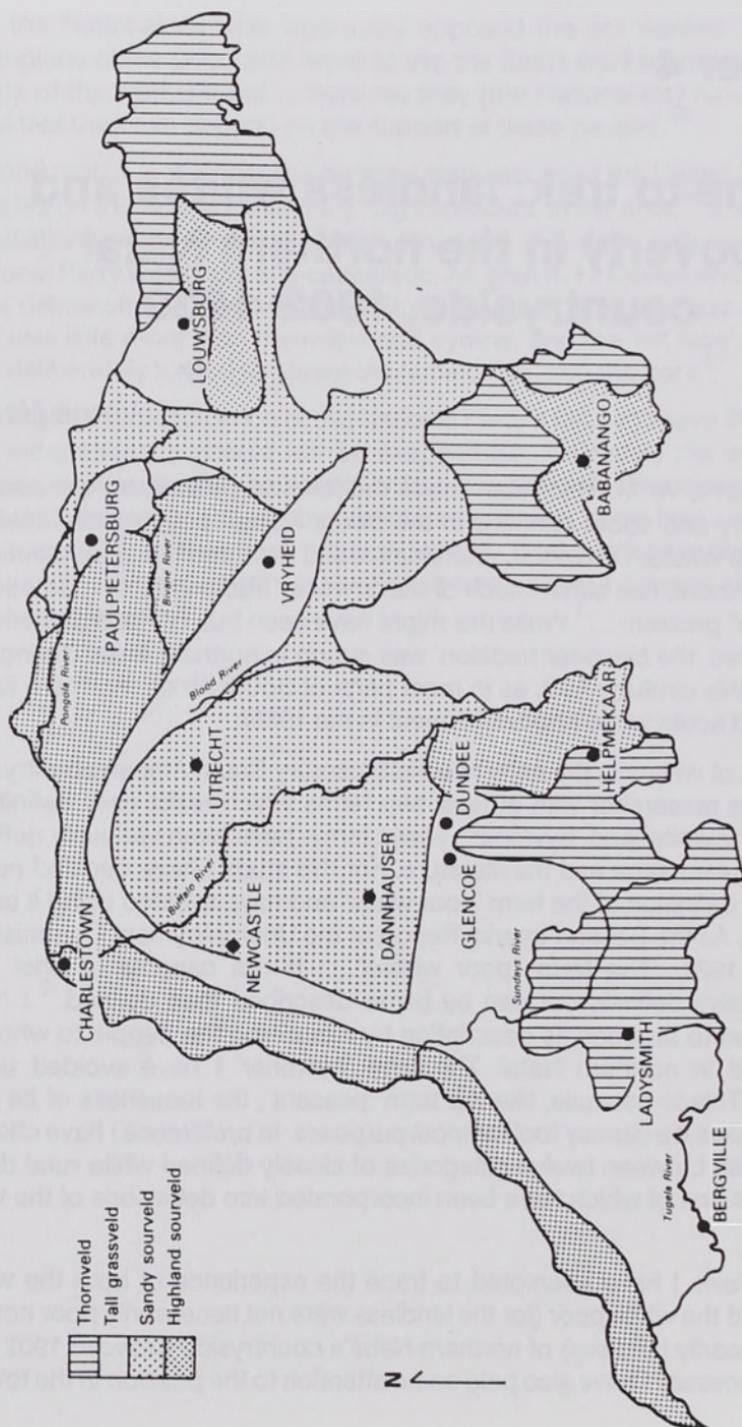
Verne Harris

Writing in 1919, W. M. Macmillan made the following statement concerning white poverty and social relations in the South African countryside: 'Neither Natal nor the Western Province, where native and coloured labour respectively are so prominent, has either much of the *bijwoner* tradition or of the peculiar "Poor White" problem ...'¹ While this might have been true of Natal as a whole, what he called 'the *bijwoner* tradition' was strong in northern Natal during the first half of this century. And, as in most parts of South Africa, northern Natal experienced acute white impoverishment in the 1930s.

The subject of whites in the early twentieth-century South African countryside presents the researcher with at least two terms which resist easy definition, namely 'poor white' and 'bywoner'. These terms have been variously defined in both popular usage and the literature. For this study I have decided not to formulate a definition of the term 'poor white' and have avoided using it as far as possible. As the Second Interim Report of the Unemployment Commission warned in 1921, 'The term "poor whites" ... is not capable of brief and comprehensive definition. It can be better described than defined.'² I have endeavoured to broaden its description by examining the people to whom it was applied in northern Natal. The term 'bywoner' I have avoided using altogether. This is because, like the term 'peasant', the looseness of its parameters makes it a clumsy tool for most purposes. In preference I have chosen to distinguish between twelve categories of closely defined white rural dwellers,³ all but one of which have been incorporated into definitions of the term 'bywoner'.

In what follows I have attempted to trace the experience of both the white landless and the white poor (for the landless were not necessarily poor nor the poor necessarily landless) of northern Natal's countryside between 1902 and 1939. Of necessity I have also paid some attention to the position in the towns,

Northern Natal: veld types



to which so many rural dwellers moved in order to escape destitution. My focus is limited by the fact that the primary sources I have consulted are almost exclusively official. Few insights are given by these sources into issues like the political sympathies of the landless and the poor and the ways in which they viewed themselves, their wealthier neighbours and landlords, and the state.⁴ In this chapter I have addressed two central questions: precisely what ties to the land were enjoyed by landless whites, and how did these change in the period between the end of the South African War (1902) and the start of World War II?

The land and the farmers

Northern Natal, or the northern districts of Natal, has been variously defined by administrators and scholars in this century.⁵ For the purpose of this study it is regarded as that region comprising Klip River County and the territory ceded to Natal after the South African War; in other words, Natal north of the Thukela River but excluding Zululand.⁶ Before considering the people who worked the land in this region, it is important to examine briefly its agro-ecology,⁷ for the environment people seek to exploit always shapes them in a variety of ways.

Four veld types are to be found in northern Natal: highland sourveld, tall grassveld, sandy sourveld and thornveld. Highland sourveld is restricted to the highveld areas, which are situated in the Drakensberg foothills, the Biggarsberg range and parts of Utrecht, Paulpietersburg and Vryheid. The rainfall in these areas is good and the soils poor but deep. The vegetation is primarily a dense grass cover the nutritive value and palatability to livestock of which decreases as it matures. It is useful for grazing for only four or five months of the year. Consequently, winter grazing in the lowveld areas was important to farmers in the period under review. The tall grassveld areas, to be found primarily in the Klip River, Bergville and Utrecht districts, are characterised by a poorly distributed rainfall, soil possessing a shallow topsoil and an extremely erodable subsoil, and a grass cover of 'mixed' veld. By 'mixed' veld is meant a grass cover which is useful for grazing for about eight months in the year. Sandy sourveld, predominant in Newcastle, Dundee and Vryheid, is suitable for extensive farming only. The low rainfall is ill-distributed and unreliable. The soils are sandy and erodable, while an underlying layer of laterite causes poor drainage. Although most of its grasses are sour, burning of the veld in late summer and autumn enables it to carry livestock throughout the year. The thornveld areas of Klip River, Babanango and Ngotshe⁸ are the driest in northern Natal. The rainfall is even more unreliable than in the sandy sourveld areas, while the greater intensity of its fall (thunderstorms are prevalent and

rain occurs as sharp showers), the hilly nature of the terrain (greater run-off), and the intense heat in summer all reduce its effectiveness. Frequent hailstorms are a great menace to crops, and the soils though chemically rich, generally tend to be impervious and readily eroded. These factors, together with the facts that the thornveld's sweet grasses maintain their palatability and feed value through the year and that certain other plants provide good browsing, make pastoral farming a far more attractive proposition than the growing of crops.

In terms of farming potential, the striking feature of northern Natal is its marginal nature. Predominantly suitable for only semi-intensive and extensive operations, it promises disaster as the consequence of heavy grazing and cultivation without irrigation, fertilisation and the implementation of soil conservation methods. Even today, farmers utilising advanced farming methods are frequently balked by the environment when trying to intensify their operations. Added difficulties are presented by periods of drought and locust invasion. The region experienced acute drought in 1902/03, 1913 and 1930–1936, while large areas were invaded by locusts in 1904 and again in the early 1930s. Between 1902 and 1939 much of northern Natal's soils and grasses were exhausted by the region's farmers, both white and African. The phenomenon was serious enough for the Natal Regional Survey, 1(1951) to comment that 'many of the current farming practices will have to be modified if the area is not to disappear altogether as a farming region'.⁹ This was particularly true of the tall grassveld and thornveld areas. In the former, the main culprits seem to have been more 'progressive' white farmers expanding their operations to meet growing markets.¹⁰ In the latter, they were African tenant farmers crowded on primarily white-owned land over-grazing the low carrying capacity sweet grasses.¹¹ The narrowness of the limits laid down by nature in this region, together with the fact that markets were small and access to outside markets limited, ensured that the capitalisation of agriculture, vital to the development of rural social relations, was a gradual process.

In 1902 the vast majority of the region's white farmers conducted pastoral farming operations, primarily for beef and wool. Maize, sorghum, oats and wheat were grown for feed and labourers' rations. The period 1902–1939 saw two major developments in white livestock farming. Firstly, owing largely to the prevalence of East Coast Fever in the sandy sourveld areas, sheep ranching expanded at the expense of cattle ranching.¹² And secondly, increasing numbers of ranchers, particularly in Bergville and Klip River, switched to dairying.¹³ Both developments represented a squeeze on tenant farmers, white and African. With better quality herds to sustain and protect, landowners sought a tighter control over the size and movement of tenant herds. A large

number of northern Natal's white ranchers were Free State and Transvaal farmers who had purchased farms in the region for winter grazing and as a source of labour. In addition, many wealthier white farmers in the highland sourveld and tall grassveld areas of northern Natal owned farms in the lowveld for the same purposes. At the beginning of every winter thousands of cattle and sheep were driven down into the lowveld. Some indication of the scale of this annual migration is given by the Ngotshe Magistrate's 1912 estimate of between sixty and seventy thousand sheep being moved into this district annually.¹⁴ And George Pringle, a retired northern Natal farmer, remembers bringing his father's eight thousand sheep down from Wakkerstroom into Klip River County annually in the 1920s.¹⁵

The great majority of tenant farmers in northern Natal were Africans living on private white-owned land in the absence of 'reserves' and with the scarcity of company, mission and African-owned land. In the period under review these labour and rent tenants experienced growing inroads into their rights in land and livestock as well as growing demands to provide landlords with labour. Nevertheless, and despite the operation of the 1913 Natives Land Act, a significant proportion was able to avoid more than slight labour obligations up until 1939. Only on the few wattle and cotton plantations in the region were white farmers reliant on cash labourers with no rights in land and livestock.

But African labour and rent tenants were not the only landless farmers in the northern Natal countryside: it is the aim of the following section to examine in depth the range of white tenant farmers to be found in northern Natal. It is worth pointing out at this stage that the precise quantification of landless whites is difficult. The only figures I was able to trace were from the Vryheid Repatriation Commission, which categorised the white farmers of Vryheid in November 1902 as follows: 168 'landed proprietors', 178 '*bijwoners*' and 20 'lessees'.¹⁶ It is plain from these figures that in Vryheid, at least, landless whites were a significant proportion of the white population in the first decade of the twentieth century. And it is probable that this holds true for the other districts in the ex-South African Republic territory, where the '*bijwoner* tradition' was equally strong. The position in Klip River County is not as clear, though the high proportion of Dutch/Afrikaans-speakers (two in five according to the 1904 Population Census) and the large number of farms owned by absentee Free State and Transvaal farmers ensured a fertile soil for the tradition.

The landless whites

In his study of poor whites in North Middelburg, Rob Morrell has emphasised the often deep divisions amongst these rural dwellers.¹⁷ What follows rein-

forces the need for careful differentiation between the various categories of landless whites to be found in the South African countryside during the first half of this century. In attempting to do so for northern Natal, I have drawn extensively from magistrates' records, especially the files dealing with administration of state aid and relief schemes in the late 1920s and 1930s. These files often provide detailed information on the precise nature of tenants' conditions of occupation and their material and other circumstances. They are less helpful in establishing gradual changes over time, and provide little detail for the early period.

Two broad categories of landless whites can be identified: those who dwelt on the same property as their landlords and those whose landlords were absent. The most common arrangement in the former instance was for the tenant to provide the landowner with labour and a share of the crops in return for access to land. Found throughout northern Natal, this arrangement varied considerably in detail: access to grazing land ranged from no provision to unlimited; the provision of arable land ranged from 20 morgen to as much as the tenant wished to plant; and the share of crops kept by the tenant ranged from a tenth to a half. It is important to note that whereas some landlords put the sharecropper/labour tenant in charge of all cultivation on the farm, others provided him with arable land which he worked only for himself as well as requiring him to work arable land elsewhere on the farm on a shares basis. An example of the latter is provided by a certain S. L. Landman, tenant on a Paulpietersburg farm in the 1930s.¹⁸ He was required to assist in all the farming operations and to provide his landlord with a half share of a tobacco crop reaped from 15 morgen. In addition, he was given six morgen of arable land for his own use. In every instance examined for this study, the sharecropper/labour tenant enjoyed access to the landlord's African labour, implements and draught animals, and was given free housing and seed. Sometimes free meat was also provided. Extremely rare was the landlord who only required a share of the crops from a tenant living on the same farm. I was able to trace only a single reference to such an arrangement, a Bergville farmer providing his sharecropper with arable land, free grazing for an unrestricted number of cattle, seed, and the use of implements and three African labourers in return for one tenth of the crop.¹⁹ Also rare was the labour tenant, who in return for access to land, was required to provide his landlord with labour services. An example of this category of landless white is George Boshoff, who lost his own land in the early 1930s and was taken on as a labour tenant by his son-in-law in the Newcastle district.²⁰ In return for his services he was given 30 morgen of arable land, unlimited access to grazing, free seed and the use of implements and African labour.

Categorisation of landless whites in northern Natal

Landlord	Form of payment	Designation
Resident	Labour	Labourer (1) Labour tenant (2)
	Management	Manager (3)
	Labour and share of crops	Sharecropper/labourer tenant (4)
	Share of crops	Sharecropper (5)
	Nothing	Free tenant (6)
Absentee	Nothing	Free tenant (7)
	Share of crops	Sharecropper (8)
	Labour and share of crops	Sharecropper/labourer tenant (9)
	Labour	Labour tenant (10)
	Kind or cash	Rent tenant (11) (12)

Three categories of landless whites resident on the same property as their landlords remain to be described. First, the free tenant, who enjoyed access to land without being required to render payment in any form. In every case examined for this study, the tenant was Dutch/Afrikaans-speaking, resident on a relative's property and given access to land as an alternative to impoverishment. For example, in 1938 M. S. Heyns took on his brother-in-law as a free tenant after the latter had lost his temporary job on the railways and incurred a debt of £80.²¹ Second, the farm manager, to be found throughout the region and representing a less independent standing than those of the categories described thus far. Farm managers, both English- and Dutch/Afrikaans-speaking, were usually paid at least partially in cash and frequently lived in the same

house as their employees. Nevertheless, I was unable to find reference to a farm manager who did not retain certain rights in both land and livestock. White farm labourers, on the other hand, did not enjoy these rights and received payment in the form of cash, accommodation and food. They were English-speaking and, like the farm managers, to be found on the farms of relatively wealthy and rapidly capitalising farmers.

Far more common than the tenant dwelling on the same farm as his landlord was the tenant of an absentee landlord. In most instances the absentee landlord was a highveld farmer who owned a farm or farms in the sandy sourveld and thornveld areas for winter grazing or as a source of African tenant labour. White tenants were engaged for one or a combination of the following reasons: to supervise farming operations, especially in the winter months; to fulfil beneficial occupation requirements on land bought from the state (although it seems that these requirements could be circumvented easily); and as a source of income.

Five categories of tenant having an absentee landlord can be identified. Least common were the rent tenant (paying in cash or in kind for the right to occupy) and the free tenant. The latter, as with his counterpart on land occupied by its owner was, as far as one can tell from the sources consulted for this study, always Dutch/Afrikaans-speaking, usually resident on land owned by a relative, and usually given a place after falling on hard times. Not surprisingly, this practice became relatively widespread in the 1930s. Most common were arrangements involving payment in the form of labour, a share of the crops or both. Of the former, most involved labour tenants caring for the livestock of absentee landlords during the winter months in return for rights in land and livestock. In some instances tenants also received a cash wage – for example, W. A. de Witt of Newcastle district received £6 per annum in addition to 25 morgen arable land and grazing for ten head of cattle from his landlord in the mid-1930s.²² However, most landlords using lowveld farms for grazing purposes required their white tenants to provide both labour and a share of the crops. This arrangement was to be found throughout northern Natal's lowveld, the share of the crops required ranging between 15 per cent and two thirds (although half and two thirds shares were the most common). Finally, there was the sharecropper who had no labour obligations. To be found almost exclusively in the ex-South African Republic territory, they were expected to provide their landlords with either a half or three quarters of their harvest. In rare instances sharecroppers also received a cash wage – I was able to trace only one such arrangement, a Paulpietersburg sharecropper receiving £1 a month in addition to one quarter of his harvest, free grazing for 17 head of cattle, a two-morgen arable plot, and the use of African labour, wagons, oxen,

implements and six dairy cows.²³ It is worth noting that most white tenants falling into the last three categories enjoyed the free use of their landlords' implements, oxen and African labour. And the vast majority, if not all, were Dutch/Afrikaans-speaking.

As was pointed out in the introduction, all but one of the twelve categories of rural dweller outlined above have been incorporated into one or other definition of the term 'bywoner'. The exception is the rent tenant paying in cash for the right of occupation. Contemporary popular usage incorporated categories 2 to 11,²⁴ while the Carnegie Commission into the Poor White Problem in South Africa incorporated only categories 1 to 6, namely those landless whites dwelling on farms occupied by their owners.²⁵ In administering the Rural Rehabilitation and Housing Scheme in the late 1930s, the state attempted to distinguish between 'bywoners', 'overseers' and 'assistants', the name 'bywoner' being applied to my categories 2 and 4 to 10, 'overseers' to category 3 and 'assistants' to category 1.

Very few white tenants, whatever their category, enjoyed security of tenure; it is probable that none had written contracts with their landlords. Of the verbal contracts details of which I was able to trace and where a specified period of time was laid down, most were of five years' duration. But even seemingly secure verbal contracts could be fragile. The case of J. H. Steenkamp, free tenant on his neighbour's unoccupied farm, illustrates this point.²⁶ In 1935, having lost his own land, he was given 20 morgen of arable land, 500 morgen of grazing land and the use of a span of oxen and a kraal of African labour tenants, guaranteed for a period of ten years. But in the same year the neighbour died, and his daughter changed the terms to seven morgen arable land, two morgen grazing land and a half share of his crops. The harmful consequences of lack of security have received eloquent comment from the 1921 Unemployment Commission and the Carnegie Commission. As the latter observed:

The bywoner or share tenant usually has no security of tenure, and consequently makes no effort to be careful in his use of pasture or arable land, nor does he aim at improvement. This in turn reacts unfavourably on the landowner. Many bywoners complained that, after receiving notice to quit, they received no compensation for permanent improvements. Only too often purely personal bickerings, or disagreements about the rights and obligations of either party, led to the cancelling of the contract.²⁷

Northern Natal magistrates in the period under review also identified what they saw as a lack of endeavour on the part of 'bywoners'. And the cancelling of

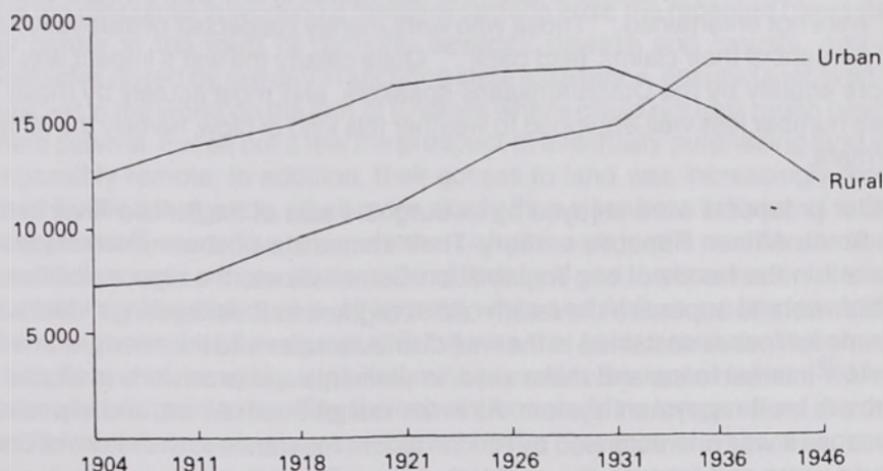
contracts was a frequent occurrence. Despite what O'Meara calls 'a strong sense of community' amongst Afrikaners,²⁸ the evidence shows that Afrikaner landlords in northern Natal often felt little restraint when ejecting unwanted fellow-Afrikaner tenants. In consequence, the degree of movement amongst landless whites, especially the poor, was high. I discovered few references to tenants who had stayed in one place for any great length of time and many to tenants who had changed locality repeatedly. This pattern seems to have grown during the 1930s, although by the close of the decade it had been subsumed by a stronger movement, that of a drift off the land. As the Report of the Economic and Wage Commission warned in 1925, 'the bywoner has security neither of tenure nor of status. The system has no power to hold him to the land when other forces are tending to drive him off the land.'²⁹

Time to trek

Although ravaged by the South African War and crippling drought immediately after it, the northern Natal countryside was able to sustain a relative increase in the white population dependent on it between 1904 and 1911.³⁰ The population of the region's towns and villages stagnated. The rate of growth was sustained between 1911 and 1921, but fell away markedly thereafter: landless whites in northern Natal were beginning to succumb to the growing pressures attendant on landowners switching from cattle ranching to sheep or dairy farming. But a drift from the land was less marked in the region than in Natal as a whole. This is probably explicable in terms of the relatively slow emergence of capitalist agriculture in the region and a commensurately slower squeeze by landlords on their tenants, white and African. But the 1930s were years of crisis for South African agriculture, thousands of white farmers, both landlords and tenants, succumbing to the dual blows of depression and drought. The population figures for northern Natal reflect this in striking fashion. Between 1931 and 1936 the region's white rural population showed an absolute decrease for the first time, while its white urban population increased more rapidly than ever before. By 1936 there were fewer whites in the countryside than in the towns and villages. It was in this time of crisis that the ties to the land enjoyed by white tenant farmers in northern Natal were irrevocably loosened. The trickle had become a flood.

The origins of the trickle are to be found in the outbreak of rinderpest in the late 1890s and the differential impact of the South African War on northern Natal's white farmers. All had seen their herds ravaged by rinderpest. All had suffered grievous material loss during the Boer invasion, Buller's ponderous northward drive and the guerrilla warfare which endured until the Peace of Vereeniging. And all experienced the depredation of drought, disease and locust invasion

White population of northern Natal, 1904–1946



in the two years following the cessation of hostilities. The position in 1904 was described as follows by the Vryheid Magistrate:

Though the farmers have striven hard to face their difficulties, most of them being ruined during the war, they have met with little success, owing entirely to the bad seasons which have unfortunately prevailed since peace, and to the depredation of locusts, cattle disease, and other calamities over which they had no control; and now, to make matters worse, the dreaded Tick Fever has appeared in this district.³¹

The position was equally bleak elsewhere in the region. But the potential for recovery varied greatly. In Klip River County Dutch/Afrikaans-speakers enjoyed little hope of state assistance, most of them having disqualified themselves by assisting the invading Boer forces in one way or another.³² The Natal government was prepared to pursue a conciliatory policy towards them, imposing relatively light sentences on convicted rebels, ensuring their right to their immovable property (in the face of strong opposition from English-speaking colonists) and assisting the destitute by admitting them into refugee camps. But it was unwilling to provide financial assistance. Applications for this kind of assistance were rejected, even after the granting of free pardon in 1905. And the claims for compensation made by the Klip River Dutch to the Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission were more often than not rejected. This body was appointed by the Imperial government and was directly responsible to the government of Natal. Its working principle was that compensation was 'to be

awarded only as an act of grace to those who were loyal and had suffered through adherence to their loyalty'.³³ The claims of convicted rebels, the wives and children of rebels, and 'those who had traded in any way with the enemy ...' were not entertained.³⁴ Those who were merely suspected of disloyalty had 75 percent of their claims 'held back'.³⁵ Quite clearly the war's impact was felt more acutely by the Dutch/Afrikaans-speakers, and most acutely by those of their number less well-equipped to weather this kind of blow, namely the tenant farmers.

Better prospects were enjoyed by ex-burghers east of the Buffalo River in the ex-South African Republic territory. Their immediate post-war interests were placed in the hands of two Repatriation Commissions, the responsibilities of which were to supervise the return of ex-burghers to their dwellings, deal with claims for losses sustained in the war, distribute rations to the needy, administer low-interest loans and make seed, implements and provisions available to farmers on a repayment system. As in the rest of South Africa, and especially because it was characterised by African tenant resistance to the return of Boer landowners and tenants, the ex-South African Republic territory experienced the rural reconstruction programme's bias in favour of white agriculture.³⁶ Nevertheless, in practice, the commissions were shackled by Imperial parsimony. As the Utrecht Repatriation Commission reported in 1902:

A good deal of suspicion and uncertainty has arisen amongst the Burghers owing to the refusal of applications made under section 10 ... for loans free of interest for 2 years and repayable over a period of years at 3 per cent. This refusal has, I am afraid, raised doubts as to Britain's intentions to carry out the terms of the treaty in full ...³⁷

Moreover, only landless farmers were required to give security for loans and items received on the repayment system.³⁸ As in Klip River County, it was the poorest who had to struggle hardest to recover. Although no mass exodus from the countryside followed the war — quite the contrary in fact was pointed out above — nevertheless the war inflicted a body-blow from which many white rural dwellers never recovered.

But maintaining a place on the land did not mean working the land profitably. As the Ngotshe magistrate reported in 1919, in the midst of what he called 'a forward movement' in farming operations:

... the only people who appear to be incapable of sharing in the movement are the people who form the indigent classes. They somehow cannot make headway. They could if they would but try and it is here where they fail: They do not try. It is a mystery how they live.³⁹

Certainly the evidence suggests that ignorance, an unwillingness to change, and the depressing effects of hardship played their part in entrenching poverty. But the difficulties in working a marginal farming area, the repeated blows dealt by nature in the form of drought, livestock disease and locusts, and the obstacles posed by poverty in securing state assistance, ensured that even the best will in the world on the part of landless whites could not look much beyond mere survival. For all but a few the prospect of eventually purchasing land was impossibly remote. In addition, their access to land was increasingly threatened by the emergence, albeit more slowly than elsewhere in Natal, of a class of capitalist farmers. The latter, whether dairy farmers, cattle ranchers or sheep ranchers, sought a more efficient use of their land and the conversion of labour tenants into wage labourers. All tenants, white and African, on land owned by them began to feel the squeeze. But it was the African tenants, their labour cheaper and more easily exploited, who proved to be more resilient.⁴⁰ Moreover, white farmers expanding their operations could no longer afford the drain on African labour resources constituted by the presence of white tenants.

Strong as the squeeze was in certain parts of northern Natal, especially in the 1920s, the access to land of most white tenants was only severed in the 1930s. During this decade many, lacking the state support enjoyed by the landed, in the face of acute economic and natural crises were unable to make a living on the land; others were evicted by landlords no longer able or willing to carry tenants doing little more than exhausting their soils and pastures; yet others decided to try for a better life through local relief works funded by the state.⁴¹ Most tenuously placed were the sharecroppers, sharecroppers/labour tenants, labour tenants and free tenants whose landlords dwelt on the same property. Concentrated mostly west of the Buffalo River in Klip River County, they all but disappeared in the decade before World War II.⁴² And it is probable that this decade also saw the rights in land and livestock enjoyed by farm managers finally undermined. White tenants who worked the lowveld properties of absentee highveld farmers proved to be marginally more resilient. Some were able to weather the 1930s and maintain ties to the land until as late as the 1950s. Thus Hurwitz was able to point out in 1957 that 'Farms on the "shares system" are mostly concentrated in the northern districts, especially Utrecht, Vryheid and Newcastle. This is mainly due to sharecroppers, who have not entirely disappeared.'⁴³

But the vast majority of northern Natal's white tenant farmers were catapulted into a new set of social relations during the 1930s: whether swelling the ranks of the region's farm labourers and managers or becoming part of South Africa's white urban labour aristocracy, their access to the means of production had been severed.

State assistance and relief on the land

In the period under review, and especially after the assumption of political power by the Pact government in 1924, the South African state displayed a growing sensitivity to the interests of white farmers.⁴⁴ However, white farmers made widely differing demands on the state. The interests of farmers practising labour tenancy both willingly and reluctantly (confronted by labour tenant resistance to being transformed into proletarians) diverged in important ways from those successfully converting to wage labour. The latter's labour needs were greater and they found themselves in more direct competition for labour with the mines and cities than the former. Consequently, the pressure they exerted on the state to mobilise and control labour was far greater, and increasingly they pressed for the restriction and ultimate abolition of labour tenancy. Caught between these pioneers of capitalist agriculture in South Africa and the African labour and rent tenant population were the landless and rural whites, who strove to maintain their access to the land. While the political voice enjoyed by them ensured that their interests could not be entirely ignored by the state, advancing capitalist agriculture, especially in the 1930s, determined that state assistance would never be sufficient to sustain white tenant farmers as a class.

In the first two decades of Union, limited assistance was given in various forms to white tenant farmers by the state. Firstly, would-be purchasers of land were assisted. The 1912 Land Settlement Act laid down that a candidate need put down only 20 per cent of the purchase-price, the balance being met by the state and repayable in 40 half-yearly instalments at 4 per cent per annum interest. It also empowered the state to offer extremely cheap leases to run for five years, at the end of which the lessee had the option to purchase. Secondly, subsidies were granted to landowners who took on approved families as tenants. And thirdly, advances were granted to 'satisfactory' candidates who wished to make a start in farming. In practice, these measures made little impact, their inadequacy being condemned by both the 1925 Economic and Wage Commission and the Carnegie Commission. The former suggested the extension of the measures, the granting of greater security of tenure to 'bywoners' and the overall upgrading of South African agriculture.⁴⁵ Reporting for the latter, J. F. W. Grosskopf commented as follows:

On the whole South Africa has mostly evaded the real problem and tried to remedy the evil by charity or by local and temporary measures of relief. The easy ways out of the difficulty were chosen. But our social policy was also based too much on the assumption that the poor ought to be kept out of the town, without doing much towards improving conditions in the country itself.⁴⁶

Quite clearly the state was not prepared to commit funds to enabling white tenant farmers to maintain merely a toehold in the countryside. It gave generously to the more well-to-do and able, those capable of eventually purchasing land and working it profitably. The rest it preferred to 'field' through various rural projects (probation settlements, afforestation schemes, irrigation works, etc.) and the promotion of a policy of 'civilised labour' in urban areas after 1924.

In the face of escalating rural exodus and massive urban unemployment in the 1930s, the state introduced several schemes designed to stem the flood of white tenant farmers from the land. In 1931 the Land Settlement Act of 1912 was amended to allow purchasers to repay their state loans over forty years instead of twenty. And lessees under the Act in certain districts had their rents substantially reduced. One such district was Ngotshe in northern Natal. In 1932 the Tenant Farmers Scheme was introduced. Initially administered by the Land and Agricultural Bank, it was taken over by the State Advances Recoveries Office in 1935. In terms of the scheme, white tenant farmers were given loans at 5 per cent per annum interest in order to purchase livestock. Funds were made available on receipt of a certificate from a local livestock inspection committee stating that the livestock concerned had been approved and branded. The scheme was discontinued in 1938, but was resurrected towards the end of World War II. Another scheme was the Rural Rehabilitation and Housing Scheme, also known as the Bywoners', Farm Overseers' and Farm Assistants' Rehabilitation Scheme. Operative from 1935 to 1939 and administered by the Department of Labour and Social Welfare (redesignated Department of Social Welfare in 1937), it made funds available for subsistence allowances, the rail transport of tenant farmers and the building and improvement of tenant dwellings. But as with the earlier measures, those of the 1930s were aimed primarily at redeeming the 'progressive' few. I traced numerous instances of applications for assistance from tenant farmers being turned down on the grounds that their chances of making a success of farming were slim. As the Secretary for Social Welfare informed one such applicant in 1938:

The Department's information is that you have had good chances and opportunities to make a success of farming, but that you did not do so. In the circumstances the Department has decided to refuse your application on the grounds that there is serious doubt that you would be able to make a success of farming in Natal, so that the granting of public funds in this regard would be unjustified.⁴⁷

A state more unwilling than ever before to sustain them, and the crushing impact of economic depression and natural disasters, broke the back of northern Natal's class of white tenant farmers.

Off the land

What awaited those who were no longer able to cling to the land? For a few, work, but for the great majority a measure of state relief and grinding poverty. As a Newcastle tenant farmer said to the landowner evicting him in 1936, it was 'n slegte tyd ... om te trek'.⁴⁸ The Natal Provincial Administration, through the Department of Labour, offered relief work on road maintenance and building gangs in northern Natal. Relief work was also available in the towns and on locust fighting units. Other work was hard to come by. Aside from temporary jobs to be had in the railways, the towns offered little hope of employment. And the coal industry, in a depressed state owing to uncertain market conditions and fierce foreign competition, could provide little employment for whites, especially the unskilled. Nevertheless, most of northern Natal's displaced white rural dwellers remained in the region. Those who did not ended their trek in Durban, Pietermaritzburg or on the Rand.

But precisely how was white impoverishment dealt with in northern Natal's towns? As early as February 1927 a Joint Unemployment and Relief Committee, with representatives from the Department of Labour, the Natal Provincial Administration and the Durban and Pietermaritzburg Corporations, had been established in Natal. It was designed to promote the policy of 'civilised labour' and to co-ordinate the provision of relief aid.⁴⁹ The magnitude of the task which lay ahead is indicated by the rapid growth in numbers of 'paupers and needy persons' who received assistance in two northern Natal towns between 1927 and 1936: in Babanango 36 between 1927 and 1931, 230 between 1932 and 1936; in Louwsburg 56 in the former period, 148 in the latter.⁵⁰ The assistance was in the form of rations, monetary grants and free medical and hospital treatment, and was funded by the Department of Labour and Social Welfare, the Department of Public Health and the Natal Provincial Administration. A large proportion of the latter's expenditure on poor relief was earmarked for the subsidisation of charitable organisations, which, rather than local authorities, acted for the state in distributing direct poor relief in Natal's urban areas. The role of these organisations was acknowledged by the Ladysmith Mayor in 1934:

The two societies which deserve special recognition and mention are the Ladysmith Benevolent and Child Welfare Societies. As is well-known, these Societies, while not being strictly speaking, Municipal Institutions, are to a large extent, responsible for the relief of distress and the care of the poor people of the Borough ...⁵¹

As was pointed out by the Inter-Departmental Committee on Poor Relief and Charitable Institutions in 1937, the lion's share of the Provincial Administra-

tion's subsidy was given to the Durban and Pietermaritzburg Benevolent Societies: £7 310 out of £7 890 in 1936/37.⁵² Subsidies were also granted by local authorities: for example, in 1933 the Ladysmith Benevolent Society received £195 from the Borough and £147 10s from the Provincial Administration.⁵³ But while northern Natal's local authorities were prepared to contribute towards poor relief, they were reluctant to promote the state's 'civilised labour' policy by dismissing African employees and replacing them with unemployed whites. This despite the subsidisation of the latter's salaries by the Department of Labour and Social Welfare. The evidence suggests that there were two reasons for this: fear that the availability of jobs would spark an influx of unemployed, and the opinion that such a development constituted the replacement of efficient by inefficient labour.⁵⁴

Conclusion

The period 1902–1939 saw white tenant farmers in northern Natal confronted by several threats to their access to land and livestock: expanding capitalist agriculture, exhausted soils and pastures, natural disasters, economic depression and an unsympathetic state. The crisis faced by all white farmers in the 1930s proved to be the turning point, the state throwing its weight behind the rapidly expanding capitalist section of white agriculture. In northern Natal white tenant farmers all but disappeared; only east of the Buffalo River were some, probably all the tenants of absentee landlords (my categories 7 to 12), able to cling to the land. The great majority joined either the urban labour aristocracy or were accommodated in my categories 1 and 3. A very few were able to join the ranks of the landed.

To what extent the traumatic experiences of the period under review shaped the consciousness of northern Natal's white tenant farmers is not addressed in this study. Potentially fruitful questions which remain to be answered include the following: How cohesive, as a class, were they? Were their political sympathies distinct from those of landlords? Was the return of Nationalist candidates in Newcastle, Klip River and Vryheid in the 1948 general election due in part to dissatisfaction with state assistance on the part of displaced white tenant farmers? I suspect that the answers to these questions, as with my attempt to categorise the region's landless white rural dwellers, will reveal a significant measure of diversity. Certainly it is probable that the consciousness of a more prosperous tenant farmer, receiving state assistance and looking to the day when he could purchase land, would diverge in important ways from that of an impoverished tenant unable to secure state assistance; as would that of the tenant under threat of eviction from that of the tenant feeling little or no pressure from his landlord, and that of the tenant only

