

Chapter 7

Slums, segregation and poor whites in Johannesburg, 1920–1934

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From its inception Johannesburg incorporated housing conditions that ranked amongst the worst in the world.¹ Tents and tin structures that formed the built environment for gold diggers on the Rand encouraged a climate in which poor housing conditions proliferated.² In the first part of the century the sanitation problem provided the official *raison d'être* for the removal of people of colour from the city limits. Yet, in Johannesburg, as many as one third of the 5 651 people enumerated in the first survey of slums were white.³ In response to the outbreak of plague in 1904 and influenza in 1918 the council acted on a racially selective basis to remove large numbers of black slum residents from the inner-city.⁴ The provision of only 300 houses in the location in no way adequately redressed the critical accommodation shortage, however, and rent racketeering in the city increased.⁵ Growth in the urban African population and the persistence of white poverty saw the proliferation of a working class housing problem. The state sought new solutions to the accommodation crisis, a rubric that came to include the absolute shortage of housing stock and the perceived threat of race integration, first by application of the Natives (Urban Areas) Act and later rehousing of the impoverished electorate.

Increases in the number of poor whites living in slums moulded the state's approach to the issue of working class residential segregation. In this chapter it is shown that once whites formed a major racial component of the slumyards, the policies and action of the central and local states shifted to accommodate the white working class. The imperative of ensuring a minimum standard of living for whites culminated in continued residential segregation of blacks, and also in the introduction of subsidised municipal housing for whites.

The genesis of Johannesburg's housing problem

The discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand prompted almost unlimited investment in the extraction of the precious metal. By contrast, despite the rapid growth in the numbers working on the mines, capitalists were reluctant to

invest in costly construction of working class accommodation. In these early years a further distinction between the spheres of work and home was evident. While on the mines racial division was strictly adhered to, in the town residential segregation was not immediately entrenched. Especially in the poorest quarters of the town the pressure of inordinately high occupancy levels took its toll on the inadequate physical structures and the quality of the built environment deteriorated. While the local state was visibly concerned about incipient disease, water, sewerage and other essential services were not installed.⁶

As the city grew and became more permanent, deteriorating wood and iron houses close to the city absorbed increasing numbers of the urban poor. The disgusting conditions which resulted were perhaps less extensive than they might have been had mining companies not housed their contract employees in compounds. The permanence of Johannesburg not only saw an increasing non-mining sector, but also witnessed the arrival of women and families of the early pioneers. The changing population structure of the growing town was accompanied by a demand for housing which could not be met by hostel facilities. Thus, while the Randlords constructed elaborate colonial mansions for their brides,⁷ poorer folk sought out a room in a slumyard of the city in which to establish their family residence.⁸ By World War I Johannesburg had a slum legacy that cut across the colour bar.

Activity and interest in white housing after the First World War was predicated on the belief that an accommodation crisis of significant proportions existed in Johannesburg. There was a fear that the white housing crisis would be exacerbated by demolition of wood and iron structures, more especially as there was no alternative accommodation available for displaced people. Establishing the validity of concern over the amount of housing available to whites was difficult. On the one hand Dr Porter, the Medical Officer of Health, was of the opinion that there was 'a very great shortage' of dwellings for the enormous influx' of poor whites.⁹ In the same month, however, Dr Porter's evidence to the Housing Commission was more cautious in the assessment of the problem. Porter conceded readily that cheap rental accommodation was not easily available, and quoted the example of Symonds & Co., estate agents active in Fordsburg and Vrededorp, who were unable to meet the requests for accommodation to £12 10s a month. Dr Porter argued, however, that the housing problem for whites was much less serious than it was often made out to be. In support of this new position the Medical Officer quoted the findings of his enquiry into further properties likely to be affected by closures. Of the 2 000 people likely, in his estimation, to be affected by council efforts to clear insanitary properties, only 250 were white.¹⁰

Ambiguity over the nature and extent of a housing crisis for whites did not prevent the issue becoming a major item on the local political agenda. The municipal election of 1919 focused unambiguously on the pressing accommodation requirements of white labour in post-World War I Johannesburg. The Labour Party, which took up the issue vigorously, urging subsidised housing for whites, won that election. Its victory on the 'housing for whites' ticket reflected the acute crisis in the position of white workers in the mining town of Johannesburg. Conflict over wages in the struggling mining sector spawned the strikes of 1920 and 1922.¹¹ The importance of the housing question in these developments has never been developed. The idea that the high cost of shelter in Johannesburg may have exacerbated the already fierce competition between the workers of the city has, however, been mooted.¹²

The connection between work and residential conditions is significant. In theory white wages were not only considerably higher than those of blacks, but on the official £1 per day wage a white man could afford to

... own a comfortable, electrified, well appointed bungalow in grounds with a garden and support a small family well. He could in fact hire the services of a black man to do the menial work. His diet compared well to that of virtually any workingman in the world. Putting aside the threat of personal injury (which was of course not a small one for the miner), he had by any international standards a very reasonable wage indeed.¹³

The reality of the job market for many whites differed dramatically from the £1 per day ideal. On the Rand whites were only able to earn the equivalent of farm wages which ranged between 17s 6d and 25s per week.¹⁴ By comparison wage rates for black labour varied between 15s 8d and 23s 9d per week.¹⁵ These barely differentiated wage rates meant that white labourers, particularly newly urbanised Afrikaners, enjoyed little additional income elasticity in acquisition of shelter than did the average black worker. Prior to World War I, reductions in living costs had allowed the establishment of family life in Johannesburg, but protection of white living standards required the assurance of housing of a better quality than that offered by slumlords. In the workplace the white working class fought for protection of their skilled position by demanding that wages be decided on the basis of 'rate for the job'. In the domestic sphere they flexed their political muscle by demanding state assistance in obtaining housing that would distance them from the black population of the slums.

White labourers could never have afforded shelter of this standard without state patronage. This demand was taken up together with the call for segregation by the Labour Party which, within weeks of gaining control of the Johan-

provided by the local authority, 'so that the mixing of poor whites and blacks together could be remedied'.¹⁶

Only a month later a Johannesburg Council decision recommended the Provincial Council support a draft ordinance, drawn up by the Labour Party, that would give local authorities in the Transvaal the powers necessary to implement a white housing scheme.¹⁷ Whereas Transvaal local authorities held extensive power over, and even responsibility for, the provision of African housing, no attempt had been made prior to this initiative to legislate such provisions for whites. The outcome of the Labour Party drive for housing assistance to whites was the 1919 Transvaal Housing Bill. Although this Bill was never passed by the Provincial Council the authority required by Johannesburg Town Council was made law by national acceptance of the 1920 Housing Act.¹⁸ Following the creation of the Central Housing Board under the new Act the Johannesburg Council was in a position to implement their stated commitment to housing for poor whites.

It seems that the desire of the authorities to initiate a white housing scheme related only in part to the need for housing. As a member of the Johannesburg Parks and Estates Committee pointed out, it would have been foolish of the city not to avail itself of government money, 'whereby the needs of the town could be met with practically no risk to the council'. Provision of a white housing scheme, it was argued, would not only create employment opportunities, but would also generate revenue for the council by taxing the developed property.¹⁹ Whatever the motive of council support for initiating a public housing scheme, the proposal was endorsed by Johannesburg residents. An announcement by the Parks and Estates Committee that it had decided to apply for a £490 610 loan for the erection of 500 cottages at Cottesloe immediately drew 1 220 applications.²⁰

As it happened the closing date for applications to the Central Housing Board for funding was missed by two days, and the proposed scheme came to nothing.²¹ It was alleged that the chairman of the Finance Committee, who was a prominent estate agent, had neglected to put in the application despite receiving specific instructions to do so.²² Even when the omission was rectified, the Johannesburg Council was apparently told by the Central Housing Board's representative that the city was wealthy enough to raise its own money, and should not approach the government for advances.²³ The council, however, was firm in its resolve to obtain a white housing scheme, and in 1923 applied for £200 000 from the Central Housing Board.²⁴ The outcome of this application was particularly significant as, for the first time, the extent of the housing crisis for poor whites was assessed. The Central Housing Board held

that, as it had no knowledge of the white housing shortage, it would require the enumeration of empty dwellings in the poorer areas where unskilled workmen and less prosperous artisans would seek housing before a loan could be granted.²⁵

Dr Porter, the Medical Officer of Health for Johannesburg, was assigned the task of conducting the survey. He found that, other than within the area one mile from the city, there was a 'reasonable sufficiency' of working class dwellings. Although some families were found to be sharing the same dwelling, empty houses were available. In an interview with the Rent Board the inferior quality and general disrepair of available houses were emphasised. Both the Rent Board representative and Dr Porter strongly criticised 'the close housing association of poor whites with Native and Coloured persons' and unreservedly expressed the view that the necessity for assisted white housing was relatively negligible compared with the urgency for the segregation and decent housing of 'Natives'. The Medical Officer of Health concluded that there was little or no public health necessity or justification for state-aided housing for 'Europeans' in Johannesburg. The conditions of 'European' housing in certain of the poorer central districts would be greatly improved by the provision in locations or 'native-villages' of adequate housing for 'natives'.²⁶

No money was allocated to Johannesburg for white housing,²⁷ ostensibly because of the Medical Officer's report to the Central Housing Board, but possibly because funds were not available.²⁸ Attention to the working class housing question was subsumed in efforts to get the Natives (Urban Areas) Act proclaimed and enforced in the city. The proposed provision of a white housing scheme was dropped as the most important item on the council's agenda, and replaced by the drive to rid the inner-city of all blacks. The focus on the removal of Africans from the slums, however, was not inconsistent with the council's concern for white housing needs. For the council, the white housing problem had been defined as a problem of residential integration, and could therefore be solved by the removal of the 'native menace'.²⁹

Contrary to this intention, in the years following 1923 racial mixing in the inner-city working class suburbs increased and slum conditions proliferated. Industrial developments resulted in an influx of whites, mainly women, who could not afford 'suitable accommodation' and therefore rented rooms from coloureds or Indians.³⁰ In an attempt to house young workers 'properly' the provisions of the 1920 Housing Act were amended in 1925 to allow for construction of hostels for whites.³¹ Despite concern about mixing of races, the Johannesburg Council did not apply for hostel funding. These facilities were provided by charitable bodies such as the Catholic Women's League.³² In the same period a series of court orders declared *ultra vires* attempts to

implement the Natives (Urban Areas) Act,³³ thereby rendering the council impotent in their attempts to remove the African population.

By 1927 both public and civic opinion was such that despite the fact that more than a quarter of all whites in Johannesburg lived with more than two people to a room,³⁴ the council did not consider it necessary to apply for a housing loan. Instead the energy and finances of the local authority were centred on ridding the slums of all blacks. Attention focused on the re-housing schemes of Western Native township, various hostel facilities, and Orlando. Even if whites were present in slum areas, the city's housing problem was understood to be about re-housing 'natives'. During the 1920s neither the Labour Party in Johannesburg, nor the Pact government, had any impact on the built environment of the white working class despite the prevailing political climate of sympathy for poor whites. It was not until the 1930s, once thousands of Africans had been removed from the inner-city, that official attention turned to address the necessity of alternative public accommodation for whites.

Poor whites and the housing crisis

The closing years of the 1920s saw a transformation of inner-city areas of Johannesburg which meant that slums could no longer be construed as merely a 'native' problem. The transition was marked by increased urban decay and a shift in the racial composition of the slumyards. In the four years following the proclamation of the city under the Natives (Urban Areas) Act (1923–1927), the Native Affairs Department forcibly removed 30 000 African people.³⁵ The majority of the displaced families sought accommodation in unproclaimed remnants of the city, namely the suburbs of Sophiatown, Newclare and Martindale.³⁶ Established after the First World War it was intended that these suburbs would cater for 3 000 families; by 1933 the population had swollen to 26 000 people.³⁷ Other relocated Africans were housed in municipal hostels or locations.³⁸ Despite these removals the African presence in slums was not eradicated by the segregationist efforts of the Johannesburg Council. Some of those affected by the Natives (Urban Areas) Act returned to slum areas, and there were always new migrants seeking accommodation.³⁹ One noticeable trend was for coloureds, over whom local authorities had no power, to take occupancy of the houses and rooms vacated by Africans.⁴⁰

More significant for the persistence of slums than the reflux of blacks, was the dramatic increase in the number of poor whites in the city. The number of people the government defined as poor whites increased nationally from 106 000 in 1916 to 120 000 in 1921 and 300 000 in 1933, and a large proportion of these newly urbanised poor sought a niche in Johannesburg.⁴¹ By 1933 the

Johannesburg authorities deemed it necessary to conduct a survey of white housing needs in which they found 1 121 families to be unsatisfactorily accommodated.⁴² Clearly the situation had changed dramatically from that of 1923 when 322 houses in working class suburbs stood empty.⁴³

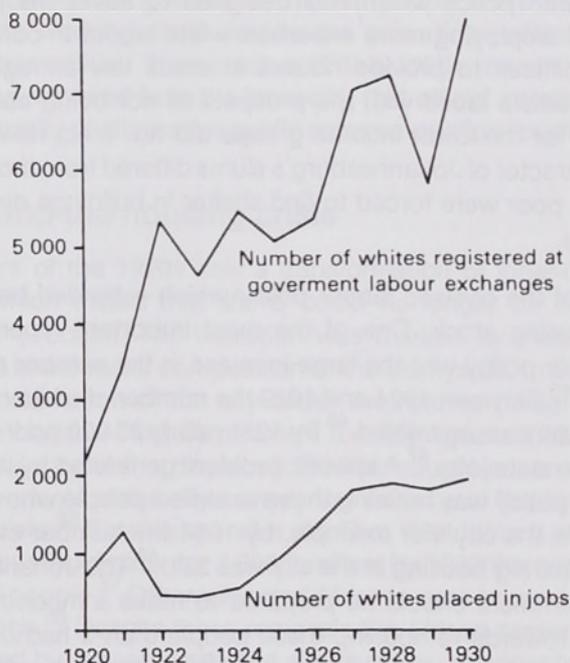
The early years of the 1930s saw a transformation of working class residential areas of Johannesburg because of the dramatic increase in the number of poor whites in the city. At the most obvious level, one ramification of the increased urban population was to reduce the number of buildings available for shelter. Ironically this problem was made worse by the Pact government's 'civilised labour' policy which was designed to assist the poor white. The imperative of employing more expensive white labour in construction meant that it was difficult to provide houses at costs low enough for affordable rents.⁴⁴ Capitalists faced with the prospect of not being able to profit from construction for the lower income groups did not erect new buildings. As a result the character of Johannesburg's slums differed from those of other large cities, as the poor were forced to find shelter in buildings never intended for domestic use.

The impact of the civilised labour policy which extended beyond restricting available housing stock. One of the most important repercussions of the civilised labour policy was the large increase in the number of poor whites in urban areas.⁴⁵ Between 1924 and 1929 the number of white railway labourers based in Johannesburg trebled.⁴⁶ By 1931 nearly 25 000 poor whites had been absorbed into state jobs.⁴⁷ A specific problem generated by the government's white labour policy was housing those unskilled people who could not afford rents asked in the city. For example, by 1934 the number of married railway labourers requiring housing in the city was 351.⁴⁸ The Johannesburg Council felt that government should be prepared to make a much more substantial contribution towards re-housing these people than it had done in the past, particularly as the white labour policy lacked any proper mechanism of preventing an influx from the impoverished rural areas. The promise of work, it was argued, drew 'bywoners' 'away from their natural environment' by enticing them with wages which appeared high, but which under urban conditions, could only provide subsistence at a very low standard of living.

In the worsening depression not all new migrants to Johannesburg benefited from state efforts to create employment for whites. The limited success of the civilised labour policy is emphasised by Department of Labour figures for the number of unemployed per thousand of the white male population (see also figure 1):

For the worst depression years 1932 and 1933 the Department calculated that there were 17 and 31 unemployed males per thousand of the white population respectively. The Department managed to find subsidised labour for 3.7 and 14.8 per thousand respectively, leaving 13.3 and 16.2 per thousand wholly out of work.⁴⁹

Figure 1 White males registered at government labour exchanges, and white males placed in jobs, 1920–1930⁵⁰



In April 1930, 3 000 white males were reported to be unemployed in the city, and over 200 new employment requests were received each month by the Rand Aid Society, mainly from those who had been living in the area for less than three months.⁵¹ The cumulative impact of the policy of 'civilised labour', depression and drought, which struck in 1930,⁵² increased pressure among whites for inexpensive shelter. Conditions of overcrowding and insanitation had resulted in white slum conditions in the poorer class districts such as Fordsburg, portions of Jeppestown, Doornfontein, and Newlands. The posi-

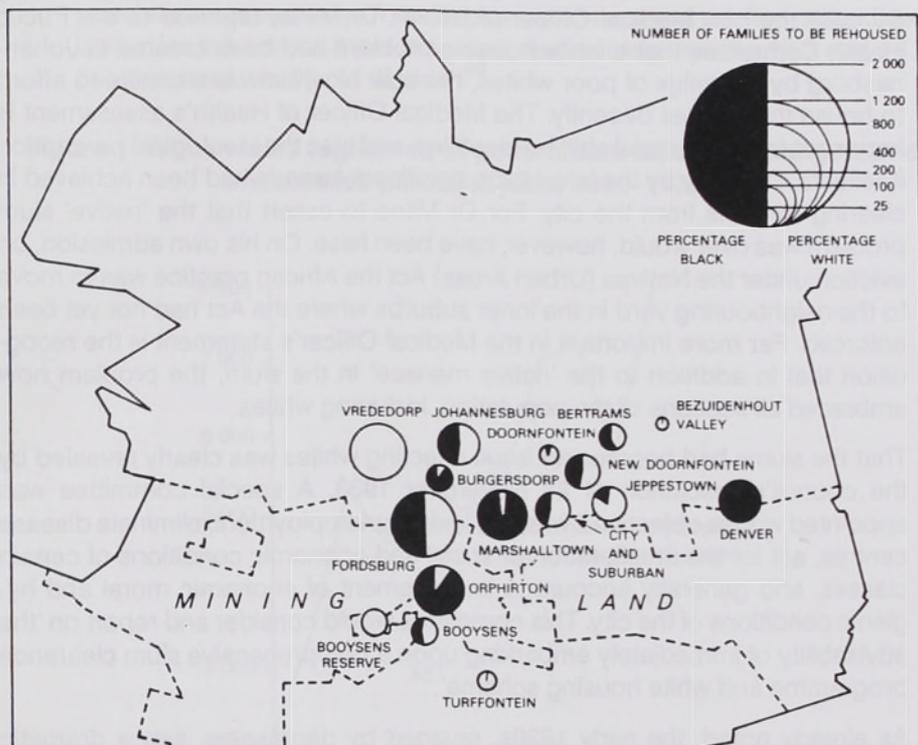
tion had changed entirely from 1927 when slums had been 'largely a native problem which has since been energetically tackled'.⁵³

By 1933 the new Medical Officer of Health, Dr Milne, reported to the Public Health Committee that a white housing problem had been created in Johannesburg by the influx of poor whites, the bulk of whom were unable to afford to house themselves decently. The Medical Officer of Health's assessment is important for the material shift he identifies, and also the ideological perception it reflects. Certainly by the late 1920s significant inroads had been achieved in clearing Africans from the city. For Dr Milne to assert that the 'native' slum problem was over would, however, have been false. On his own admission, on eviction under the Natives (Urban Areas) Act the African practice was to move to the neighbouring yard in the inner suburbs where the Act had not yet been enforced. Far more important in the Medical Officer's statement is the recognition that in addition to the 'native menace' in the slum, the problem now embraced all sections of the population, including whites.

That the slums had become an issue affecting whites was clearly revealed by the council's resolution of 28 November 1933. A special committee was appointed whose objective it was to alleviate unemployment, eliminate disease centres, act for the amelioration of social and economic conditions of certain classes, and generally encourage improvement of economic moral and hygienic conditions of the city. This committee would consider and report on 'the advisability of immediately embarking upon a comprehensive slum clearance programme and white housing scheme'.⁵⁴

As already noted, the early 1930s, ravaged by depression, saw a dramatic increase in the extent of the slum problem, and of the number of whites living in these unsatisfactory conditions. The visible increase in the concentration of the poor in the inner city led one Johannesburg citizen to enquire where a 'decent person of average means' could live. In his own words every suburb near to town was becoming 'a haunt of kaffirs and half-wild white hooligans'.⁵⁵ The most significant dimension of the growing accommodation crisis was the changing racial composition of slumyards. The Johannesburg Council's 1934 survey of slums and insanitary properties for the Central Housing Board showed that 928 of the 1 922 families needing re-housing from the slums (i.e. 48 per cent) were white.⁵⁶ These poor whites were not only concentrated in the racially pure suburbs of Vrededorp and Booyens Reserve, but were scattered all through the working class neighbourhoods of the city (figure 2).

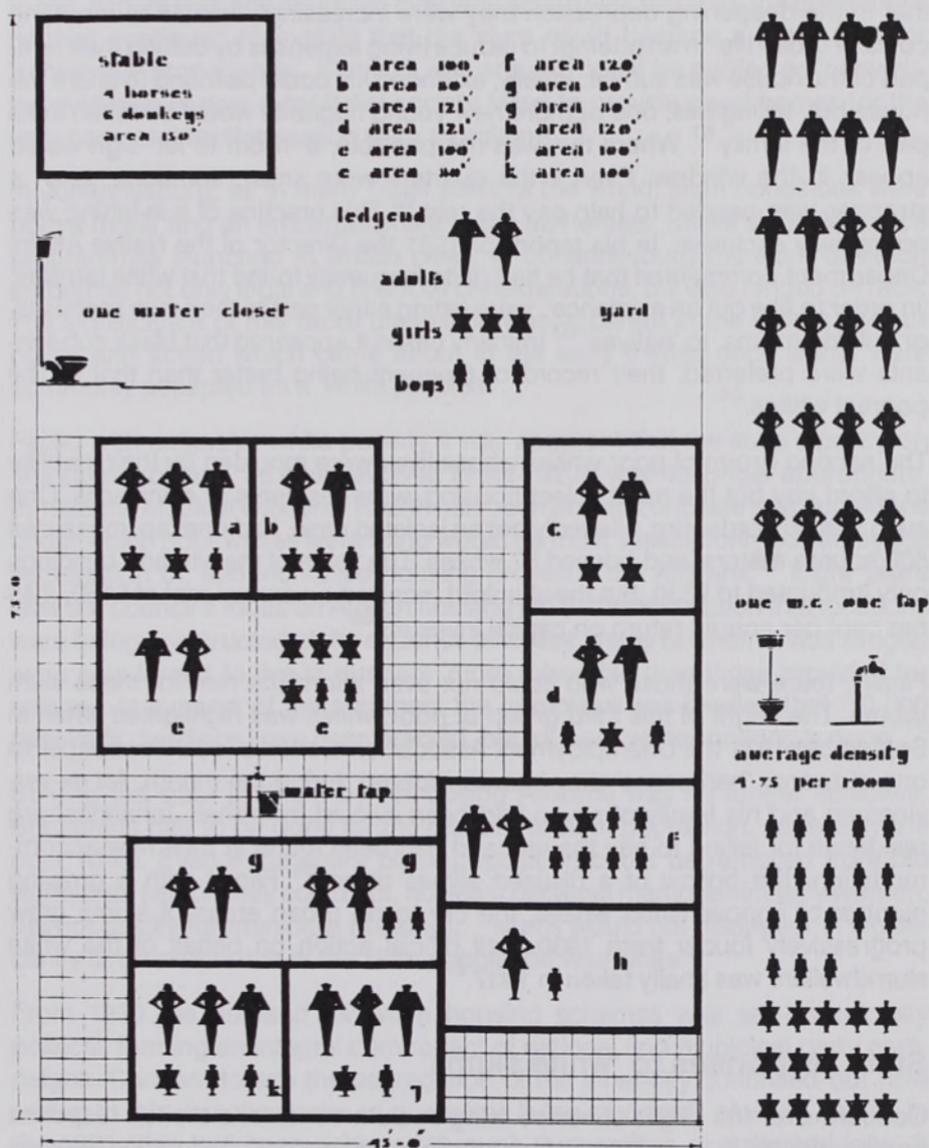
Figure 2 Racial geography of the slums of Johannesburg, 1934⁵⁷



The slums of Johannesburg

Conditions in the slums, where the dwellings were often remnants of wood and iron structures from 'gold rush' Johannesburg, were appalling. The council's own 1933 survey of white housing showed 157 cases of overcrowding in single rooms. Sometimes more than one family shared the same quarters.⁵⁸ The same report identified 873 cases of social overcrowding (that is where adults who were not of the same sex, and who were not partners, shared the same room). Social overcrowding was also held to occur if the dining or kitchen areas doubled as sleeping accommodation. Problems of overcrowding were exacerbated by concentration of 'rooms' in yards, where facilities such as outside taps and toilets were shared by all the occupants of the yard (figure 3).

Figure 3 Schematic representation of a slumyard in Fordsburg, 1933⁵⁹



Circumstances of white people embroiled in the housing crisis of the 1930s varied tremendously. At least three distinct experiences can be sketched. The first group, the 'new poor' as they came to be identified in the press,⁶⁰ found that in the deepening depression they were increasingly unable to meet the costs of urban life. In an attempt to reduce living expenses by cutting their rent, part of the house was sub-let. Ideally, extended kin could be found to share the house but, failing this, one or more new young migrants would be taken in as part of the family.⁶¹ Where this was not possible, a 'room to let' sign would appear in the window. Even if the quarters were small, someone, even a stranger, was needed to help pay the rent.⁶² This practice of sub-letting was not racially exclusive. In his report for 1931 the Director of the Native Affairs Department commented that he had quite frequently found that white families, 'in order to eke out an existence', were letting either part of their own premises, or outside rooms, to 'natives'.⁶³ In many cases it appeared that black sub-tenants were preferred, their record of payment being better than that of the poorest whites.⁶⁴

The second group of poor whites whose lives were moulded by their inability to afford any but the most abject housing, were residents of slumyards. One such yard in Fordsburg, allegedly not an isolated case, had one tap, measured 500 square meters, and housed 57 whites. The value of the site and buildings only amounted to £330, but the slumlord received an annual rent of £150, a 45 per cent per annum return on capital invested.⁶⁵

Finally, there were those who could not even afford the rent for these slum rooms. The plight of this third group of poor whites was highlighted when in September 1931 the Unemployment Association alerted a local newspaper to one of twenty 'bad cases' they had considered during the month. An ex-serviceman and his family of seven had been evicted from their Johannesburg residence for failing to pay the rent and had been found at their new accommodation: the hollow of a disused slimes dump.⁶⁶ Faced with a growing number of impoverished whites, the cry to rid urban areas of slums grew progressively louder from 1930 until official action on behalf of the white slumdweller was finally taken in 1937.⁶⁷

State responses to 'white slums'

Concern over the plight of whites living in slum conditions elicited response unprecedented in the 1920s. Before any official comment on the white housing crisis had been formalised, however, the Johannesburg Housing Utility Company was launched in 1933. Two extracts from their publicity booklet *To hell with slums* capture the emotion of the new concern. The Johannesburg

Housing Utility Company pointed out that the nation could not afford 'the moral and mental degradation which slum conditions create in those who inhabit them'. If there was any doubt left over why action was required, the company's booklet continued to explain that the slum could become a fertile field for 'subversive propaganda'. Slums, it was argued, could be quoted as 'convincing evidence of how a capitalist society failed to provide good homes for the very poor, and for this reason were a problem'.⁶⁸

In Johannesburg, as in many other parts of the world, slum conditions were both a threat and an embarrassment to the authorities. Unlike slum clearance programmes launched in British cities, in Johannesburg the slum question embraced not only legal and financial considerations, but also hinged on race. The significance of this racial dimension was apparent in the shift in council policy and action which came about in the early thirties once slums were commonly accepted as a 'white problem'.

Faced with extensive white poverty it was apparent that the state's policy on 'the slum problem', as it had evolved in the 1920s, was no longer appropriate. In 1923 the Medical Officer of Health had been able to conclude that conditions under which poor whites were living would be most satisfactorily solved by the segregation of, and increased housing provision for, Africans.⁶⁹ Eight years later the council's focus on African housing led to the accusation that locations were being constructed at the expense of whites, many of whom it was alleged were now forced to live in quarters 'more miserable than those provided for natives'. In support of the argument the complaint was levelled that '10 000 neat kaffir dwellings have been erected, but for poor whites nothing is done'.⁷⁰

Solving the slum problem by re-housing Africans was no longer sufficient. Something had to be done for the rest of the slum population, especially the poor white. Even if the entire black population could be removed from the slumyards (which they could not, not least because many, particularly women, did not qualify for municipal housing),⁷¹ slums would not disappear. A significantly large proportion of the slum population was white.

From 1930 the demand for white housing schemes was self-consciously political, forming an integral component of national and municipal party campaigns. Concern to see the segregation of the inner-city continued but now added to this was the desire to guarantee living standards of white labour. In the 1920s this had been achieved through the creation of protected jobs. A decade later assisted housing provision was an additional means of subsidising wages and ensuring a minimum standard of living. Nationally this translated into the introduction of extended housing finance for poor whites. In Johannesburg the city fathers geared themselves to accept responsibility for

providing accommodation for the poor, even where this entailed unavoidable cost. Councillor Leveson, chairman of the Public Health Committee, and prime mover in the demand for a council-provided scheme, motivated for the initiative on the grounds that whites were not 'inveterate or hereditary slum dwellers', and that there existed some responsibility to ensure their rehabilitation.⁷²

The Johannesburg Council decision to provide housing 'under proper conditions' through the establishment of a sub-economic housing scheme based on the Octavia Hill system of management⁷³ was made possible by changes in national housing legislation. In 1930 the Central Housing Board was given the authority to grant sub-economic loans for white housing schemes. The low rate of interest (1,5 per cent) facilitated charging low rents, and was intended to encourage slum clearance. The second change was the passing of the Slums Act in 1934. This gave local authorities power to expropriate whole areas even where not every stand was a slum. In addition the Act reduced costs of obtaining a closing order from the courts, which was particularly useful as eviction orders were often refused on grounds that there was no alternative accommodation available to the inhabitants.⁷⁴ The Slums Act, because of these additional powers, was also critical in ensuring the availability of land close to the city. In the case of the clearance of the Bertrams area, the Glenesk Housing scheme was built on the newly expropriated land.⁷⁵ The council's policy of removing all slum dwellers and re-housing only the whites had been made explicit.

Conclusion

In the early part of the century, as now, conditions for the poorest whites were in general better than those of many African workers in Johannesburg.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, during the 1920s and 1930s, there was a large group of whites who did not share all privileges usually associated with the 'elite' racial group of South African society. The presence of poor whites living in slum conditions highlights the low standard of living these people endured. It has been argued in this chapter that the failure in the 1920s to clear the slums by the removal of the African population highlighted the plight of inadequately housed poor whites. The genesis of a white public housing scheme stemmed in part from an increased national political concern to ensure the support of the white working class. It was also motivated by unacceptable persistence of racially integrated slum conditions in Johannesburg. The heritage of abysmal poor white housing conditions, and recognition of the inadequacy of the Natives (Urban Areas) Act in removing slum housing, combined to justify the search for new means of dealing with housing requirements of the franchised poor. Encouraged by economic recovery, and spurred on by political necessity, the

state expanded its commitment to white public housing. Introduction of sub-economic funding spawned a white public housing movement in most major urban areas, including Johannesburg. From 1930 council housing was adopted by both central and local housing officials as the pivot for urban segregation.

In the 1920s, when the population of the slums of Johannesburg was predominantly black, the major concern of the authorities was to rid the inner-city of its housing blight by forcibly removing the black population. Relocation of these unfortunate people beyond the jurisdiction of the council, and beyond the public eye where housing standards would be subject to less critical evaluation, was the major strategy adopted by the council to deal with the city's desperate housing problem. Although this programme of removal in no way adequately addressed the crisis situation, official moves to segregate the black population do seem to have appeased anti-slum campaigners and those whites calling for racially separated facilities, including housing. By the end of the decade even extensive repressive action under the 1923 Natives (Urban Areas) Act was insufficient to stop the growth of slum areas in Johannesburg. Furthermore, the nature of the housing crisis had altered so that provisions of the 1923 legislation were incapable of addressing urban problems. Solving the slum problem of the 1930s demanded that specific attention be given to whites, who by then inhabited the slums in large numbers.

The most difficult aspect of ridding slums of whites proved to be finding suitable alternative accommodation. Political imperatives of wooing poor whites, combined with elitist notions of the inherent superior potential of whites as opposed to blacks, made it essential that whites be provided with housing that would encourage their social upliftment. As the private sector was unlikely to initiate housing of the standard required at a cost within the means of poor whites, the state intervened to make available funds for public housing schemes. In this way, the establishment of council housing for whites was seen as crucial in eliminating racial mixing in cheap quarters of the city.

Chapter 8

Minute substance versus substantial fear: white destitution and the shaping of policy in Rhodesia in the 1890s*

*Philip Stigger***

What is obvious about poor whites in Rhodesia is that they were not numerous. Whereas some 300 000 largely Afrikaner poor whites existed in South Africa in 1929,¹ the Prime Minister of Southern Rhodesia could talk of about only between 100 and 150 such individuals subsisting in the colony in 1934.² On the basis of the most proximate census figures, poor whites comprised 1 in 6,68 of all whites in South Africa as against 1 in 369,89 of those in Rhodesia.³ These relative numbers at first sight amply support Hailey's assertion that there was no poor white problem of any importance outside South Africa,⁴ and the temptation to trust his judgement and dismiss the matter out of hand is strong. However, the wide discrepancy between the relative number of poor whites in two adjacent states that have been – and in many quarters still are – regarded as forming an entity known now as 'southern Africa', is in itself challenging.⁵ In responding to that challenge, the significance of the poor white problem in colonial Rhodesian history emerges, for it becomes apparent that it was the fear of a poor white problem developing – rather than any developed problem – which conditioned the policy pursued in the colony virtually from the inception of the colonial state.

* Poor whites are associated with colonial states: therefore, 'Rhodesia' has been retained, together with its place-names, to emphasise that it is an aspect of colonial history which is being examined.

** I am indebted to J. R. D. Cobbing and R. Morrell for their helpful comments, and to R. J. Challiss for allowing me to view an initial draft of his chapter.

To determine what that policy was, to identify how far it was shaped by fear and to establish why the policy was significant, it is necessary to concentrate on certain events which began to emerge before the colonial state was a year old. In order to achieve these ends, it is essential to establish the extent to which the colonial Rhodesian problem was not representative of 'white' South African experience. That demands clarification of the degree to which the Rhodesian poor white question resembled that in South Africa. Therefore, in order to determine such similarities, it is necessary first of all to outline the salient features surrounding the emergence of the poor white problem in South Africa itself.

That problem has been held, until recently, to have emerged only in the 1890s. Two older commentators have suggested that it would have developed earlier had not easy access to land allowed trekkers to continue practising subsistence agriculture.⁶ Such a level of cultivation became increasingly impossible, as the acquisition of land by companies combined with rural poverty, uneconomic land holdings, and the commercialisation or capitalisation of agriculture forced Afrikaner 'bywoners' or tenants-at-will off the land.⁷ In the Transvaal where the impact of mining was strongest, this process was the most marked. Natural scourges such as drought, locusts, and cattle diseases contributed to the process which was in turn accelerated by the upheavals and bitterness generated by the South African War.⁸ Whites who were forced from the land were compelled ultimately to attempt unsuccessfully to compete against blacks, who were able to accept lower wages.⁹ Having been divorced from the land against their will, poverty-stricken Afrikaners still aspired to return to it — an aspiration supported by governments until the 1920s, probably because it was judged politically advantageous to do so since almost half the white population still lived upon the land at that time.¹⁰

There are thus eight readily identifiable features surrounding the poor white problem in South Africa. First, land was accessible even to indigent whites initially, although it was not permanently so. Second, subsistence agriculture was common in the early years. Third, land passed into the hands of companies. Fourth, once this had happened and once the expansion of the mining industry encouraged the commercialisation of agriculture, whites began to be forced off the land. Fifth, such whites encountered black competition. Sixth, such whites wished to return to the land. Seventh, governments countenanced such a desire among the white urban poor. Finally, governments supported such aspirations because a high proportion of whites lived upon the land.

Some if not all of these features ought to recur in Rhodesia, especially as the concept of a rolling nineteenth-century South African frontier is *prima facie* applicable to the territory.¹¹ Rhodesia was subjected to mounting intrusions

by white hunters, traders and missionaries from the 1850s. International mining capital undoubtedly added a powerful new dimension from 1889, operating as it did through the agency of Rhodes and Beit and their tool, the British South Africa Company (BSAC), otherwise known as the Chartered Company, a commercial institution chartered by the Crown to supervise and, where appropriate, administer the area. Land grabbing contributed to the upsurges in black resistance which in their turn led, through black military defeats, to the consolidation of colonial power throughout Rhodesia c. 1898.¹²

The decade of the 1890s in Rhodesia was clearly one of intense white activity. Whites were actively acquiring title to land. Access to land was a key issue in the development of the poor white problem in South Africa. Therefore, it is desirable to commence any discussion about the nature of the Rhodesian poor white problem by establishing how accessible land was as the colonial state itself emerged.

A white person obtained access to land in Mashonaland, Manicaland, or Gazaland by receiving a grant in one of four forms. The first was a pioneer grant. It was intended originally that each embodied member of the 1890 Pioneer Column should draw by lot for a 1 500 morgen surveyed farm which he was to occupy on military tenure for the first two years.¹³ In practice those who qualified were allowed to select land for themselves, while the occupation clause was withdrawn in October 1891.¹⁴ Subsequently, grants free of the occupation clause were made to men whom the Chartered Company wished to reward or to influence, so that the term 'pioneer' came to refer to the type of land grant rather than the background of its recipient.¹⁵ The second form was a police grant to a 1 500-morgen farm. Such grants were restricted originally to men who had served for two years in the BSAC's police, who were required to peg out and personally occupy their farm within a year of the date of their discharge. The qualifying period of service was reduced to one year as the original military police force began to be disbanded from August 1891 onwards, while the time allowed for pegging farms was extended in August 1892 to three years from the date of a man's discharge.¹⁶ Even that period might be extended, while the occupation clause was never consistently applied.¹⁷ The third form of grant was a civilian one to a farm of from 1 500 to not more than 3 000 morgen. These were made to any white applicants prepared to occupy the land within a reasonable period, the larger grants generally being restricted to Gazaland.¹⁸ The fourth and final form consisted of special grants made by the Chartered Company to those whom it wished particularly to reward or to entice.¹⁹

The position in Matabeleland was at once more straightforward, yet equally complicated. It was more straightforward since the available rights to land

exceeded the demand for land for some years after the occupation. The Chartered Company had used a right to a 3 000 morgen farm as one inducement to settlers in Mashonaland and to others specially recruited in the South to serve as volunteers in its forces in 1893 on the invasion of Matabeleland.²⁰ By 1899, the Chartered Company had recognised 948 'Victoria Agreement' rights, although 42 had not yet been used to obtain a farm. By that date also 56 special grants had been assigned, apart from a number of special rights and an additional 78 rights to 100 acres of land awarded to 'non-whites' who had accompanied the invading forces in 1893.²¹

The Chartered Company's policy on land alienation became more restrictive from 1894. In June, one syndicate in Mashonaland forfeited the farms granted to it because it had failed to comply with a requirement to occupy its farms, amongst other reasons.²² In August, the holder of a pioneer farm was threatened with forfeiture unless he paid the amounts he owed for quit-rent and for survey and other fees.²³ In September, an award of 12 farms each of 1 500 morgen to some Afrikaners a month earlier was rescinded, apparently because the Chartered Company felt that it had been tricked.²⁴ In that month also, the Chartered Company realised that it was likely to experience difficulty in providing land in Matabeleland in the quantity required to honour its commitments to its volunteers under the terms of the Victoria Agreement.²⁵ Against this background it is not surprising that it sought counsel's advice on its power to expropriate land while insisting that companies outside Matabeleland should meet their obligations by beneficially occupying all the farms to which they held title.²⁶ However, it was only in December 1896, as African resistance began to be overcome, that individuals began to be stripped of title to land which they once occupied because of a failure to continue to do so.²⁷ Shortly after confirmation that forfeiture of land for such cause would be insisted upon,²⁸ and as railway construction began to make exploitation of the land more feasible, pressure began to be exerted upon companies.²⁹ By April 1898, all landholders who were required to occupy land beneficially had been reminded of their obligation to do so.³⁰ This did not prove to be the prelude to vigorous action to cause companies to disgorge land which they were not using, for the Chartered Company in 1900 made provision for the beneficial occupation clause to be struck out either following occupation for a term of three years or through payment of a fine for non-compliance for ten years.³¹ However, its actions did induce companies to begin to exploit their holdings from 1901, to the extent to which that was possible.

The extent to which land was available to any white in Rhodesia clearly varied. It could be obtained generally in Matabeleland only by those who had served the Chartered Company in the 1893 invasion or by those who were prepared

to purchase a volunteer's right. In the remainder of the territory, land was readily available until 1894 so that even indigents might hope to acquire title.³² The position then changed because the Chartered Company was either unable or unwilling to make land freely available. From mid-1894 therefore, an individual with only limited resources was unlikely to acquire title. It follows that potential Rhodesian progenitors of poor whites could acquire land only within the period between September 1891 and c. June 1894, largely outside Matabeleland. However, the Chartered Company's inability or unwillingness to provide land also stimulated activity by individuals and companies wanting land to secure title by acquiring existing rights.³³ Since the earliest official statement of actual land holdings dates only from c. 1900 and not from 1894, it follows that the number of farms secured by the poor cannot be determined accurately.³⁴

What can be established is that individuals entitled to occupy land under Pioneer, Police, Victoria Agreement or civilian grants were unlikely to achieve title. Twenty-three out of 189 officers and men enrolled in the Pioneer Corps in 1890 are known to have farmed in Rhodesia, but seven did so half-heartedly while one grew potatoes for a season as a squatter.³⁵ One hundred and ninety five titles to farms had been obtained through the exercise of Police rights by 1899: however, the entitlement of 499 ex-policemen had been cancelled by that date, largely because no attempt had been made to secure land.³⁶ At the end of December 1893, no fewer than 156 men entitled to a farm in Matabeleland left in a single party for Johannesburg and, by 1899, only 464 farms or rights out of the 948 original entitlements remained in the hands of individuals.³⁷ The wastage in respect of civilian grants in the eastern portion of the territory was equally high: large numbers had lapsed before the end of 1896 and, while individuals still held 456 such grants in 1899, no fewer than 576 in all had lapsed by that date.³⁸

Individuals were clearly not very successful, if and when they sought to exercise their claims to land. Companies were more skilful, as their accumulation of Victoria Agreement farms and rights in Matabeleland reveals. Elsewhere in Rhodesia, their title stemmed very largely from the special grants in vogue to 1894, which gave companies control of no less than 1 752 290 morgen, or the equivalent of 1 168 standard 1 500-morgen farms. Companies had also secured 127 farms subject to Pioneer, Police or civilian terms, together with rights to peg out a further 104 Pioneer farms.³⁹ Thus, one outstanding characteristic of alienated land in Rhodesia even in the 1890s was that it was more likely to be owned by a company than by an individual.

This was the case because, notwithstanding the lack of adequate markets, many individuals who had access to land were either uninterested in seizing

any opportunity presented to them or judged themselves unlikely to succeed since they lacked capital. Most members of the Pioneer Corps either lacked an appropriate rural background, or were townsmen.⁴⁰ Most ex-policemen were also townsmen. Both groups lacked the means to survive merely by 'farming'.⁴¹ Some pioneers and some ex-policemen participated in the 1893 invasion of Matabeleland, in which it was said that some 650 Rhodesian settlers were involved. Those settlers who became casualties had little connection with the land.⁴² Those volunteers specially recruited came largely from Johannesburg.⁴³ Thus, the 1893 volunteers were no more capable of settling on the land than the majority of the members of the Pioneer Corps or the Chartered Company's military police had been. Indeed, the most likely group of settlers to succeed on the land before the 1896 crisis were those who sought or acquired civilian grants: at least they wanted to live on the land. Even among this group, more men failed than won through: mere commitment was not enough.⁴⁴ Some people who possessed capital or who had access to it were building up farms by June 1896.⁴⁵ Others, including the 108 Afrikaner single men and heads of households who attempted to settle in Gazaland, had enough enthusiasm to survive for a while practising subsistence cultivation, but they lacked the resources to do more.⁴⁶

Subsistence cultivation was all most whites engaged in throughout the 1890s, for 'farming' customarily meant no more than this, with the exceptions merely proving the rule.⁴⁷ A 'farm' was but an area of land, about 1 500 morgen in extent, with some buildings upon it, with five acres broken to the plough, and with an even smaller area actually under crops.⁴⁸ To satisfy the demands of the Chartered Company that a 'farm' should be occupied, it was necessary for a white to live on the land. To this end, whites began to physically occupy 'farms' from the beginning of the 1891/92 season.⁴⁹ Sometimes a man was expected to labour for nothing, euphemistically described as working for his own benefit.⁵⁰ More commonly, an Afrikaner might be engaged for £3 a month, presumably on the assumption that, as a rural South African he would have some ability to break the soil.⁵¹ The end result was that the average area cultivated on each 'farm' was minute, whether those who worked the land did so to secure it for themselves or for their employers. Thus, in the first quarter of 1895, about six acres was being cultivated on each of 150 occupied farms in the Bulawayo magisterial district, an average which fell by half an acre on the seventeen farms in the Fort Victoria district.⁵² Two years later, the Afrikaner families around Melsetter on the eastern frontier were more energetic, each family cultivating about ten acres.⁵³ Afrikaners around Inyanga to the north went to the other extreme, for at the end of the decade they lived on 'farms' which lacked fields and livestock. These people lived by hunting augmented by whatever else came up.⁵⁴ Other whites did the same, 'being by turns farmer,

transport rider, trader, or labourer⁵⁵ — a cycle of activity which was to be repeated by others until 1914 at least.⁵⁶

White subsistence cultivation continued unabated until railway construction first facilitated the development of mining and then combined with mining to open up a more viable internal market for farmers, while at the same time giving them access eventually to external markets. A territorial railway network was established between November 1897 and June 1904.⁵⁷ The completion of the line to Bulawayo allowed gold production to expand in Matabeleland and, in the first full year after that event, production exceeded £125 000, no less than six times the value of all white-produced gold to 31 March 1898. The gold returns increased yearly thereafter, surpassing £1 million in 1905, £2 million in 1907 and £3 million in 1914, in part because of the rapid growth in the number of small workers after 1903.⁵⁸ The response in the agricultural sector was less pronounced. The number of whites engaging in agriculture rose from 1 029 in 1904 to 1 174 in 1907, when such individuals formed 8,17 and 8,38 per cent respectively of all white adults.⁵⁹ The Chartered Company then adjusted its agricultural policies.⁶⁰ The changes made soon bore fruit, for livestock holdings increased, maize farming expanded, a European export market for maize emerged in 1909, and tobacco became a viable crop by 1910.⁶¹ By 1911, white adults engaging in agriculture formed 13,27 percent of the white population, a figure which rose to 18,38 per cent in 1921 when 3 626 agricultural income earners were involved.⁶²

The movement of whites onto the land which began to manifest itself between 1907 and 1911 reflected the commercialisation of agriculture, which was becoming increasingly obvious from 1909. From that point onwards, the emergence of a South Africa-style poor white problem was inevitable once whites were forced to compete against blacks, after the less capable rural whites had been forced off the land. Fear of an imminent poor white problem on South African lines began to be voiced as World War I broke out.⁶³ The problem did not materialise because of the disruption caused by the war and its aftermath.⁶⁴ So it transpired that it was not until the world depression of the 1930s that blacks and whites came into direct and unconcealed competition in a manner apparently conforming to South African precedents. They did so because economic conditions restricted opportunities for everyone at a time when an increasing number of blacks were ceasing to be relatively inefficient migrant workers.⁶⁵ Some blacks had acquire sufficient skills to be able to retain their position as permanent urban workers even as the depression deepened. The existence of this group, numbering at least 455 adult males, ensured that whites who lacked any skills would be forced into direct compe-

tition with unskilled blacks and so become identifiable as poor white unemployables.⁶⁶

The limited value of the South African model

All the prerequisites for economic conflict between blacks and displaced whites appeared to be met in Rhodesia in 1933. Therefore a poor white problem on the South African model materialised — at least superficially — in that year. When it did so, it generated three distinct responses. First, a Police Cadet Corps was established in the financial year 1933/34 to absorb unemployed white youths.⁶⁷ Second, other whites were set to work on the roads, out of which evolved the initial three years' programme to lay bitumen strips on territorial main roads.⁶⁸ Finally, to the long-term political detriment of the territory, wide-ranging additional legal obstacles to black enterprise were legislated.⁶⁹

A minute but actual poor white problem in Rhodesia manifested itself against a background which in five respects resembled that against which the South African problem had developed. In the early years of settlement, land was accessible to all. Subsistence agriculture was practised widely. Land did pass into company hands. The commercialisation of agriculture was related to the development of the mining industry. Whites did come into economic conflict even with migrant black labourers. Only one South African feature was not replicated. In South Africa, whites moved off the land until by 1921 they had ceased to be primarily dependent upon it. In Rhodesia, whites moved onto the land, and were to continue to do so,⁷⁰ without agriculturally-based whites ever becoming the dominant group numerically.⁷¹

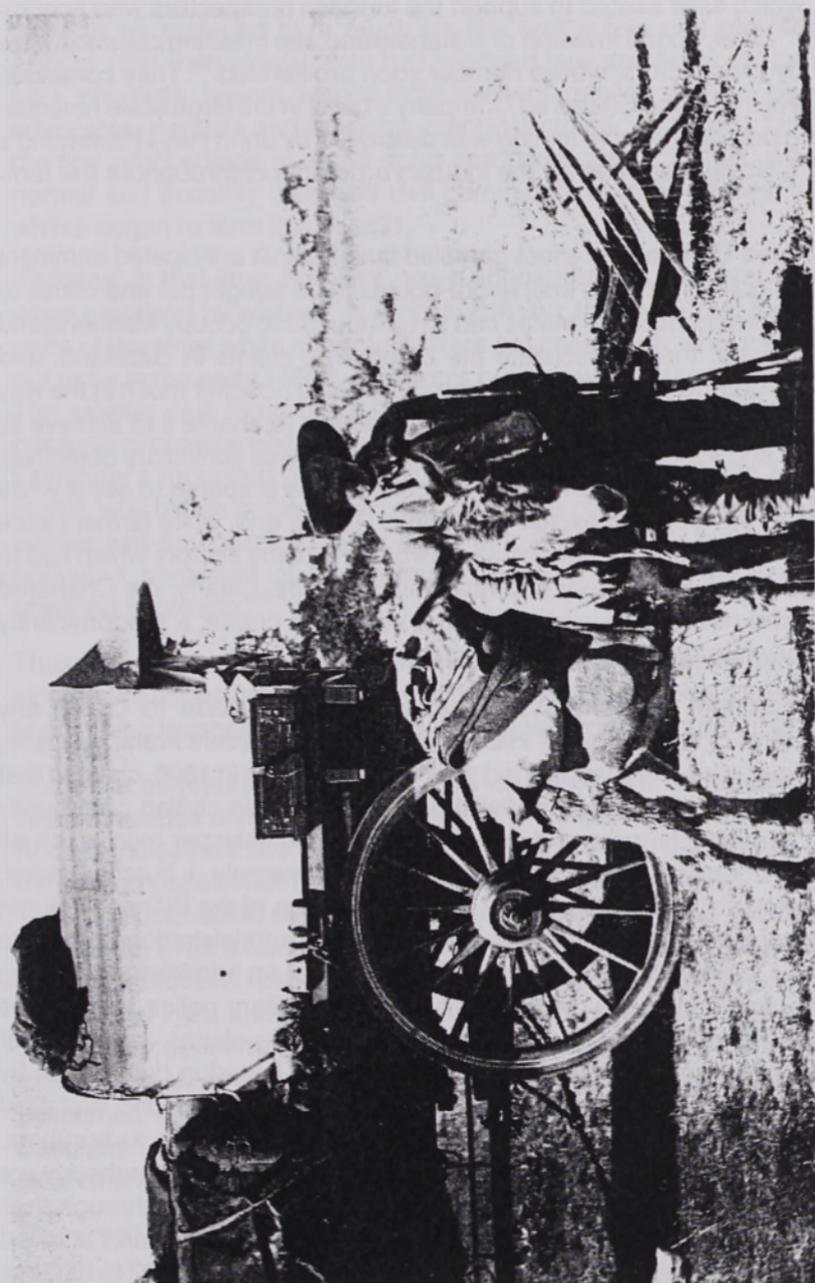
This is so marked a difference that it is necessary to reconsider the five respects in which the Rhodesian experience of the poor white problem apparently repeated that of South Africa. When this is done, four 'similarities' are transmuted. First, land was accessible to all whites initially only in Mashonaland, Manicaland and Gazaland for but four short years, during which it was not of all-consuming interest to many whites: in Matabeleland, land was accessible to individuals without purchase only in consequence of participation in the 1893 campaign. Second, land which was accessible to whites began to pass into company hands as soon as it became available and not forty or so years after the treks, which had been the case in the Transvaal.⁷² Third, mining was not the stimulus to capitalist agriculture in Rhodesia that it had been in South Africa. There, mining stimulated capitalist agriculture before the railway system developed. In Rhodesia, mining itself did not develop until the railway reached Bulawayo, while the expansion of mining and the develop-

ment of capitalist agriculture took place only after the Chartered Company amended its policies in 1903 and 1907. Fourth, it was the urbanised black who provided the catalyst in the chain of circumstances which forced the existence of a Rhodesian poor white problem to be recognised in 1933, whereas it was the migrant black labourer who lay at the heart of the South African problem at the turn of the century. Thus, Rhodesia's historical experience resembled that of South Africa closely only in that white agriculture in newly settled areas for many years involved primarily subsistence cultivation: otherwise, Rhodesia's experience differed, specifically because whites continued to move onto the land into the 1920s.⁷³

Whites did so in part in the early 1890s because the Chartered Company not only made land readily available to all whites under minimal restrictions but also publicised its willingness to do so.⁷⁴ In addition, it helped potential settlers to reach the settlement areas and to maintain themselves there. The Van der Byl trekkers at Marandellas received considerable financial support.⁷⁵ The Moodie trekkers at Fort Victoria were given three months' rations, land and a rifle to help them on their way to Gazaland.⁷⁶ The Somerset East trek was assisted from its inception.⁷⁷ More significantly, the members of the Pioneer Column were paid to enter Mashonaland,⁷⁸ the Chartered Company's police were paid to serve there and in Manicaland, while the invasion of Matabeleland was carried out by what amounted to three company-sponsored super-treks. Thus, many actual and potential white settlers were at least partially subsidised by the Chartered Company into 1894.

The Chartered Company assisted white immigrants notwithstanding its own financial weakness. When it was launched, it had a mere £250 000 available to it.⁷⁹ Despite calling up capital outstanding on partially paid-up shares, the Chartered Company required considerable financial assistance from Consolidated Goldfields, De Beers, Beit, and Rhodes by February 1892.⁸⁰ The financial weakness meant that money alone could not be expended to induce whites to do what the Chartered Company required of them. The company's only other available and expendable asset was land. Therefore, as the Chartered Company's financial crisis deepened, so land was disposed of ever more rapidly to whites, to such an extent that no more accessible land was available to the company by 1896.⁸¹

The reason why the Chartered Company was so ready to dispose of land while spending what amounted to other people's money was simple. It expected to profit from gold-mining. To this end, it framed its mining law so as to allow it, on the flotation of any mining company, to receive shares without payment equivalent to half the value of the mining assets of the company concerned.⁸² Earlier, the BSAC's police had been brought into being to support the Pioneer



Hans Shrader, prospector in the Victoria gold district, 1893. He travelled alone with his donkey which carried all his worldly possessions, and used to try and link up with a wagon at night for protection (Negative 2800, National Archives of Zimbabwe)

Column, which itself existed to support the fourteen prospectors who accompanied it.⁸³ Later, on the invasion of Matabeleland, the invading columns were followed by prospectors, whose number soon proliferated.⁸⁴ They continued to do so, even after the Chartered Company's belief in the large scale revenue-generating potential of gold mining was destroyed by John Hays Hammond's report of 5 November 1894 on the industry's prospects throughout the territory.⁸⁵

The Chartered Company in effect gambled land against anticipated imminent profits from gold-mining. To enable ore-bodies to be sought out and mines to be brought into production, whites had to be induced to occupy Mashonaland and Manicaland, then consolidate the company's claims in Gazaland, and finally seize Matabeleland. Since the company could not offer much in the way of financial inducements, it proffered land to whites to enable it to achieve its preliminary and associated subsidiary objectives. These subsidiary objectives included creating a white community which would be prepared to assist white capitalists to develop and exploit gold mines. To this end, white farmers were necessary, although white agriculture was but one of the sectors which had to be created in order to satisfy potential mining needs. Clearly, the Chartered Company did not require, and so did not set out to create, a predominantly agricultural white-dominated colonial state.

It is not apparent that any systematic attempt was made to create any particular form of colonial state. Half a century after the event Frank Johnson, the contractor who recruited and led the Pioneer Column in 1890, claimed that his task had been to deposit at Salisbury an embryonic civilian community including not only farmers and miners but also professional men, such as clergymen, doctors and lawyers, and tradesmen, namely a butcher, baker, tailor, blacksmith, and others of that ilk.⁸⁶ As the men of the Pioneer Column were discharged on 30 September 1890, so a civil administration came into being on 1 October 1890. It consisted at first only of an administrator having under him, apart from the members of the large military police force, three clerks and, more remarkably, two registrars of mining claims, one registrar doubling as postmaster.⁸⁷ These civil servants were joined in due course by mining commissioners, justices of the peace, district surgeons and field cornets.⁸⁸ The field cornets controlled the able-bodied men who, as burghers, were liable to serve in defence of the company's territory. The burghers were regarded in November 1892 as having the potential to support, through their own liability to military service, 'about 500 men trained to arms' and enrolled in the Volunteer Force. That body had been created earlier in 1892 to assume primary responsibility for the defence of the territory because, the Chartered Company maintained, circumstances had permitted the large military police

force to be replaced by a much smaller and purely civil one.⁸⁹ Already in August 1891 the colonial state had imposed fees and licences upon auctioneers, chemists, bakers, billiard table keepers, general dealers, pawnbrokers, advocates, dentists and hawkers, amongst others, while on 1 October 1891 the first proceedings in a civil court had taken place.⁹⁰ Thus, an apparently normal and possibly balanced civil community seemed to exist when some whites began to farm late in 1891.

'Farming' at that time, however, was a euphemism for subsistence cultivation when practised by whites.⁹¹ It is not surprising, therefore, that the component parts of the small white community were not necessarily what they were made out to be in the early 1890s. Johnson's butcher was a failed solicitor's clerk.⁹² The smaller civil force did not replace the large military police contingent because circumstances permitted the substitution, but because the Chartered Company's mounting financial difficulties demanded it.⁹³ The Mashonaland Horse, which then became the lynch-pin of the company's defence force, was neither well-equipped nor thoroughly efficient for, while it did acquire some horses, it consisted of men attracted by free whisky who were generally unwilling to parade.⁹⁴

Thus, the existence of mining commissioners and district surgeons or provision for the imposition of all the usual fees and licenses should not be taken to imply that a balanced white community necessarily was springing to life.

The white community was in fact distinctly abnormal, especially in the early 1890s, because of the high proportion of white males recruited to keep arms. Rhodes indicated that there were about 1 500 whites in the territory c. September 1893, most of whom had been there for less than two years.⁹⁵ In November 1891, the population of Salisbury was estimated to include between 230 and 250 whites, while a hundred or so others were said to be either in Fort Victoria or on the goldfields near that centre.⁹⁶ Others were prospecting around Umtali and Hartley Hills, and in the Lomagundi district. On 16 April 1891, there were 595 military policemen in the territory under the Chartered Company's control.⁹⁷ Thus, it is more than probable that one in every two whites was a policeman in the early dry season of 1891. Seven years later, the white population was more normal, for then only one white in every thirteen was a policeman, a position which in part reflected the advent of the railways.⁹⁸

The small number of whites, combined with the peculiar features of the community they formed, presented the Chartered Company with a problem. This became obvious from August 1891, when the Chartered Company began to disband the military police force. The background to the company's problem was simple. It needed sufficient whites under its control to sustain the

illusion that it was administering an economically viable and settled territory. The illusion was projected in part through the *Reports on the company's proceedings* and in the *Directors' report and accounts*, documents requiring some facts to give credence to their propaganda content. Whites had to create these facts by taking out licences to trade or to prospect, just as they had to fall ill in order to be treated by the district surgeons. Also, they had to do these and other things so as to appear to be engaging in sufficient economic activity to imply that they were willing and able to support mining operations. Thus, the Chartered Company needed enough 'suitable whites in Rhodesia. The root cause of its problem was equally simple: the economy was stagnant.⁹⁹ It could not offer alternative employment to and so support the 550 policemen whom the Chartered Company discharged.¹⁰⁰ The problem that the company faced was that the territory would acquire what the Chartered Company did not need, if the company merely discharged men locally who could not be absorbed into the territorial economy; and what the company did not need was too many unemployable, and therefore unsuitable, whites. To eliminate the problem late in 1891 and early in 1892, the Chartered Company had no choice but to encourage as many men as possible to leave for the South, while providing rations for those who would not or could not leave.¹⁰¹

The necessity for the illusion stemmed from the condition of the economy in 1891, which determined how the Chartered Company treated indigent whites. The company's treatment of such whites was bound to change once the territorial economy began to gather some momentum. In practice, it could not gather much momentum until railway construction resolved the transportation problem. It followed that the 1891 solution of encouraging superfluous men to leave was adopted in 1893 to return unwanted volunteers from Bulawayo to Johannesburg, just as useless white civilians were removed from Bulawayo in August 1896 and troopers were marched back to the South for discharge in October 1896 as military campaigning petered out.¹⁰² Once railways arrived and whites began to flow into the territory, the Chartered Company sought at first to provide relief to indigents by offering them either work in public parks at five shillings a day or a free pass to travel back to the South.¹⁰³ However, at the end of 1898, the company resolved to cease offering passes and to pay indigents only four shillings a day, the minimum daily sum required to keep a white alive, in the hope that such men would leave the territory of their own volition and, by their suffering, presumably discourage others from venturing up from Johannesburg.¹⁰⁴ In association with the gradual expansion of the economy from the early years of this century, the policy succeeded until the worldwide depression struck. It was necessary to assist the unemployed while communications with the South were cut during the South African War, but the Chartered Company assisted only those likely to reciprocate by assisting it in

the future. These included men with some capital wanting to farm, or youths prepared to meet some of the costs of teaching them to do so.¹⁰⁵

Rumblings of discontent

The Chartered Company manipulated whites by encouraging some to enter the territory and others to leave it. However, its power to manipulate was qualified since it had to accommodate those whites whose presence was necessary by alleviating their fears and concerns to the best of its ability. Four interlocking cases in 1891 occurred which forced the BSAC to confront the problems associated with the particular composition of the white settler population.

As early as July 1891 whites in Rhodesia began to express concern about the adequacy of food supplies. In September 200 whites assembled in Salisbury and formed a vigilance committee which protested against the high cost and scarcity of imported foodstuffs.¹⁰⁶ The Chartered Company responded by committing itself to hurrying food supplies forward from Tuli.¹⁰⁷ Some relief was achieved at the end of October, when the Chartered Company announced the prices at which it was prepared to make a range of supplies available to the public at its commissariat stores.¹⁰⁸ By December, the crisis had been surmounted; foodstuffs were available in wholesale quantities and, by mid-January 1892 at the latest, one independent retailer was offering a range of supplies at competitive prices.¹⁰⁹

Concern about food supplies was aggravated by the declining economic fortunes of whites. In September 1891 whites in Salisbury became aware that one policeman in three was going to be discharged, and consequently one white in six would be thrown out of employment at a time when the economy was already stagnant.¹¹⁰ As if this was not bad enough, more and more policemen were discharged as the ability of whites to support themselves began to be challenged by 'non-whites', generating two further crises.¹¹¹ On 3 November 1891 William Mbenya, a Colonial African, was paid £10 in respect of a public works and building contract while, within another four days, Asians began selling vegetables which some whites were merely growing.¹¹² The payment to William Mbenya led to a petition of protest signed by sixty whites being submitted to the Chartered Company, which responded by announcing that no similar contracts would be awarded to blacks in future.¹¹³ The vegetable sales caused the newly elected Sanitary Board, believing itself to be a board of management and behaving like a municipal board, to resolve that the Chartered Company be invited to impose hawkers' licences on Asian market-gardeners. In the event, all that happened to Asians at this stage was

that they, and others, were required to sell vegetables at the market which the Sanitary Board had approved as it sought licencing.¹¹⁴ However, as opportunities for commercial enterprise increased, the Chartered Company was moving to restrict black economic activity: on 22 February 1891, a Registrar of Natives was appointed who, two weeks later, had recorded the terms of service of some 500 blacks engaged to work for wages within the Sanity Board area while, by the end of March, some blacks had been forced to live in a location and pay for accommodation there.¹¹⁵

The existence of the location determined the white response to the second Asian challenge, which was delivered when 'Sawery Nyajani' purchased a stand in Salisbury on 11 August 1891.¹¹⁶ An immediate press campaign began for the 'business-like treatment' of two issues by the Sanitary Board: the Pound laws and the locating of 'non-whites'.¹¹⁷ The Sanitary Board appointed a sub-committee which reported only on the question of locating Africans and, when it did so, an attempt was made under the leadership of H. J. Deary to extend its recommendations so as to include Asians.¹¹⁸ After an initial success, whites had to give way in face of the rights which Asians enjoyed as British subjects.¹¹⁹

The issue of the Asian threat next arose at Bulawayo when the impending election of Sidney Redrup and two other popular representatives to the Sanitary Board in May 1894 was discussed in terms of the need to locate 'non-whites'.¹²⁰ Within days of the election, a sub-committee had 'fixed upon suitable sites for the Native and Coolie locations, Slaughter Poles, and Night-soil and Rubbish Deposit sites, about a mile to the N.W. of the N.W. corner of the new Township ...'.¹²¹ Nine months later there were about twenty huts in the Bulawayo Asian Location, a measure of success which encouraged the Salisbury Sanitary Board to try again.¹²² That board soon discovered that, whether they liked it or not, white residents and workers had to associate with and compete against Muslims, Hindus, Goans, Cape coloureds, and Chinese, who could not be confined and controlled like Africans.¹²³

Even before the attempt to legislate against Asian residential use of town stands had failed in Salisbury, the local Chamber of Commerce under Deary's leadership attempted to mobilise the Bulawayo Chamber and the Sanitary Boards at Umtali and Victoria in a campaign against the entry of Asian traders into the territory. This developed into a demand to prevent Hindus trading at all, an issue which was discussed by the Administrator-in-Council on 19 February 1895, when the demand was rejected. Deary and the Salisbury Chamber pursued the matter, while a newspaper suggested that the expedient of refusing to issue licenses to Asians should be adopted.¹²⁴ An official at Bulawayo so refused. An Asian took legal action and, because there was no

law to prevent him from doing so, received a general dealer's licence with Judge Vintcent's blessing.¹²⁵

There the matter rested while blacks attracted white attention until April 1897, when Redrup once more raised the threat of 'the Asiatic parasite' to white pockets and health.¹²⁶ Redrup's cry was echoed in Salisbury in 1898, and taken up in Umtali, where violent demonstrations in January 1899 led to a public declaration of Asian rights by the Chartered Company.¹²⁷ This was followed from the early 1900s onwards by the adoption of more covert methods to restrict Asian activity, both by the Chartered Company and by whites at large.¹²⁸

The white campaign against 'non-whites' was an on-going one which focused on different race and class enemies over time. This is most clearly revealed by white attacks on Asians. At first, in November 1891 and in August 1892, Asians were regarded as a threat to all whites. The first Rhodesian Asians were former indentured workers, or free Indians, from Natal who lacked resources but who might accumulate some by hard work, as Savery Nyajani, otherwise known as Charley, must have done in order to pay £25 for his stand in Salisbury.¹²⁹ Whites with no resources and those with limited resources feared any Asian who might compete, even in a hostile environment from which some free Indians deliberately withdrew.¹³⁰ The assaults led by Redrup and Deary from 1894 were fundamentally different. Redrup was a general merchant who claimed in March 1894 to have 'absolutely the finest and largest stock in Matabeleland'.¹³¹ Deary was associated at various times with the Tuli Trading Association; with a company in his own name; with Hill and Paddon; and with the Scottish African Corporation, generally doing business involving anything and everything at Salisbury, Umtali and Victoria.¹³² Redrup and Deary's concern was not the free Indian but the passenger Indian, who from 1894 was beginning to move into the territory, who had trading skills and financial resources, and who was the primary target of the Immigration Restriction Ordinance, 1903.¹³³

This ordinance, once proclaimed, was only one aspect of a renewed anti-Asian campaign. Another was the directive issued on 16 February 1904 by the Treasurer to the Civil Commissioner at Victoria, instructing him not to renew leases for trading sites held by Asians.¹³⁴ The renewed crusade in effect involved the Chartered Company in a somewhat indirect attempt to achieve in 1904 what it had declined to do in 1895: deny entry into the territory to any further Asians while refusing trading licenses to those already there. However, such activity did not reflect a sudden desire on the part of the Chartered Company to appease those settlers whose co-operation it required so much

as its willingness to act provided it did not offend the British imperial authorities, whose legal surrogate it was and whom it had to appease also.

Changing position of the Colonial Office

The position of Asians became increasingly threatened in 1904 as the result of changing constitutional arrangements. In 1904, the Colonial Office was responsible for the Transvaal, whereas in 1895 the Transvaal was an independent country, the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR). This status had allowed the Transvaal authorities to discriminate against British Indians in terms of the Transvaal's Law 3 of 1885 as amended, while that legislation and Indian court challenges to it between 1888 and 1898 required the Colonial Office to appear to be supportive of British Indian rights.¹³⁵ The occupation of the Transvaal, however, made British officials responsible for the administration of the Republic's laws and so caused them to cease to be supportive of British Indian's rights, especially since these British officials applied Law 3 to Asians from May 1901 at the latest. Thus, the Chartered Company had become free to respond to its settlers' wishes, particularly as the Law itself was not challenged successfully in the Transvaal until well after the anti-Asian campaign in Rhodesia had been renewed.¹³⁶

The Chartered Company had been unable to act freely in the 1890s because its activities were subject to the scrutiny of the High Commissioner in Cape Town. The High Commissioner was responsible for the execution of British policy in and towards the South African territories also. He had been implementing the Colonial Office's wishes in respect to portions of the Chartered Company's sphere of operations in 1888 before that body came into being. He became responsible formally for the Chartered Company's sphere of operations not later than April 1891.¹³⁷ In consequence, Colonial Office officials in London and the High Commissioner in Cape Town habitually viewed Rhodesian issues from a South African perspective. It followed that any legislation applicable to 'non-whites' in Rhodesia had to conform to imperial needs in the South African territories. In the light of the position in the Transvaal, those needs in the 1890s demanded that the only legal discrimination permissible against Asians in Rhodesia should be qualified ones governing access to liquor and to arms and ammunition, not residential stands, trading sites, or licenses to trade.¹³⁸ British imperial priorities equally allowed more vigorous action being taken against Africans, for the Chartered Company was permitted to impose any restrictions it wished upon their access to liquor, arms and ammunition, while allowing it to discriminate in other instances where the Secretary of State saw 'fit to authorise an Ordinance or Regulation'.¹³⁹ Thus it was that Africans generally, but not Asians, might be confined to urban

locations with British imperial approval, for the action taken against them from March 1892 did not require the High Commissioner to pursue diametrically opposed policies in the different regions within his charge.¹⁴⁰

Otherwise, the British imperial authorities were content to publish platitudes about allegedly 'traditional' African religious observances, laws and customs¹⁴¹ while making minimal gestures towards the protection of the interests of those Africans held to be discarding 'traditional' ways.¹⁴²

Recognition of the nature of British imperial interest in the treatment of 'non-whites' in Rhodesia makes it possible to assess the significance of the four crises which developed in Salisbury in 1891, initially in isolation and in local terms.

The significance of the first crisis over food supplies which began to develop from July 1891 was that the Chartered Company had to respond to white pressure. Thus, white residents exerted some political power through the mechanism of a mass meeting eight years before a Legislative Council met.

The Chartered Company aspired to be a commercial enterprise, not an unemployment philanthropic body. When, therefore, in August 1891 a second crisis (this time over unemployment) developed, the company responded in terms of its own needs. The local territorial economy was manifestly incapable of supporting a large number of potentially indigent whites.¹⁴³ The company's self-interest demanded their removal if it was to maintain an illusion of growth and prosperity. Military policemen were consequently discharged and encouraged to leave for Taung in British Bechuanaland. Self-interest motivated the Chartered Company to behave in the same way in 1893 and in 1896, and to a more limited extent early in 1898. It then amended its policy, on the assumption that the limitations on the assistance offered to indigents from Johannesburg would force men who would be regarded as poor whites in that city to return to it. The Chartered Company as an administrative entity, responsible for an emerging colonial territory with a primarily subsistence economy and an extremely limited 'modern' or capitalist sector, and mindful also of its own commercial interests, repeatedly treated white indigents as an exportable problem in a society where whites were overwhelmingly immigrants.¹⁴⁴

The black economic challenge of November 1891 which generated the third crisis confirmed that whites exercised some political power virtually from the inception of the colonial state, in this instance initially through petitioning and subsequently through the activities of sanitary boards. The specific significance of the black challenge, however, was that it exposed the lack of British imperial interest in the well-being of most blacks.¹⁴⁵

The Asian economic challenge, delivered a few days later, provoked a fourth crisis which revealed that white demands might not always be gratified, for the Chartered Company had to conform to British imperial policy requirements. These were conditioned by changing British needs in the South African territories, so that British policy towards Asians in Rhodesia varied as British responsibilities in the Transvaal altered. Neither was the Asian economic challenge itself immutable for, by 1894, it was maintained by passenger Indians who imperilled the prosperity of white merchants, rather than by free Indians threatening the well-being of many more financially insecure whites.

The four crises clearly have a wider significance. The Chartered Company's response to the employment crisis merits attention on four counts. First, it suggests that any emerging colonial state had to protect an embryonic capitalist sector in any territory where subsistence cultivation was the primary economic activity. Second, it implies that no poor white problem of any significance existed outside of South Africa in the 1930s, also in part because white indigents might be re-exported from African territories having small white immigrant communities.¹⁴⁶ Third, this in turn indicates that South Africa had a poor white problem in part because it could not either successfully or continuously export indigent whites from what amounted to an indigenous white community.¹⁴⁷ Fourth, the reason why South Africa could not dispose of its indigents reflected one which impelled the Chartered Company to do so: the zone of white settlement in Rhodesia was far beyond the South African frontier, however, much that frontier may or may not have been a rolling one within South Africa.¹⁴⁸

The crises over food supply and the 'non-white' economic challenges share one common characteristic: the ability of resident whites to exert political pressure upon the Chartered Company. In general terms, the recurrent feature implies that whites not employed by governments but resident in embryonic colonial states exerted political power beyond that merited by either their numbers or their economic activity. In light of South African conditions, it suggests that displaced 'bywoners' who could not leave the Transvaal became poor whites in part because they could not exert any political influence, at least not until the introduction of Responsible Government in the Transvaal Colony attracted *Het Volk's* attention to their plight.¹⁴⁹

It is, however, the cumulative effect of all four crises upon resident whites in Rhodesia late in 1891 that is of particular significance, in part because the pride with which they first faced the food crisis was soon eroded and destroyed. Whites did not expect to be fed for nothing when they demanded an adequate supply of imported foodstuffs at reasonable cost early in September.¹⁵⁰ After the employment crisis deepened and half the military police force or a quarter

of the white population had been thrown out of work by November, many whites faced a threat of imminent destitution as all became aware of developing 'non-white' competition. The threat of destitution became a reality for some whites when the Chartered Company finally disbanded its military police force on 31 December 1891 and threw some 250 men out of work, for it only provided free rations for four months to men who would not or could not leave the territory.¹⁵¹ Thus, whites moved against blacks and Asians initially when they faced destitution, while subsequently burdens were placed upon blacks as some whites began to experience actual destitution.

The controls placed upon blacks at Salisbury in February and March 1892 were not relaxed for generations: rather, they were reinforced and extended. The appointment of an Inspector of Native Locations in every area falling under the Cape Village Management Act of 1881 was authorised in October 1893.¹⁵² Bulawayo acquired a legally regulated Black location in January 1895.¹⁵³ The registration and pass system already in vogue in Salisbury was extended to Bulawayo, Umtali, Victoria, and Gwelo in February 1896 by the Registration of Natives Regulations 1895.¹⁵⁴ These were replaced in November 1902 by the Natives Registration Ordinance 1901, which applied the measures to Enkeldoorn also.¹⁵⁵ Then in June 1904 a notable step was taken when the Native Pass Ordinance 1902 went into effect, extending the registration and pass system to all black males throughout the territory, albeit while allowing the British imperial authorities to pay lip-service to the protection of atraditional blacks through the provision made for some to receive certificates of exemption from the pass provisions.¹⁵⁶ Thereafter, the legislation controlling blacks was consolidated or amended on numerous occasions until the Natives Registration Ordinance 1901 was replaced by the Natives Registration Act 1936.¹⁵⁷ Thus the threat of destitution which faced most whites in November 1891 and the actual destitution of some whites from January 1892 generated legislation which discriminated immediately against urban blacks and subsequently against rural blacks. These measures were maintained and further extended into and beyond the 1930s.¹⁵⁸

The maintenance of legal burdens inhibiting the ability of blacks to compete against whites implies that the black economic threat was a continuing one from November 1891 onwards.¹⁵⁹ From this perspective, the Great Depression in the early 1930s merely accentuated an existing crisis and provoked a customary response: the consolidation or extension of existing legislation. There was some legislation in a new field, responding to newly perceived threats. One was that by black maize producers to white farmers.¹⁶⁰ It led to protection being extended to white farmers, initially over maize and then over

a wider field, after the existence of a group of poor whites had been acknowledged.¹⁶¹

Conclusion

Recognition of the existence of Rhodesian poor whites occurred as the colonial state passed legislation to protect white farmers and white industrial workers. This coincidence of events has caused discussion of the poor white problem in Rhodesia to be conducted in South African terms.¹⁶² It cannot be denied that some Rhodesian farmers may have become poor whites because they were unable to adjust to the requirements of commercial agriculture, even after obtaining access to land for next to nothing upon which to practise subsistence cultivation. Farmers who first obtained and then retained land in this way were few in number. The period during which whites might acquire land without purchasing it was extremely limited. Therefore, the group of whites in Rhodesia from among whom poor whites on the South African model might emerge was small. It follows that South African precedents are valid only in respect of this small and unrepresentative group which itself forms a small portion of the wider but still limited white farming community that had obtained access to land either by purchase or by managing it for others.

Most whites in Rhodesia, even in the 1890s, laboured in towns and on mines, as they did in the 1930s. These non-agricultural whites had been protected continuously from black competition from February 1892 onwards. Thus, the legislation passed in the 1930s amounted not to a radical new departure but rather to a consolidation or extension of legislation reaching back to 1892.

Measures were also taken in the 1930s because some whites faced destitution, which is why burdens were initially placed upon blacks in and after 1892. Whites who faced destitution in the 1890s, as in the 1930s, were assisted by the colonial administration. Even in 1892, this was in response to political pressure. Thus, in any discussion of the poor white problem at any time in Rhodesia, it is necessary to consider the impact upon whites of impending or actual destitution and white political response to perceived economic threats.

South African precedents open up useful avenues of enquiry into the poor white problem in Rhodesia, even if subsequently the validity of most of the precedents must be discounted. This suggests that what needs to be done now is to look at the poor white problem in South Africa in the light of Rhodesian precedents, namely the response of non-agricultural whites to actual or threatened destitution and their ability or inability to exercise power and influence at all levels of government.