

SECOND CARNEGIE INQUIRY INTO POVERTY
AND DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Vagabond Hollanders and Runaway
Englishmen: White Poverty in the
Cape before Poor Whiteism.

by

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Introduction:

Bonaparte Blenkins, the unscrupulous intruder in The Story of an African Farm, having concealed that he had been tramping the roads of the rural Cape and living by his wits, was invited to remain on Tant Sannie's farm as teacher to the two little girls. The grotesquely inappropriate appointment of the ill-educated, deceitful and sadistic Blenkins - which provides a chilling humour to the early chapters of the novel - was not merely gothic invention on the part of Olive Schreiner. Modern readers of the book may not realise how representative a figure Blenkins was, or how many similar appointments may have been made on the farms of poorer colonists in the nineteenth century Cape. The inadequacy of public education in the Cape during the first half-century of responsible government has been comprehensively described (1); in particular, the children of Cape Dutch rural dwellers were conspicuously underschooled. For a variety of strong cultural, social and economic reasons, many colonists were unwilling or unable to send their children to the local "third class school", and instead engaged itinerant teachers or meesters on their farms to inculcate the rudiments of literacy in their children.

Such employees were not highly regarded. From Burgersdorp it was reported in 1865 that "a very low class of persons" found employment as meesters; that a meester "at a Boer's estimate is about the very lowest occupation an unfortunate wretch can apply himself to - he can go no lower ... even the smouse meets with more consideration"; adding for good measure that "only men of weak, indolent and vicious propensities make it their avocation." (2) These editorial comments were prompted by an account elsewhere in the same edition, reporting the call by the Divisional Council for improved teachers. The farmers, said a councillor,

did not ... employ respectable and competent teachers ... but ... worthless, and in every way unfit persons, such as soldiers who have deserted from the army, run-away sailors and others of a similar stamp. (3)

A member of the town's school committee had earlier written to Langham Dale explaining the pressures that led farmers to employ meesters rather than send their children to the local school: "But almost the only teachers procurable are vagabond Hollanders or runaway Englishmen, who often do more harm than good." (4) The reputation of meesters in Burgheersdorp would not have been enhanced by the case of Alfred Francis. Employed by one du Plessis as "a schoolmaster of my place", he stole a horse and was arrested "in a house at the lower end of town, with some black females." Du Plessis recalled that when Francis had first been engaged he was so poor that "I had to buy clothes for him." (5) Burgheersdorp was certainly not unique in its assessment of the meesters; from Colesberg, at about the same time, one hears that "most of the farmers have for their children private teachers, not one in fifty of whom is qualified to teach, being broken-down men of all sorts and conditions". (6) Writing of the rural Cape as a whole, Marthinus explained that:

These 'meesters' were usually employed for about six months ... Their salary might be 30 or 40 shillings per month. They were expected to help with the easier work on the farm such as minding the lambs. To add to their income they might make halters, riems, mend chairs and saddles, etc ... The majority were old sailors, stewards of vessels, etc., who could have no good influence either intellectually or morally. (7)

Although it borrows its title from a disparaging assessment of them, this paper is not about meesters. Rather, they have been used to introduce the broader concerns which follow. As exemplar of agrarian and small-town poverty the meester could hardly be bettered; and he also adumbrates certain other themes - the range and diversity of forms of impoverishment, the reality of pre-mineral proletarianisation in the Cape, and the hostility towards "low class" whites in the year before the "Poor White problem" was identified as such.

* * * * *

A broadly established "fact" of South African history is that Poor Whites first appeared in substantial numbers in the 1890s. One economic history states firmly that there "was virtually no absolute poverty in the country, except as a result of idleness, sickness, accident or vice" prior to 1890, and that Poor

Whites were created by economic forces only after the banking crisis of that year. (8) The Carnegie Commission accepted this chronology: it was "especially after 1800" that "new conditions" created a landless rural class; and "about 1890, the growth of poverty among the rural poor, and especially the rural exodus began to manifest itself as a problem." (9) MacMillan, in his pioneering and illuminating Origins of the Agrarian Problem, deduced from the search in the 1870s for immigrant labour that "the rise to any serious proportions of ... the Poor White problem is quite recent", and that it was "not until the 1890s that there is any evidence of the growth of a feeling that all is 'not well ...'" (10) These authors and others frequently cite the attention drawn to white poverty by J. X. Merriman and by the Dutch Reformed Church in 1892/3; Malherbe searched for the first usage of the term 'Poor White' and found it in 1892; and it is argued or implied from such evidence that the "problem" arrived suddenly in the 1880s.

This paper queries this orthodoxy; and does so in two main ways. First, it argues that a numerically substantial class of poor and proletarianised whites existed in the Cape well before 1890; secondly, it suggests that the "emergence" of the Poor White Problem in the 1890s may have been to an important degree the outcome of new ways of perceiving white poverty, that a set of awarenesses and anxieties may have crystallised out in the form of the "poor white question". In the pages that follow, a preliminary attempt is made to explore the incidence and types of agrarian and small-town poverty in the Cape in the years prior to 1890. It is based on data for the Eastern Cape and Midlands for the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s. The argument may be summarised in a series of (linked) propositions:

- (i) that the existence of a sizeable class of landless and unskilled men and women was a distinctive feature of the Cape well before 1890;
- (ii) that before the discovery of gold and rapid urbanisation, economic forces such as the expansion of capitalist agriculture (wool, grain, and ostriches), as well as the spread of railway and other construction work, promoted considerable differentiation and class formation;
- (iii) that various types of white poverty existed, especially (a) the landless rural poor (bywoners; agricultural labourers, farm servants); (b) small-town low-skilled and low-paid wage earners (navvies, gangers, less skilled artisans, unskilled labourers, etc.); (c) a lumpen proletarian element (casual and infrequently employed labourers, a range of marginal and insecure quasi-rural employments, as well as drifters, beggars, and criminals;

- (iv) that relations between members of these groups and members of other ethnic groups may have been considerably more fluid and interactive than the traditional emphasis on the heightened race consciousness of the poor (Afrikaner) white would have it;
- (v) and that poverty, in the 1890s, became "ethnicised" to a much greater extent than before: perceptions by professional, religious, and political authorities of a "poor white problem" helped shape public awareness; there was a redefinition of poverty (which reflected a metropolitan as well as a local ideological shift) as a social problem to be tackled by state action rather than as a phenomenon of individual failure to be assuaged by charity; assumptions of (white) ethnic solidarity rapidly replaced older forms of ideological distance and hostility along class lines.

Landless rural and small-town poor:

This paper is not about those officially defined in the period 1860-1890 as paupers, those dependent on public funds and inmates of hospitals, gaols, asylums, or charitable institutions. So stringent were the regulations governing the disbursement of public monies as "pauper rations" that the numbers of this group were in any case always small: 115 in 1865, 703 in 1875. Under examination here, instead, are various types of propertyless, low income poverty above the official "hopelessly indigent" category.

The single group which has been described most often is of course the rural landless poor: squatters, bywoners, other tenants, dwarf-proprietors on oft-divided farms. There has been a tendency, already noted, to claim that the creation of a class of landless poor was peculiarly a phenomenon of the 1880s or 1890s; in fact, a full discussion of the emergence of landlessness and the creation of pockets of white poverty would draw one to the late eighteenth century ⁽¹¹⁾; would include details of the decline of members of the 1820 settlers' parties and the German legionaries, and would discuss the acceleration of landlessness under the impact of wool-farming in the 1840s and 1850s - and so on. Here, the discussion of rural poverty between about 1860 and 1890 will identify two features in particular: first, the manner in which periods of economic depression dislodged numbers of strugglers from the precarious existences as landholders or tenants; secondly, the ways in which capital accumulation

and agricultural improvements by well-to-do farmers could lead directly to the impoverishment of their poorer neighbours.

During the depression of the mid-1890s, there was not only a high level of unemployment in Cape Town and Port Elizabeth, but also a marked increase of rural poverty. From the district of Albany, for instance, there was in 1866 "so much distress ... among the labouring classes" as had not been seen for many years that numbers of "unfortunate men" were "wandering about the colony almost naked and completely penniless."⁽¹²⁾ In the following year, distress among "the lower orders of the European population" in the same district had been alleviated somewhat by the entry of a "large number" into sheep-shearing and reaping labour.⁽¹³⁾ In 1868, many "distressed operatives" found employment on road-making in the district.⁽¹⁴⁾ Similarly, from Fort Beaufort there came reports that "Unfortunate Europeans are frequently seen in a state of destitution ... their extreme misery sometimes drives them into associations which debases (sic) their minds, and leads them to crime."⁽¹⁵⁾ From the same source came graphic accounts of "skin and bones specimens of humanity", "emaciated forms from want are seen to move about like spectres from the tombs".⁽¹⁶⁾ A correspondent from nearby Stockenstrouw wrote indignantly of the part played by merchants and law agents in the proletarianisation of small farmers: many in the district had been "driven to eat roots and other edible wild productions" because of crop failures, and "now comes the merchant with his letters of demand upon them; ... the poor man has to part with land, wagons, oxen or sheep, to pay a debt which nature would not pay for him."⁽¹⁷⁾ Again, during the severe recession of 1877-9 - when droughts compounded commercial failures - there was a stream of evidence of rural insolvencies ("mostly among the smaller farmers")⁽¹⁸⁾, of people losing their livestock and their land, and being displaced as agriculturalists.⁽¹⁹⁾

The other process that led to the loss of tenancies, or to the inability of meeting mortgage or quitrent payments, was capital accumulation and agricultural improvement. In every Eastern Cape district, there were small numbers of capitalising farmers. In every decade, their investments in fencing, irrigation, improved livestock, and machinery were chronicled; and in each case had an impact on their less enterprising, less creditworthy, and less well-to-do neighbours. The rise in land prices and the competition for land, especially during the ostrich boom of the 1870s, drove a "class of cultivators off the land".⁽²⁰⁾

Officials penned reports which juxtaposed details of insolvencies with accounts of improvements by the "leading men" of the district.⁽²¹⁾ In Graaff-Reinet, the droughts of the 1860s convinced those who could afford it to build dams and experiment with pumps, while the same phenomenon delivered the economic coup de grace to others: "Some of the white squatters forced off the land entered the growing ranks of the poor whites."⁽²²⁾

Those forced off the land moved in the main to the nearest village or town. Several observers of "poor whites" commented later that recruits to the railway works of the White Labour Department "came from the villages rather than direct from the land".⁽²³⁾ There they often maintained a precarious semi-rural existence, producing some of their needs on an erf or a portion of one, but also earning some income through agriculturally-related pursuits (like transport riding, cart driving, the sale of firewood or prickly pears). In Graaff-Reinet, for instance, many erfholders lived close to the breadline, and competed with blacks for work as constables, cart drivers and wood sellers when times were hard.⁽²⁴⁾ Although he was writing a generation later, there is every indication that the process MacMillan had himself observed had its counterpart in the period under review in this paper: "they often prefer the very doubtful pittance which is too often all they can hope for even if there is any opening for them..."⁽²⁵⁾ The "vlug na die stede" was for many preceded by a struggle in the dorp as a distinct phase in the process of proletarianisation: in the Cape as in the Transvaal, then, "capital had to conquer many Afrikaners not once, but twice, before they succumbed to the position of wage labour".⁽²⁶⁾

Unskilled and low-waged labour:

With few skills to offer, the newly landless could also find employment in various forms of local labour; frequently the same forces that had deprived them of access to land offered labour on the property of others - as dam-makers, fence-builders, well-diggers, brickmakers and stone-quarriers. The indigenous pool of labourers and artisans was considerably swelled by policies favouring the importation of skilled and unskilled labour from Europe. There were two main waves of immigrant labour, in 1857-63 and again in the decade 1873-83. Governor George Grey favoured a vigorous immigration policy, with considerable local support; there was in 1860

"a strong demand for immigrant labour in the Eastern Province as is witnessed by reports from local immigration boards in Grahamstown, Fort Beaufort, and Uitenhage." (27) About 10,000 immigrants arrived between 1857 and 1861, and nearly 23,000 between 1873-83. These latter fell into two main groups: "governmental immigrants" (employees on rail-works, recruits to the Cape Mounted Rifles, and agricultural settlers) and "aided immigrants" (mainly self-employed artisans - carpenters, masons, painters, and the like - and "considerable numbers of female domestic servants"). (28) The construction of the Cape rail system in the mid-1870s absorbed large numbers of unskilled white workers. In 1877 there were between three and four thousand white navvies; in all over 4000 men came as immigrants between 1873 and 1878 specifically to work on rail and other public works. They were joined in the drought years of 1877-8 by many Afrikaner men on the Midlands line who were described as "engaging themselves on the railway line, and working as navvies side by side with Zulus and Fingoes", while their wives were "engaged in a variety of menial labour." (29)

Railway labourers have been characterised by Purkiss as "rough, tough man", and one group who won particular notoriety for their riotous and insubordinate behaviour were certain "Belgian navvies". They appear to have arrived early in 1875; in March of that year several appeared in the Port Elizabeth magistrate's court on charges of drunken disturbances, fighting, and stone-throwing. In September, J.X. Merriman - then Commissioner of the Public Works Department - sniffed that the Belgians were "the scum and refuse of large towns". In the months that followed, navvies kept police and court officers busy in a number of districts. In Kingwilliamstown there was a spate of assaults and violence among immigrant navvies. In Uitenhage eight navvies were charged with public violence after attacking a group of Africans with guns; at Highlands (near Grahamstown) twelve navvies - three of whom were wanted for theft - attacked the sergeant and men sent to arrest them. (30) What one witness called the "gay and careless manner of living" of the navvies was also a harsh and violent existence. One of the duties of field-cornets was to file inquest reports on individuals who died in their wards, and in districts which lay along the line of rail construction, these inquest reports frequently included details of rail-workers' deaths, with drunkenness, brawls, and poverty recurrent themes. (31)

Another group frequently called 'navvies' at the time were employees of farmers who had been engaged to dig dams or sink wells and similar earth-moving jobs. In 1866 when the Parke brothers of Graaf-Reinet built

a large dam on their "model" farm the excavation was done "by six English navvies who 'find themselves' and are paid 9d per cubic yard, they finding all materials." (32) Dam-making was arduous and unattractive work, clearly entered into by white labourers near the bottom of the social scale. (Commented one observer, "If a man failed in every other respect, then he became a dam-maker.") (33) Frequently all the historian discovers of such men are scraps of evidence relating to their plight as social casualties. (34) A Salem field-cornet made laconic report of the death of a middle-aged man who had been working on a dam; although he had been employed by a Mister Wedderburn for six months, the farmer did not know whether he was Belgian or French, was ignorant of his surname, and knew him only as "John". (35) Immigrant workers may have been particularly vulnerable to economic distress due to the absence of kin or community support. While acute economic hardship could be mitigated in a tightly-knit Cape Dutch community (when pauperism occurred relief was "generally given by friends of neighbours by way of collections or donations", wrote the Beaufort West Civil Commissioner in 1858) (36), newly arrived whites might suffer the fate of four "perfectly destitute" English and Irish workmen admitted to the Burghersdorp gaol in 1865 because "they had no relations in the Colony who could fairly be called on to contribute to their support". (37)

If dam-making was one of the last resorts of the unskilled white wage-earner, there were a number of similarly low-status occupations. Without scouring the census data for such esoterica as aloë-tappers, billiard-markers or whip-makers, one can identify some of the commoner niches of the poorest employed men and women: the felling and selling of wood; hawking and peddling; the lower reaches of transport and conveyance; domestic service; and service in the armed forces or district police. (These latter were frequently the source of disparaging comments: the magistrate of Cradock complained in 1879 that "such Europeans as join the force are with two or three exceptions a very low, drunken and disreputable class of men who give us a great deal of trouble ...") (38)

How many people occupied the range of low-income jobs described above? Without undertaking detailed quantitative analysis (and much of the data is incomplete or misleading), a few details of the 1875 Census Report provide a compelling impression of the substantial numbers of whites in low paid occupations. There were (see Table 1) over 2000 domestic servants; nearly as many casual ("undefined") labourers; over 4000 in the transport sector as drivers, porters, stevedores and storemen;

and over 5000 engaged in various branches of "mechanic production" - of whom over half were employed as rail and road navvies and gangers or in the building trade. The least satisfactory area of the Census is that dealing with rural occupations: the Report itself noted that very few of the bywoners or squatters actually in existence were returned as such, and the broad categories of "agricultural pursuits" and "pastoral pursuits" conceal as much as they reveal. Even so, over 2500 whites among the rural poor were differentiated as farm servants, agricultural labourers, herdsmen, and bywoners. As Table 1 indicates, selected lower-income categories (comprising at least 500 individuals each) accounted for about 19000 of a total adult population of under 114,000 - a figure which is notably deficient in its omission of unspecified members of the agrarian poor.

The "lowest orders" or lumpenproletariat:

Among the "lowest orders of Europeans" there frequently appeared ex-artisans and petty tradesmen, once self-employed but increasingly unable to support themselves. This "unfortunate class of 'handymen'"⁽³⁹⁾ drifted into casual employment on farms and in small towns, or into vagrancy, begging and crime. In a typical case, we learn of one Charles Schwartz, described as "a European (Frenchman)", who moved about the Cradock district making bricks and undertaking other occasional jobs. He owed "a great many people money, which he cannot or will not pay"; he defaulted on a brick-making job for a Mr. Grobbelaar; and was reported as travelling with 52 goats belonging to somebody else!⁽⁴⁰⁾ Even amongst artisans living in small towns, the impression conveyed is frequently of the insecurity and violence, even the marginality, of their lives. In the tiny town of Alice, for instance, there appeared before the magistrate within a few months of one another in 1876 (on charges of assault, drunkenness, and vagrancy) a wagon-maker, a carpenter, a carpenter's apprentice, a baker and shoe-maker. George Gibson (fined for begging while drunk) perhaps sought to retrieve some dignity by describing himself as "a carpenter from Dordrecht", but was ruthlessly catalogued by the Alice Times as "a European loafer".⁽⁴¹⁾ Impressionistic detail of this type could be multiplied almost indefinitely from the columns of dorp newspapers in the nineteenth century. No systematic analysis of such evidence has yet been undertaken, even in local studies; the social history of small-town crime must surely soon find a research student.

Members of this underclass formed a clearly visible component of Cape society. Referred to as "people of the poorest sort" or "Men of the lowest class" they were frequently denigrated for their idleness, licentiousness, drunkenness, and other vices. Almost every town had its "low" or "rough" quarter. In Port Elizabeth "the district lying between Main Street and the sea" was infamous: there black and white children were growing up "inhaling the reeking atmosphere of dung-heaps, slaughter houses and tanneries"; there "congregated the dangerous classes, the idle and drunken ... thieves and prostitutes".⁽⁴²⁾ In Grahamstown, an area known as "bog-o'-me-finn" was "tenanted by a miscellaneous herd of whites and blacks who lived together in the most promiscuous manner imaginable".⁽⁴³⁾ Garret's Lane in Port Beaufort was the site of "a coffee shop ... harbouring drunkards and idlers, black and white, from morning to night."⁽⁴⁴⁾

Clearly, one of the aspects of underclass poverty throughout the period under review was the tendency of some of the poor of different race groups to live together, relax together, and sometimes to work together - in occupations which ranged from farm labour and artisan crafts to stock-theft and other crimes. These conditions could lead to a very real blurring of ethnic identity among the poor. From a single and important source, the 1893 Labour Commission⁽⁴⁵⁾, comes a wealth of evidence in illustration of inter-marriage and sexual liaisons between white and black rural and urban poor, of the employment of poor whites alongside black labourers, and of the relative fluidity of the categories "white" and "coloured". Several witnesses told the commissioners that whites were increasingly "mixing with" coloureds, marrying coloured women, "assimilating more to the black race", and so on.⁽⁴⁶⁾ On more than one occasion, the commissioners revealed just how indistinct were the ethnic divisions. In an exchange with Robert Hill (an ex-bywoner, working as a post-cart driver) a commissioner asked if there were "many poor whites like yourself?" and received the reply: "I am a coloured man. My father was a Scotchman and my mother a black woman."⁽⁴⁷⁾ Many farmers and other employers explained that they engaged both black and white employees - and frequently added that they paid and treated them alike.⁽⁴⁸⁾ J. S. Grewer, a farmer and member of the Divisional Council in Uitenhage, was asked if poor white men would work among coloured men. "Yes", he replied:

Yes they do. Some do not mind it. It is not necessary for them to work with coloured men, but they want to speak to some one, and for lack of whites will speak to blacks. (49)

Another feature which emerges very clearly is that many well-to-do white farmers and other employers were conscious of a great social distance between themselves and poorer whites. The success of Afrikaner nationalist politicians in the early years of the twentieth century in mobilising Afrikaner solidarity across class lines in defence of the arme blankes should not obscure how broad the gulf was that had to be bridged. Certainly, in the 1870s and 1880s, a large number of spokesmen for the "haves" among the white population displayed a robust disdain and even hostility towards the "have-nots" in their midst. An Eastern Cape MLA supported the Fencing Bill of 1874 in these terms:

He was not convinced by the arguments about "poor people". He thought the "poor man" was the most obstructive nuisance in the colony. The "poor man" always stood in the way municipal and legislative progress. (50)

The Vagrancy Act of 1879 was welcomed by an editor on the grounds that

it was almost as much needed for whites as for blacks. Within the past three years the town has hardly ever been free of ... brandy-stinking whites who went about begging for a sixpence or a shilling. (51)

In the 1893 Labour Commission hearings questions specifically on poor whites were put to most witnesses, and a number of similar and related attitudes were manifested. A long established Prince Alfred farmer scornfully resisted the notion of educating poor whites more than poor blacks: "I think that if they are destined to take the same work, the same stage of education suffices." (52) Several farmers wanted the Masters and Servants legislation, the strop Act, and the Vagrancy Act applied more rigorously against poor whites. "The law cannot make exceptions", they urged; poor whites "required a little less pride and a little more industry"; harsh measures were needed for "men who must eat and will not work". Explained one farmer:

I found that I had to be strict to see that they did their work well. They must stand under discipline ... In some instances they were rather troublesome about their little wants. (53)

Perhaps no more pointed illustration of the gulf between affluent and very poor whites is available than the workings of the legislation applying to destitute children. Under an Act of 1865, abandoned and destitute children were available for indenture, and were publicly advertised in local newspapers. (The youngest such white child in a newspaper advertisement that I saw was the five year old son of the failed photographer Mathew Hale, gazetted in the Fort Beaufort Advocate of 14/3/1968.) In 1876 a Mr. Montagu wrote to the Cradock magistrate in response to an announcement of three destitute white sisters:

I noticed yesterday for the first time, in the Cradock paper, that there were some destitute children shortly to be bound. I should much like to get one of the Girls, the one of 12 years old would be most useful, but if I can't get her the one of 8 would do ... Some three years ago I had a little English boy bound to me, & although at first I was inclined to regret of my bargain, I am beginning to find him very useful indeed. (54)

The significance of the 1890s.

It may well be that class attitudes like the ones described in the previous section are an important indicator to the significance of the 1890s: how were such attitudes affected by the concern directed in that decade towards defining and alleviating the "poor white problem"? Detailed and careful research is necessary before this can be answered in any detail or with any certainty; for the moment, some preliminary and tentative comments may be worth making. One can confidently assert that there took place in the Cape colony in the 1880s and especially in the 1890s a major shift in ruling class perceptions of the nature of poverty that was analogous to ideological developments in metropolitan Britain, and partly derived from them; and that in the colonial context these altered perceptions tended to be expressed in racial terms.

In England, there took place during the last two decades of the nineteenth century a considerable restructuring of attitudes towards poverty and unemployment, and a rethinking of the appropriate response

by the state to these. (55) Briefly, there was in England in the 1880s a "rediscovery of poverty" and this broadened into "a dramatic re-interpretation" of the causes and nature of impoverishment. Between about 1830 and 1880, poverty had classically been viewed in terms of moral failure on the part of individuals, it now came to be seen as a product of the physical and economic environment. Concern shifted from the "demoralisation" associated with pauperism to the "degeneration" believed to accompany poverty; this shift

prepared the middle class public to see chronic poverty as an endemic condition of large masses of the population rather than as the product of exceptional misfortune or providence on the part of isolated individuals.

The search for "solutions" to poverty by social policy rather than the assumption of its disappearance in the face of moral and material progress was part of "the intellectual assault which began to be mounted against laissez-faire. (56) (There was, it may be noted, a corresponding "discovery" or "awakening to poverty as a social problem" in the United States at the same time; first at municipal and then at state and federal level attention moved from "pauperism" to "poverty" as reformers urged administrative action.) (57)

The precise forms of the transmission of ideology from metropolitan Britain to the Cape need to be explored and established, in a task well beyond the scope of this paper. In a few instances, quite direct links are observable. Cape newspapers reprinted accounts of "Outcast London" and the "London poor". (58) In 1892 Merriman visited the Midlands and "made his first horrified discovery of the problem that would agitate him for the rest of his life - the poor white problem." (59) Only the previous year he had been moved, on reading William Booth's In Darkest England (a vigorous tract on the "submerged tenth") to comment that

at no time have social problems been more acute - at one end of the scale the Duke of Westminster or Baron Hirsch with their millions, at the other the poor outcasts who seek work and find none ... (60)

His belief that the "degradation of the white population" was one of the "great questions", one of "the things upon which our existence as a race in this land depend", as well as the actions that he took to publicise and investigate the problem, are a transcription into a colonial key of themes common to the New Liberalism and the Social Imperialism of the 1890s.

There were of course other shapers in the nineties of the "poor white question" in the Cape. One source was the Dutch Reformed Church ⁽⁶¹⁾, a number of whose ministers - notably Marchand, Hofmeyer, and Murray - had become concerned about deepening poverty amongst their congregations. (The Afrikaner Bond had previously raised the issue of white agrarian poverty in the mid-eighties.) ⁽⁶²⁾ The Department of Education had been concerned in various ways with the problem of reaching the rural (and especially the Boer) population continually since at least 1869, and in the major enquiry of 1891 redirected attention to the incidence and perils of educational failure. Of particular importance was the Department of Public Health. Created only in 1891, its earliest reports drew vigorous attention to the "grossest sanitary errors and neglect in numbers of towns and villages". Maynard Swanson has shown how the "sanitation syndrome" affected thinking about segregated municipal locations for blacks at the turn of the century. ⁽⁶³⁾ Professional and popular anxieties about sanitation and the health hazards of urban slums also involved a concern about whites "compelled to live among the coloured people and who are sinking, sinking, sinking ..." ⁽⁶⁴⁾

D. W. Smith's case-study of Graaff-Reinet is revealing in this context: in the 1890s the issue of sanitary clean-up and the removal of blacks living in rented rooms (huurkamers) in the "white" town was complicated by "the rising numbers of Poor Whites living in hire-rooms." ⁽⁶⁵⁾ Bickford-Smith has examined the changing perceptions of poverty held by Cape Town's English-speaking middle class in the 1880s and 1890s. The assumption that "all you needed to do was to inculcate morality in the labouring classes" was swiftly rendered obsolete by fears about disease, about working class organisation, and about crime. There were several articles in 1892 devoted to the Poor White issue, and in January 1893 the Argus found that "poor whites and filthy blacks live side by side" and warned that the former were "degenerating by reason of their surroundings." ⁽⁶⁶⁾

In conclusion, it is important not to overstate the case being made here. To argue that there was a considerably larger stratum of poor and proletarianised whites in the Cape before the 1890s is not to deny those well-known accelerators of white poverty - rinderpest and the Anglo-Boer War - or the extent to which the numbers of impoverished men and women moving into the cities swelled after 1900. Nevertheless, it has been a central concern of this paper to challenge the chronology which has large numbers of poor whites suddenly created in the 1890s. Gareth Steadman Jones has written (of London): "What changed in the

1890s was not so much the situation of the casual labourer as the social prism through which his situation was regarded." (67) If one substitutes "poor white" for "casual labourer" the essential point is made.

Notes

All material from the Government Archives in Cape Town is prefixed CA; the series and box numbers follow - e.g., CA, (series) 1/CDK, (box) B/48. The following abbreviations have been used:

AY	Albany	CO	Colonial Office
BW	Beaufort West	SGE	Superintendent-General of Education
CBB	Cape Blue Book	SSE	Somerset East
CPP	Cape Printed Papers		
CDK	Cradock		

- (1) See Malan, J.R. The Reorganisation of Rural Education in the Cape Province, New York, 1922; Marthinus, M.E. Sketch of the Development of Rural Education in the Cape Colony, Grahamstown, 1922; Malherbe, G.E. Education and the Poor White (vol. 3 of the Carnegie Commission Report, Stellenbosch, 1932, pp. 13-63; the most important of the Cape Parliamentary Papers are; Report of the Education Commission, 1863; Report of the Education Commission (Barrie Report) 1869; Report of a Commission on the Education Acts in force in this Colony (de Villiers Report) 1879; G.12-'83, Preliminary Report on the State of Education in the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope (D. Ross report) 1883; Report of the Education Commission, 1891.
- (2) Burghersdorp Chronicle, 10/6/1865
- (3) Ibid.
- (4) CA, SGE 1/14, John Brebner to Langham Dale, 21/8/1865.
- (5) Burghersdorp Chronicle, 26/6/1865.
- (6) CBB, 1865, p. JJ42. (Cf. CA, SGE 1/24, R. Lentz to Langham Dale, 5/3/1870, in which the author explains that having failed to subsist as a farmer he had become a teacher.)
- (7) Marthinus, op. cit., p. 70; cf. Report of a Commission on the Education Acts, 1879, p. 101: "the farmer finds it convenient to have his own meester ... who can teach the children after a fashion, and also be a kind of servant of all work."
- (8) de Kock, M.H. Selected Subjects in the Economic History of South Africa, Cape Town, 1924, p. 454.
- (9) Grosskopf, J.F.W. Rural Impoverishment and Rural Exodus (volume 1 of the Carnegie Commission Report), Stellenbosch, 1932, pp. 4-6, 20.
- (10) MacMillan, W.M. The South African Agrarian Problem and its Historical Development, Johannesburg, 1919, p.8.
- (11) There is a brief and useful guide to the topic of early landlessness and stratification in Boer Society in Giliomee, H. "Processes in Development of the South African Frontier", In Lamar, H. and Thompson L. (eds), The Frontier in History, New Haven, 1981, esp. pp. 79-88.

- (12) CHN, 1866, p. JJ22.
- (13) CBB, 1867, p. JJ27.
- (14) CBB, 1868, p. JJ30.
- (15) Fort Beaufort Advocate, 20/7/1867.
- (16) Ibid., 13/10/1866.
- (17) Letter by "Amicus", Fort Beaufort Advocate, 4/8/1866.
- (18) CBB, 1877, p. 29.
- (19) CBB, 1877, pp. 14-29; CBB, 1878, pp. 8-19. See also newspaper accounts of agrarian distress such as: Alice Times, 13/10/1876, 2/3/1877; Adelaide Standard and Bedford Advertiser, 8/5/1878; Middleburg Gazette, 21/8/1877. There is an excellent discussion of social stratification and proletarianisation in a single district: Dubouw, S. "Land, Labour and Merchant Capital: The Experience of the Graaff-Reinet District, 1852-72", Univ. of Cape Town Centre for African Studies, Communication No. 6, 1962, esp. pp. 53-62.
- (20) CPP, G.3-'94, Labour Commission, Vol. III, p. xxxi.
- (21) CBB, 1876, pp. cc 17-18.
- (22) Smith, K.W. From Frontier to Midlands: A History of the Graaff-Reinet District 1786-1910, Grahamstown, 1976, p. 86.
- (23) MacMillan, op. cit., p. 48.
- (24) Smith, op. cit., p. 188.
- (25) MacMillan, op. cit., p. 48.
- (26) van Onselen, C. Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand 1886-1914, Vol. 2 New Nineveh, London, 1982.
- (27) Stone, J. F. Colonist or Uitlander?, Oxford, 1973, pp. 112-13.
- (28) Stone, op. cit. p. 114; see also Purkis, A. "The Politics, Capital and Labour of Railway-Building in the Cape Colony 1870-85", (Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 1978), pp. 339-40.
- (29) Eastern Province Herald, 25/9/1877.
- (30) Merriman is quoted by Purkis, op. cit., p. 350; the violent navvies appear in the Eastern Province Herald, 2/3/1875; 11/1/1876; 14/3/1876; 26/4/1876; 2/6/1876; 3/10/1876, and 5/12/1876.
- (31) Cory Library, MS 127, John Landrey, Veldkornet, letters and reports. Landrey served as field-cornet in the Frankfort ward of Kingwilliamstown in 1876 and 1877: see his reports on the inquests of James Inskip (12/11/1876), John Baggot (4/4/1877), Lockwood Sykes (29/4/1877) and Edwin King (24/7/1877). Similar evidence recurs in inquest reports in CA, 1/CDK, 8/42, Letters from Field Cornets, e.g., 26/6/1880, 26/8/1882.

- (32) Fort Beaufort Advocate, 24/2/1866.
- (33) CPP, C1-'94, Report of Select Committee on Destitute Children Relief Bill, p. 38.
- (34) CA, SSE, 8/90 (letters from field cornets), M. Bain to Resdt. Mgte., 4/2/1881: details of the suicide by one of three white labourers digging a well.
- (35) CA, 1/AY, 8/11, Field Cornet, Salem to Civil Commissioner, 12/12/1874.
- (36) CA, 1/BW, 9/57, statistical returns for 1858.
- (37) CA, CO 3077, Civil Commissioner, Burghersdorp to Colonial Secretary, 27/4/1865.
- (38) CA. 1/CDK, 10/10 Civil Commissioner to Colonial Secretary, 18/9/1879.
- (39) MacMillan, W.M. Economic Conditions in a non-industrial South African town, Grahamstown, 1915, p. 11.
- (40) CA, 1/CDK, 8/48, Chas Sullivan to Resdt. Mgte., 15/11.1878.
- (41) Details in Alice Times, 25/2/1876; 19/5/1876; 26/5/1876; 9/6/1876; 7/7/1876; 21/7/1876. Gibson's case is in 6/10/1876.
- (42) CA, SGE 1/14, copy of letter from Samuel Brook to Editor, P.E. Telegraph, 1/3/1865.
- (43) Fort Beaufort Advocate, 13/1/1866.
- (44) Ibid., 1/2/1868.
- (45) CPP, G.39-'93 (Vol. 1) and G.3-'94 (vols 2 & 3) Report of the Commission on the Labour Question, 1893. Part of the brief of the Commissioners was to investigate the relationship between poor whites and the labour market. The massive volumes of evidence taken (and indexed) make this one of the most explicit and detailed sources for white poverty, rural and urban; yet curiously it seems to have been overlooked by the authors of the standard works on "the poor white question".
- (46) CPP, G.3-'94, Labour Commission, vol. 2, pp. 131, 143, 209, et al.
- (47) Ibid., p. 311; cf. evidence of William Rowan ("I am a Bastard" - "What is a Bastard?" - "A little of everything"), p. 317, and of P. van Heerden, p. 316.
- (48) Ibid., pp. 164, 204-5, 224, 238, 245, 439, 468, 587-8, 609, et. al.
- (49) Ibid., p. 593.
- (50) Eastern Province Herald, 9/6/1874.

- (51) Granaff-Reinet Advertiser, 28/10/1879, quoted in Smith, op.cit. p. 244.
- (52) CPP, G.3-'94, Labour Commission, vol. 2, p. 140.
- (53) Ibid. The quotations are at pp. 278, 301, 238, 638; see also pp. 137, 179, 210, 222, 304, et.al.
- (54) CA, 1/CDK, B/48, J. Mantaqu to Civil Commissioner, 8/4/1876.
- (55) See especially Harris, J. Unemployment and Politics: A Study in English Social Policy 1886-1914, Oxford 1972, and Stedman Jones, G. Outcast London, Oxford, 1971.
- (56) The quotations are from Stedman Jones, op.cit., pp. 285, 313, 297.
- (57) See Brenner, R. From the Depths: The Discovery of Poverty in the United States, New York, 1956, esp. pp. xi-xii, 71, 123ff.
- (58) Bickford-Smith, V. "Dangerous Cape Town: Middle-class attitudes to poverty in Cape Town in the late nineteenth century", in Studies in the History of Cape Town (ed. Saunders, C. et al.) Cape Town, 1981, p.60, footnote 14.
- (59) Lewsen, P. J.X. Merriman: Paradoxical South African Statesman, Johannesburg, 1982. The quotation in fact comes from the much longer manuscript version of the same work, deposited in the South African Public Library, at pp. 410-11.
- (60) Lewsen, P. (ed), Correspondence of J. X. Merriman, vol. 2, pp.28-9.
- (61) Hermann Giliomee has recently emphasised the role of DRC clergyman as ideologues in the late nineteenth century. ("Reinterpreting Afrikaner Nationalism, c. 1850-1900", ICS Seminar Paper SSA/82/7). His discussion centred upon language and nationalist issues; the predikants were to play an equally prominent part in publicising and shaping the "poor white problem".
- (62) Davenport, T.R.H. The Afrikaner Bond, Cape Town, 1966, p. 98.
- (63) Swanson, M. "The Sanitation Syndrome: Bubonic Plague and Urban Native Policy in the Cape Colony, 1900-1909", Journal of African History, 18, 3, 1977.
- (64) Cape Argus, 21/12/1892, quoted by Bickford-Smith, op.cit., p. 57.
- (65) Smith, From Frontier to Midlands, pp. 218ff.
- (66) Bickford-Smith, op. cit., quotations at pp. 32, 42.
- (67) Stedman Jones, op. cit., p. 327.

TABLE: SELECTED OCCUPATIONAL CATEGORIES, WHITES IN
EMPLOYMENT, CAPE COLONY CENSUS, 1875.

A: Totals in selected categories

<u>Census category</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>
Engaged in attendance	3636	1255	2381
Engaged in conveyance of goods, etc.	4052	4030	22
Labourers / branch undefined	1859	1814	45
Engaged in defence	2952	2952	-
Engaged in mechanic production	5038	5023	15
'Toegtanger', hawker, pedlar	664	662	2
Bywoners, farm servants, agricultural labourers	2521		
	<hr/>		
	20,822		

B: Further details within selected categories

Engaged in attendance			
- general domestic servant	2115	545	1570
- coachman	103	103	-
- cook	265	13	252
- gardener	147	147	-
- housekeeper	229	-	229
- nurse	257	-	257
Engaged in conveyance of goods etc.			
- engine-drivers, stokers	47	47	-
- railway servants, et al	125	121	4
- wagon/cab driver	85	85	-
- carrier, driver, leader	1314	1310	4
- storeman	323	323	-
- ship servant	202	191	11
- boatman, ferryman	281	281	-
- messenger, porter	95	95	-
Mechanic production			
- carpenter, joiner	1356		
- bricklayer	54		
- mason, pavior	968		
- painter, plumber	330		
- coach maker	834		
- harness maker	319		
- blacksmiths	1066		
Persons working in minerals			
- brickmaker	116		
- road, railway labourers	723		
- dam-makers and well sinkers	114		