DSPACE

https://dspace.org/

# 'God het ons arm mense die houtjies gegee': towards a history of the 'Poor White' woodcutters in the Southern Cape forest area c. 1900 - 1939.

**Grundlingh, A.**

**1987-02-14T07:11:06Z**
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/7877

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

GRUNDLINGH



UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

# HISTORY WORKSHOP

THE MAKING OF CLASS

9 - 14 February, 1987

AUTHOR: A. Grundlingh

TITLE: 'God Het Ons Arm Mense Die Houtjies Gegee': Towards a History of the 'Poor White' Woodcutters in the Southern Cape Forest AREA c. 1900- 1939.

AFRICANA LIBRARY

# 'GOD HET ONS ARM MENSE DIE HOUTJIES GEGEE' ; TOWARDS A HISTORY OF THE 'POOR WHITE' WOODCUTTERS IN THE SOUTHERN CAPE FOREST AREA, C. 1900-1939.

Albert Grundlingh

This paper focuses on a particular group of 'poor whites' who eked out an existence in the Southern Cape forest belt. Although their history goes back to the 18th century, this overview concentrates mainly on the first four decades of the 20th century. In the first place an attempt is made to outline the material conditions under which the woodcutters lived, and secondly, those forces which to a large measure shaped the socio-economic environment and context of their lives, are analysed. It must be emphasised that this paper is very much an exercise in self-clarification; my research is not completed yet and this presentation does not claim to be exhaustive.

0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

The indigenous forest of the Southern Cape, located inland along a narrow coastal strip and stretching for about 200 km between George and Humansdorp, was the main source of income for generations of woodcutters. Knysna, between George and Humansdorp, was the principal town as far as the timber industry was concerned. Despite a high rainfall, poor quality soil militated against agricultural production and stock farming; until well into the 20th century the entire economic life and structure of Knysna revolved around the timber trade. Deep valleys and gorges, nearly impenetrable forests and the steep Outeniqua mountains rendered access difficult and contributed to the relative isolation of the area in the 19th and early 20th century. It was only with the construction of a railway line in 1928 and tarred roads during World War II that the situation changed markedly.

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

further afield. The eastward movement of the Dutch colonists facilitated this search and in 1711, when some settled in the vicinity of the Outeniqua mountains, news of vast forests in the area was related to the authorities in Cape Town. The inaccessibility of the area handicapped trade, but after the completion of a road from Swellendam and the establishment of an official 'timber post' in 1772, the situation improved somewhat and a gradual influx of settlers who made their living from the forests occurred. The founding of towns in the Cape interior during the 19th century increased the demand for wood used in the construction of buildings, and the trade also benefitted from the Great Trek which created a larger market for oxwagons. The discovery of diamonds in Kimberley and gold on the Reef as well as the expansion of the railway network acted as a further powerful stimulus since timber from the George-Knysna area was used for mining props and as railway sleepers.[1]

The timber trade was intimately connected with the general growth of the South African economy, and the 20th century industrial expansion of the country ensured an increasing market for timber. Especially during the First World War, when South Africa was cut off from foreign imports and local manufacturing developed rapidly, there was a keen demand for timber. The timber industry of course, had to cope with subsequent fluctuations, particularly during the depression of the early thirties, but there was always, however limited, a demand for railway sleepers to fall back upon.[2]

The favourable market for timber during the First World War coincided with an increase of the white population in the George-Knysna-Humansdorp districts from 18 623 in 1911 to 23 179 in 1921. Many of the newcomers to the area were evicted 'bywoners' from the semi-dry neighbouring Karoo districts across the Outeniqua mountains. These districts - Prince Albert, Willowmore, and Oudtshoorn in particular - experienced a severe economic crisis after the ostrich feather slump of 1913-14 and a crippling drought in 1916 with the result that the surviving larger landowners were disinclined to keep

'bywoners' on their farms. The forest and coastal belt was a haven for such 'poor whites' from the Karoo.[3]

Besides the opportunity of earning a living as woodcutters, it was also in another way relatively easier for the poverty-stricken to make ends meet in this area than in the arid Karoo. 'George is a poor man's district', T. Searle, a prominent citizen of the area, explained before the unemployment commission of 1920, 'it is the home of the sweet potato on which the poor generally live... The poor can live on sweet potatoes which cost them very little, and the result is that people are apt to flock in from the poorer districts in times of drought for that reason. At present we are, I might say, almost full up with people who have come in during the last few years owing to the severe droughts in the Karroo districts'.[4] Because sweet potatoes were easy to cultivate in the sandy soil, it became the staple diet of the destitute classes in the area who were unable to afford more nutritional food.[5]

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

The establishment of these forestry settlements was not inspired by purely humanitarian motives. Karatara and Bergplaats were founded in 1922 in direct response to the 1922 strike on the Rand. Removing the 'dangerous classes' from the 'pernicious influences' in Johannesburg and resettling them elsewhere was a deliberate strategy devised by the state to assist in blunting the strong challenge from the white working class on the Rand. Gen. J.C. Smuts clearly explained in parliament how this could help defuse the situation :

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

Officially the forestry settlements were considered the ideal environment for the 'rehabilitation' of 'misguided' and 'fractious' elements on the Rand. On these settlements which were 'off the beaten track and amidst the most beautiful scenic surroundings', the settlers were placed under the 'guidance of persons interested in their welfare'. Under these 'idyllic' conditions it was hoped that they would make a fresh start with 'a healthy outlook on life'.[8] It is doubtful whether former disgruntled urban dwellers found their new rural setting quite so congenial, and it is equally unlikely that they 'reformed' according to the wishes and desires of the state. The issue awaits more detailed research, but there are indications that some ignored the regulations and absconded.[9] Others who stayed might also have found the discipline and strictly controlled work environment irksome and even oppressive, but at the same time it did offer them security and a degree of permanency.

The majority of 'poor whites' in the area found themselves outside the plantation settlements. They constituted the bulk of the woodcutting population and were

largely dependant on the indigenous forests for their livelihood. Many of them viewed the forests as a providential gift :'God het ons arm mense die houtjies gegee', one woodcutter expressed this general sentiment.[10] Some of them were descendants of the early 18th century Dutch pioneers, while others were relative newcomers who had failed to make a living elsewhere and turned to woodcutting as a last resort. Amongst the woodcutters there were also a few descendants of British stock, immigrants who were unable to succeed on the land, as well as a small number of Italian immigrants and their descendants who had originally been brought out by the Cape Government from Turin in 1879 on an ill-conceived scheme to start a silk industry near Knysna. The industry had failed to materialise, mainly because of a lack of mulberry leaves to feed the silkworms, and in course of time some of these immigrants drifted into the ranks of the woodcutter community.[11]

Since 1913, through the Forest Act of that year, all woodcutters working in the indigenous state forests had to be registered. Approximately 1 200 men registered and no new names were allowed on the list. A registered woodcutter was officially supposed to derive his main source of income from working the timber alloted to him by the state, else his name could be deleted from the list and his license revoked. A woodcutters' board, consisting of the magistrate and a number of local luminaries, worked in co-ordination with the Forestry Department and closely monitored the situation. In addition, any woodcutter found guilty of contravening one of the numerous forestry regulations could be deprived of the right to work in the forests. Through the actions of the board (and also because the names of deceased woodcutters were struck from the list) the number of registered men was reduced to 557 by 1929. Besides the registered woodcutters in state forests, there were those who worked in privately owned forests. Estimates of the number of these unregistered men vary, but in the late twenties their numbers probably slightly exceeded those of the registered

woodcutters. The income of registered woodcutters obviously fluctuated with the demand for timber, but in the twenties the average annual income was approximately between £ 30 and £ 40. Unregistered woodcutters were generally regarded as even poorer, and at times they acted as assistants for those working in the state forests.[12]

Very few woodcutters actually owned fixed property. Most of the registered woodcutters rented small plots at a nominal fee from the state. Unregistered woodcutters who resided on private estates usually had to work the surrounding forests on behalf of the landowner, and they were liable to be evicted if they tried to dispose of the wood in any other way. In general the woodcutters did very little in the way of cultivating produce for the market. The smallness of their plots, the poor quality of the soil, lack of capital to acquire such necessities as fertilizer, and the limited local market, which was in any event supplied by the larger farmers, meant that they produced mainly sweet potatoes for their own consumption. For their cash income they remained dependant on the forests.[13]

The woodcutters' lack of interest in the land and the fact that they actually worked in the forests for only part of the year, often led to accusations of laziness and indolence - qualities which were sometimes regarded as characteristic of 'poor whites' in general.[14] In reality, however, the work the woodcutters performed and the conditions under which they toiled were most arduous. 'Their work, be it felling, slipping or sawing is laborious in the extreme', a sympathetic observer wrote in 1911 :

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

> To see a heavy log slipped out of a deep gully and dragged to the sawpit, inch by inch, by long teams of crawling, groaning oxen, along slippery, slushy, almost impassable slip paths, is a never to be forgotten sight.[15]

After his spell in the forest, the woodcutter came home to little more than a corrugated iron or wooden shack, consisting of two rooms with a clay floor and a kitchen. His large family - in the thirties the average family consisted of 8 children - meant overcrowded living conditions, lack of hygiene and often insufficient food. The woodcutter nevertheless considered his male off-spring as an economic asset which, after a rudimentary schooling, could at the age of 14 or 15 years or even earlier assist him in the forest. The main task of the elder daughters was to help their mother with the burden of childcare. In the early 20th century very few women accepted wage labour - they usually married early and remained part of the woodcutter community - but in the twenties, during the time of the Pact government, an increasing number of daughters left home either for domestic service in town or for factory work in the larger and expanding industrial centres such as Port Elizabeth. In general, though, the woodcutter families lived an isolated and insular life, cut off from 'civilizing' influences and attached to the forests and their particular life-style.[16]

It is important to emphasise that desperately poor as the woodcutters undoubtedly were, they did not, in a general comparison with the 'poor white' population in South Africa at the time, represent the lowest stratum of indigent whites. They were not in the same category as the'dangerous lumpenproletariat class' which existed on crime, hand-outs or both. The woodcutters were self-employed, willing and able to work, but often lacked the necessary capital, training and most important, the opportunity to benefit from their labours.[17]

Although the 'woodcutter problem' was comparatively small in relation with

the overall 'poor white question' of approximately 300, 000 impoverished whites in the early thirties, the woodcutters were nevertheless a distinct feature of the social profile of the area. In the early 20th century three 'classes' can be discerned amongst the whites in the forest belt : firstly the landowners, forestowners, merchants and professional men; secondly and below them, those in permanent employ as artisans, clerks and other functionaries; and thirdly at the bottom of the social pyramid ('at a judicious distance and knowing how to keep their place') the 'poor whites'. There was a considerable social distance between the underprivileged and the more well-to-do, the latter often treating the poor with contemptuous disdain.[18] The wealthy and the destitute lived in two worlds as if they had nothing in common but, as will be discussed shortly, in an historical-materialist sense the social relationship between the two was intimately intertwined and ridden with conflict. There was, in fact, a direct correlation between the riches of the one and the poverty of the other.

If there was a growing gap in conventional social terms between the wealthy and poor in white society, there was much less of a racial divide between 'poor whites' and the 'coloured' population in the area. Of the total number of registered woodcutters in 1913 (approximately 1,200 men), about 195 men (17%) were considered 'coloured'. There was no difference in the material conditions between the 'coloured' and 'poor white' woodcutters. Independent 'coloured' woodcutters worked under the same circumstances and regulations as whites in the forests and shared the same physical deprivations and mental outlook on their work and environment.[19] Occasionally, whites might have employed 'coloureds' to help them, but the reverse also happened. In the immediate aftermath of the Anglo-Boer War for instance, discharged 'coloured' muleteers from the British army moved into the Knysna area from mission stations at Bredasdorp, Mossel Bay and Bethelsdorp, and in an attempt to benefit from rising timber prices at the time, hired local 'poor white'

woodcutters to assist them in collecting wood.[20] Admittedly some white woodcutters might have resented the fact that their social standing was on a par with that of 'coloureds',[21] but ultimately hard material realities blurred and obliterated attitudes of presumed superiority. One expression of this communality is to be found in a petition of 1907 to the Cape government, calling for a greater allocation of trees, and signed by 118 woodcutters of whom 63 were 'coloured'. Significantly the petition closed with an appeal for assistance, 'whether we are English, Dutch or Coloured'.[22]

'Coloureds' and 'poor whites' furthermore shared the same residential areas. At Suurvlakte in the George district, and at Ouplaas and Soutrivier, close to Knysna, as well as deeper in the forest area of the district at the Crags, Harkerville and Kraaibos both groups occupied their small-holdings on the same conditions, and according to an investigation in 1933, lived 'cheek by jowl' and regarded each other as 'complete equals'. Under these conditions marriages between whites and 'coloureds' were not at all uncommon. To some 'poor white' women, marrying into a 'coloured' family might, at times, have meant a distinct improvement of their position. In 1933 it was reported 'that there are white girls who are only too glad to become the wives of coloured men, whom they have known since childhood and who were more prosperous than the girls' own white parents.'[23]

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

question would not be so urgent if we did not have the coloured population here', he argued, 'but the fact of our having the coloured population here and the fact that they are advancing in every direction... makes the situation so very serious. If we did not have that question, the poor white problem would not be so serious. It would almost solve itself.'[24] In response to the situation the Durch Reformed Church initiated various relief schemes, amongst others church settlements for the white poor only.[25] These settlements, however, only accomodated a small minority of the impoverished whites, and in the thirties the issue of the poor and their relations with the 'coloureds' in the forest belt became part of the broader Afrikaner economic mobilisation with one of its avowed aims the eradication of white poverty. In particular, Dr H.F. Verwoerd, at the time professor in psychology and sociology at the University of Stellenbosch and a prominent academic during the economic 'volkskongres' of 1934, emphasised the 'grave danger' of 'racial mixing' in the area and the necessity of 'racial separation' as a prerequisite for the 'upliftment' of the woodcutter population.[26] However, neither the white poor nor the 'coloureds' were particularly perturbed about the situation, and although some of the whites moved away after they had improved their financial position, it was only in the fifties, after the advent of the National Party rule in 1948, that these mixed residential areas were destroyed by official decree.

0 0 0 0 0 0 0

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

presumed 'backwardness' and 'laziness'.

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

By far the most prominent amongst the timber merchants was the firm of Thesen and Company. The Thesen family came to South Africa in 1869 from Stavanger in Norway after their shipping business in Norway had suffered badly through the Danish-German war of 1864. Originally they had intended starting anew in New Zealand. However, after they had docked their ship, the Albatros, for repairs in Cape Town they came into contact with the Swedish-Norwegian consul and merchant, C.A. Åkerberg, who informed them about the shortage of ships along the South African coast. The interest of the head of the family, Arnt Thesen, was aroused. Åkerberg put the Thesens in touch with some Cape merchants who wanted cargoes delivered along the coast, including the port of Knysna. Knysna, a small town of approximately 200 whites at the time and situated on a lagoon protected by a narrow channel with towering cliffs on either side, reminiscent of Norway and its fjords, appealed to the Thesens. But more important, the economic potential of the large forests close by attracted them and in April 1870 the family decided to settle in Knysna. They established a profitable relationship with Åkerberg who handled the timber carried from Knysna in the Albatros, and in turn supplied the Thesens with general merchandise for the area.

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

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

district forest officer at Knysna, made the connection between capital accumulation and indigency in the forest region abundantly clear. Charles Thesen, according to Ryan, was 'the principal member of a class which, by its absorption of the profits attenting the timber industry, has been chiefly responsible for the impoverishment of the woodcutter.'[35] Equally pertinent was the observation, 27 years later, of A.J. Werth, National Party member for George, that the 'firm of Thesen.. are people who want to buy the timber as cheaply as possible. They are the people who throughout the whole history have never yet done anything to help these people /woodcutters/ out of the forest. Their object is to get rich out of timber and they have, as a matter of fact, succeeded.'[36]

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

The established timber merchants like Thesens, had a virtual monopoly over the timber trade, and went to great lengths to protect their dominance. Attempts on the part of others to break their stranglehold met with uncompromising opposition. For instance, in 1927, J. van Reenen, a local farmer, erected a saw mill on his property and planned to bypass the merchants by organising the woodcutters into a co-operative society, encouraging them to sell their wood to him instead of to the established merchants. The woodcutters would have benefited in that a percentage

of the profit would have been distributed amongst the members of the proposed co-operative. This scheme which had the potential to undermine the interests of the established merchants, ran into formidable problems even before it could be launched. Through the 'powerful influence' of Thesen in particular, the threat of competition was swiftly eliminated. Van Reenen found that his credit at the Standard Bank suddenly dried up, and that the manager of the other bank in town, the National Bank, also refused to provide him with credit facilities. It transpired later, that the established merchants had closed ranks and exerted such pressure that the two bank managers, not wishing to antagonise their largest clients, were disinclined to assist Van Reenen.[39]

While the preceding example illustrates the way in which timber merchants held on to their dominance, it is also necessary to look at the system of exchange which enabled the merchants to keep the woodcutters in perpetual bondage. Although the licensed woodcutter was entitled to buy standing timber from the government, he had to compete with the agents of timber merchants and mill owners who obtained concessions to buy timber at the annual auction sales. This resulted in the agents regularly outbidding the woodcutter. In order to acquire trees, the woodcutter then had to turn to the merchant who only ceded his right to the timber on the stiffest conditions. Usually these conditions meant that the merchant was not only compensated for the auction dues and license fees which he incorporated into the agreement, but that the woodcutter was also bound to deliver the timber (either in log or processed into required articles like felloes, spokes or naves) to the merchant. In addition the timber merchants often doubled up as shopkeepers. By making cash advances or allowing credit for general merchandise in return for a substantial supply of timber, the shopkeeper cum merchant's hold over the woodcutter was further strengthened.[40]

The way in which merchant capital operated on the ground clearly left the woodcutter in a most vulnerable position. Rev. Luckhoff vividly described in

1911 how the merchants benefited at every turn :

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

The effect of this relationship was, Luckhoff continued, that

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

The material conditions of the woodcutters were thus largely determinded and shaped by the way in which merchant capital operated in the area.

In a broader context this was, in the main, a development which occurred after the discovery of minerals in the interior and the subsequent growth of industrial South Africa. To a great extent woodcutters used to do their own marketing before diamonds and gold transformed the South African economy. Correspondingly they appear to have been better off. An elderly woodcutter remembered in 1933 that in earlier days, before approximately 1886, they used to load their wagons with wood which they sold at Riversdale, Swellendam and as far afield as Worcester. 'One wagon brought in £ 50, and a trek of 18 wagons thus meant £ 900. Those were the days,' he recalled.[42] However, few woodcutters possessed sufficient capital and resources to meet the demands for effective distribution networks which accompanied the changing economic order after the 1870's and 1880's. Although some of them did try, even as late as 1913, to market their own wood,[43] the emerging timber merchants who had the necessary means and contacts rapidly displaced those woodcutters who marketed their timber independently.

Despite the debilitating effect of merchant capital on the woodcutter population,

employment, preferring to continue work in their beloved forests with... a very small income - but as independent operators.'[44] Through their sense of independence, however tenuous this might have been in objective terms, they managed to stave off proletarianisation. 'Forest workers love the forest and are proud of the fact that they are not daily-paid men. That is the... one thing which still makes them strong in the midst of poverty,' A.J. Werth stated in 1939.[45] Similarly, they spurned state-initiated attempts to relocate them on the various land-settlements developed for 'poor whites' during the twenties.[46]

Throughout the four decades under review the Department of Forestry which was responsible for the conservation of the area, exerted considerable pressure to displace the woodcutters, claiming that the forests were incapable of supporting the number of woodcutters and that their uneconomical methods rapidly depleted the indigenous forests. However, the tenacity with which the woodcutters held onto their livelihood prevented their expulsion. In 1913 the state sought to regulate the situation through an official Forest Act. One clause of the act introduced a lottery system which replaced the existing auctioning of trees and this meant that each woodcutter would be assured of at least one tree. It was hoped that the lottery system of allocating trees might increase the woodcutters' income, but in actual fact it had little effect on the powerful hold of the merchants over the woodcutters.[47] Another clause, mentioned already, determined that all woodcutters had to be registered and that no new names could be added after the initial registration. Since the number of people on the list declined annually and additional registrations were disallowed, the registration clause marked the beginning of the end for the woodcutter population working in the indigenous forests.

In effect then, the woodcutters failed to benefit from either clauses of the 1913 Act. Any possible gains they might have made through the new allocation system of trees were quickly eroded through the power of the merchants, and

the registration system also worked to their detriment and meant, in real terms, that a slow war of attrition was being fought against the woodcutter community. The intention of the 1913 Act was subsequently made clear by a former director of forestry when he wrote that 'the ultimate object was the eventual extinction of the woodcutters.'[48]

The final demise of the woodcutters came in 1939 when the number of those registered had dwindled to 256. Through the Woodcutters' Annuity Act of that year they were granted an annual annuity of £ 25 and at the same time forfeited the right to work in the forests. This act, A.J. Werth noted in parliament in 1939, 'was the end of a chapter of history in those parts, and it terminates an old established settlement of people... They are an interesting class of people with a highly developed sense of independence and self-respect. But now... they are placed in the humiliating position, according to their conception, of labourers.'[49]

The Department of Forestry, however, rejoiced that the 1939 act brought to 'a close the long drawn out struggle between the forest service and the woodcutters'. It was not an easy victory though; through the 'ballot box', as forestry officials ruefully admitted, the woodcutters had for three decades successfully politicized their own interests.[50] The woodcutter community was a sufficiently important interest group in the constituency for politicians to take note of their demands. In the 1915 election, for example, the woodcutter vote was seen to be a crucial factor which assisted the National Party in winning the seat from the South African Party.[51] The woodcutters had, not surprisingly, very little conception of broader national issues and were almost exclusively concerned with 'bread and butter' issues. On these issues the woodcutters did not hesitate to make politicians aware of the interests of the community. Thus after the advent of the Pact government in 1924, N. Bouwer, a woodcutter from the Knysna district, expressed the hope that they would not be disappointed in the new administration

and that the Woodcutters' Board, controlling registration, would be more lenient. 'We always take the trouble to walk long distances to vote', he informed Gen. J. Kemp, Minister of Agriculture and Forestry in 1925, 'because we have always heard that things would be better if we had another Government. I hope that would be the case.'[52] Despite the fact that the woodcutters consistently voted for the National Party, their support could not be taken for granted. In the 1930's they even considered putting up an independent candidate to protect their interests.[53] This idea failed to materialise, but it emphasises their awareness that the power of the vote could be used to their advantage and also underlines their readiness to act accordingly.

The fact that the woodcutters toyed with the idea of an independent candidate further demonstrates that the National Party was not necessarily the 'organic' representatives of 'poor whites' in the area. At best the National Party merely mediated on behalf of the woodcutters. Seen in the broader context of the thirties and the mobilisation of Afrikanerdom during these years, the National Party needed the 'poor whites' just as much, if not more, than the 'poor whites' needed the party. As P. le Roux has argued in a recent paper on 'poor whites', whatever sympathy the Nationalists might have had for poor Afrikaners, it was decidedly also in their material interest 'to be seen to be fighting the cause of the poor white.'[54] In this sense there was a degree of validity in claims of United Party spokesmen during the debate on the Woodcutters' Annuity Act of 1939 that the Nationalists who vigorously opposed the act wanted 'to pose as champions of the poor' and 'want to use the forest workers not to satisfy the needs of the workers, but... because they [the Nationalists] have the assurance that they can depend on the support of these people.'[55]

It is furthermore important to notice that the National Party in opposing the act, accused the United Party government of serving the interests of 'big

capitalists' in the area.[56] However true the National Party argument might have been, in that the merchants obtained a free hand and that some of the remaining woodcutters were forced to accept work as labourers in the saw mills, it does not mean that the National Party was really anti-capitalistic. Both R.H. Davies and D. O'Meara have demonstrated that the spokesmen of the National Party in the thirties actually adopted a position of 'status quo anti-capitilism'; it was often merely rhetoric and the 'left face' of the party was carefully turned to attract the 'small man' and the poor.[57]

Although the National Party failed to prevent the woodcutters' being deprived of their independent livelihood, ultimately the woodcutters themselves were not in a position to hold out indefinitely. As shown in this paper, the contours and context of their lives and work were shaped by potent forces which in the final analysis, despite the resilience of the woodcutters, largely determined what could be achieved and steadily eroded whatever independence they might have possessed. Indeed, 'God might have given the poor the wood,' but it was also a gift which others coveted and acquired to serve Mammon at the expense of the poor.

## Abbreviations

CAD - Central Archives Depot, Pretoria.

FOR - Department of Forestry Archives.

LDE - Department of Lands Archives.

SC - Select Committee.

UOD - Unie Onderwys Departement Argiewe.

UW - University of the Witwatersrand.

## Footnotes

1. N.L. King, 'The Knysna forests and the woodcutter problem', Journal of the South African Forestry Association, 3, 1939, pp. 7-8; F. von Breitenbach, 'Indigenous forests of the Southern Cape', Journal of the Botanical Society of South Africa, 58, 1972, pp. 34-36; A. Nimmo, The Knysna story (Cape Town, 1976), pp. 94-96.

2. M. Grut, Forestry and forestry industry in South Africa (Cape Town, 1965), pp. 7-8; J. Phillips, The forests of George, Knysna and the Zitzikamma : a brief history of their management, Bulletin no. 40, Department of Forestry (Pretoria, 1960), p. 61.

3. P.F.S.J. van Rensburg, 'Oud-Boswerkers en nakomelinge van boswerkers in die Middellandse bosstreek met besondere verwysing na Knysna : 'n sosiologiese ondersoek' (Unp. D.Phil. thesis, University of Pretoria, 1949), pp. 39-40; W.M. Macmillan, The South African agrarian problem and its historical development (Reprint of 1919 edition, Pretoria, 1974), pp. 45-46; P. Buirski, 'Aspects of material life in Oudtshoorn, 1860-1927 - with particular reference to the labouring poor' (Unp. B.A. Hons. thesis, University of Cape Town, 1983), p. 76.

4. UW library, A.G. 1280, Minutes of evidence before the unemployment commission of 1920, T. Searle, 3 December 1920, p. 2364.

5. De Kerkbode, 5 January 1922, 'Het arme blanke vraagstuk in de ring van George'.

6. Annual report of the Department of Forestry, 1921, p. 269; Social and Industrial Review, January 1926, pp. 24-25, 'Afforestation settlements'; UW library, A.G. 1280, Minutes of evidence before the unemployment commission of 1920, R. Burton, 6 December 1920, p. 2676. See W.M. Macmillan, Complex South Africa : an economic footnote to history (London, 1930), p. 99 for the

approximate average wage in the area.

7. Cape Argus, 23 May 1922, 'Gen. Smuts on the Budget Debate' (Newspaper cutting in CAD, FOR 187/310.) See also CAD, FOR 187/310, Chief Conservator of Forests to Chief Clerk Department of Labour, 26 May 1922; Social and Industrial Review, January 1926, p. 24, 'Afforestation Settlements'.

8. Social and Industrial Review, January 1926, p. 25, 'Afforestation settlements'.

9. Social and Industrial Review, February 1928, p. 91, 'Welfare work on a forestry settlement'.

10. CAD,FOR 259/446, M. Bouwer to Gen. J. Kemp, 11 December 1925.

11. King, 'Woodcutter problem', pp. 8-9; W. Tapson, Timber and tides : the story of Knysna and Plettenberg Bay (Cape Town, 1973), pp. 107-112.

12. J.D.M. Keet, 'Historical review of the development of forestry in South Africa' (Unp. mss., Department of Forestry library, Pretoria, 1970 (?)), pp. 11-13, 264; J.F.W. Grosskopf, 'Rural impoverishment and rural exodus' Carnegie Commission Report on the Poor White problem in South Africa, I (Stellenbosch, 1932), pp. 146-147; CAD, UOD 1944/180/II, Transcript of an interview between J.F.W. Grosskopf and R. Burton, Conservator of Forests, 1929; UW library, A.G. 1280, Minutes of evidence before the unemployment commission of 1920, R. Burton, 6 December 1920, p. 2696.

13. CAD, UOD 1944/180/III, 'Rapport van 'n komiteeoor die maatskaplike wantoestande in die George-Knysna-Zitzikamma Bosstreek' (henceforth Stals report), 1935, pp. 30-32; CAD, UOD 1944/180/II, 'Ondersoek na maatskaplike toestande in die Knysna bosstreek deur E. Theron en M.E. Rothmann (henceforth Theron and Rothmann memorandum), 1933, unpaginated.

14. Cf. Macmillan, Complex South Africa, pp. 47-48.

15. LDE 3718/1848, 'Enquiry into the poor white question as affecting the Cape Province', 1911 (Rev. A.D. Luckhoff), pp. 1-2.

16. Van Rensburg, 'Boswerkers', pp. 147-151, 188, 199, 212, 214-219; M.E. Rothmann, A comparison between Leslie country, Kentucky, USA and Knysna district, South Africa (Pretoria, 1940), pp. 15-17; H.O. Terblanche, 'Die trek van die Afrikaner na Port Elizabeth', Historia, Mei 1977, pp. 26-29.

17. Cf. Macmillan, Complex South Africa, pp. 47-48.

18. Tapson, Timber and tides, p. vii; CAD, UOD 1944/180/III, Stals report, 1935, p. 13. The quotation is from Tapson.

19. Van Rensburg, 'Boswerkers', pp. 103-104; CAD, UOD 1944/180/I, Theron and Rothmann memorandum, 1933.

20. W.R. Nasson, 'Black society in the Cape Colony and the South African war of 1899-1902 : a social history' (Unp. Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge, 1983), p. 266.

21. See for example CAD, FOR 259/446, M. Bouwer to Gen. J. Kemp, 11 December 1925 complaining about 'coloureds' being on the registered list.

22. CAD, FOR 58/56, G. van Rooyen and 117 others to Prime Minister, 4 March 1907.

23. CAD, UOD 1944/180/II, Theron and Rothmann memorandum, 1933. Quotations translated from Afrikaans.

24. S.C. 9-13, Report of the select committee on European employment and labour conditions, p. 267.

25. CAD, UOD 1944/180/III, Stals report, 1935, pp. 30-31.

26. CAD, UOD 1944/180/II, 'Memorandum deur H.F. Verwoerd oor die Knysna Bosstreek vir die Ekonomiese Volkskongres', 1934. Quotations translated from Afrikaans.

27. P. le Roux, 'The Poor white problem - an economist perspective', Social Work, March 1978, p. 11. Le Roux provides a critical perspective of this notion.

28. Cf. S. Dubow, Land, labour and merchant capital in the pre-industrial rural economy of the Cape : the experience of the Graaff-Reinet district, 1852-1872 (Communication no. 6, Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, 1982), pp. 6-7. Dubow follows G. Kay, Development and Under-development (London, 1979) in this argument.

29. For the material on the Thesens see A.H. Winquist 'The impact of Scandinavians on the cultural, social, and economic development of pre-1948 South Africa' (Unp. D.Phil. thesis, New York University, 1976), pp. 211-216; W. Tapson, 'C.W. Thesen', South African Biographical Dictionary, II, pp. 739-740; Nimmo, Knysna story, p. 94.

30. House of Assembly Debates, 33, 14 February 1939, col. 402 (A.J. Werth, National Party M.P. for George-Knysna).

31. UW library A.G. 1280, Minutes of evidence before the unemployment commission of 1920, C.W. Thesen, 6 December 1920, p. 2626.

32. Tapson, 'C.W. Thesen', p. 740.

33. Winquist, 'Scandinavians', p. 216.

34. Cf. Von Breitenbach, 'Forests of the Southern Cape', p. 39; Grut, Forestry industry, p. 4.

35. CAD, FOR 58/56A, H. Ryan to Assistant Conservator of Forests Knysna, 15 February 1911.

36. House of Assembly Debates, 33, 16 February 1939, cols. 410-411.

37. UW library, A.G. 1280, Minutes of evidence before the unemployment commission of 1920, R. Burton, 6 December 1920, pp. 2689.

38. CAD, UCD 1944/180/II, Transcript of an interview between J.F.W. Grosskopf and R. Burton, 1929.

39. CAD, FOR 350/1425, C. Legat (Conservator of Forests) to Chief Conservator of Forests, 9 May 1927 and W. Rode (Inspector of co-operative societies) to Assistant Chief Division of Agricultural Economics and Marketing, 11 April 1927.

40. CAD LDE 3718/1848, 'Enquiry into the poor white question as affecting the Cape Province', 1911, p. 11; S.C. 9-13, Report on European unemployment and labour conditions, pp. 80-81 (Rev. B.P.J. Marchand), pp. 469, 483, 485-486 (Rev. P.R. McLachlan); Annual report of the chief conservator of forests, 1911, pp. 2-3.

41. CAD, LDE 3718/1848, 'Enquiry into the poor white question as affecting the Cape Province', 1911, p. 12.

42. CAD, UCD 1944/180/II, Transcript of an interview between M.E. Rothmann and unnamed woodcutter, 1933.

43. S.C. 9-13, Report on European unemployment and labour conditions, p. 218 (Rev. A.D. Luckhoff).

44. Von Breitenbach, 'Forests of the Southern Cape', p. 39.

45. House of Assembly Debates, 33, 10 February 1939, col. 235.

46. Phillips, 'Forests of George, Knysna and Zitzikamma', pp. 61-62.

47. King, 'Woodcutter problem', p. 10; Phillips, 'Forests of George, Knysna and Zitzikamma', p. 61; House of Assembly Debates, 28 May 1913, cols. 2845-2846; D.L. Berger, 'South African government policy and white poverty, 1890-1935' (Unp. Ph.D. thesis, Temple University, 1983), p. 106.

48. Keet, 'Historical Review of Forestry', p. 266.

49. House of Assembly Debates, 33, 2 March 1939, col. 1113.

50. King, 'Woodcutter problem', pp. 7, 9. See also Phillips, 'Forests of George, Knysna and Zitzikamma', p. 62.

51. R.J. Bouch, 'The South African Party and the National Party in the Eastern Cape, 1919-1924' (Unp. M.A. thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1979), p. 68.

52. CAD, FOR 259/446, M. Bouwer to Gen. J. Kemp, 11 December 1925. Quotation translated from Afrikaans.

53. Bouch, 'The South African Party and the National Party in the Eastern Cape', p. 65.

54. P. le Roux, 'Poor whites', Carnegie conference paper no. 248, Cape Town, April 1984, p. 7.

55. House of Assembly Debates, 33, 13 February 1939, col. 276 (J.H. Viljoen, United Party M.P. for Hoopstad).

56. House of Assembly Debates, 33, 16 February 1939, col. 411 (A.J. Werth, and P. Sauer, National Party M.P. for Humansdorp).

57. R.H. Davies, Capital, state and white labour in South Africa, 1900-1960 : an historical materialist analysis of class formation and class relations (Sussex, 1979), pp. 281, 284; D. O'Meara, Volkskapitalisme : class, capital and ideology in the development of Afrikaner nationalism, 1934-1948 (Johannesburg, 1983), p. 163.

---

HWS 148