

THE RISE OF THE CAPE GENTRY

by

Robert Ross

Over the last two centuries, among those groups who have formed part of the ruling class of South Africa (1), the "gentry" have been continually represented. By "gentry" I mean the relatively prosperous, market-oriented farm owner-operators, almost invariably white and in general considerable employers of labour. By the mid-twentieth century they came to own and control the vast majority of South Africa's agricultural land outside the African "reserves". (2) For instance, they were the "maize" whose uneasy union with "gold" was at the heart of South African capitalism in the early part of this century (3), and when they fell out, in the 1940s, it was maize's defection to the National Party (significantly very largely on issues of labour control) that did much to bring that party into power. (4) This was possible in part because of the heavy weighting in favour of agricultural interests inherent in the Act of Union (5), in itself a clear index of the power the gentry had been able to maintain even after the growth of mining power and of industrial capital. Before then, the governments in all the future provinces of South Africa had been based on and had represented the gentry, to a greater or lesser degree. They were the core of the Afrikaner Bond, which grew out of the Boeren vereenigingen and without whose support an administration could not be formed in the late nineteenth century Cape parliament. (6) Even earlier, before the formation of the Bond as a true party, the commercial farmers were in general dominant within the parliament, much more so than more vaunted Cape liberals, who, relying on the African small-holders of the east and on the merchant groups who serviced them, may have been strong enough to block but never to create. (7) It is symptomatic that the first measure of any consequence passed by the Cape parliament after its inauguration in 1854 was a very harsh Masters and Servants Act. The slave-holders who, in 1831, had offered to barter the emancipation of their slaves (albeit in rather diluted form) for a representative assembly, had known what they were doing. (8) A theoretically non-racial franchise notwithstanding, their descendants still ran the Cape, and controlled their labourers.

The same was true of the other future provinces of the Union of South Africa, although the dominance of the gentry was less clear-cut. In Natal, the relations between the gentry and the traders, transport riders and land speculators might at times be strained, but it was not until after around 1900 that they were able to put the full squeeze on the African peasantries who lived, for instance, on the lands of the Natal Land and Colonization Company. (9) Nevertheless, much earlier, they had been able to compensate for this by arranging for the immigration of large numbers of Indian indentured labourers to work, above all, in the sugar plantations. In the Free State, the wool farmers of the south clearly operated in the same way as their fellows across the Orange River, especially after they had managed to winkle the Griquas out of the country round Philippolis. (10) Further

north, matters were by no means so obvious. According to Keegan, "by the 1880s and especially the 1890s, capital and commerce were already making their impact felt on the class structure of the countryside", but this analysis suggests that it was not until the Lands Act of 1913 that the restructuring was complete. (11) Even in the Transvaal, the notables were behaving much as the gentry to the South well before Union (12), and afterwards developed into the most prominent agricultural capitalists of the country, as the "maize triangle" dominated the countryside of the southern Transvaal.

The emergence of the gentry in any particular region of southern Africa can be dated to the that moment when the class relations in the countryside are restructured so as to enable the production of cash crops on a fairly extensive scale under the immediate control of the landowner (or perhaps his representative). This is in contradistinction to two other methods of exploiting the territory that the whites had conquered from the Africans. First, there was the possibility that the whites would themselves indulge in what was effectively subsistence agriculture and pastoralism only peripherally bound to the market. This was a matter of circumstance rather than choice, a fact which probably led to the harsh exploitation of their mainly Khoisan labourers. (13) The second mode of exploitation was based on the extraction of surplus from African peasants. This was particularly the case in the northern provinces, rather than the Cape, where free smallholders were far more commonly found. Indeed, the merchants who took up a liberal stance opposed to that of the gentry were largely those whose business interest tied them to the African smallholders, above all in the Ciskei. (14)

The shift to the more "capitalist" forms of agriculture did not necessarily coincide with the development of a rural proletariat, if by this exclusively wage labourers are meant. Various forms of labour tenancy certainly post-dated the emergence of the gentry. Slavery, too, could exist with capitalist farming as I have defined it, perhaps in the inboekselingen system of the Afrikaner republics (15), and certainly in the classic colonial form of the Cape before 1834. Although a certain amount of readjustment was needed, there is nothing to suggest that there was a major restructuring of class relations after emancipation. (16) As I will be arguing below, by then the pre-eminence of the gentry within Cape society had been established. Only with the industrialization of South Africa was this system challenged, and even then the gentry were able to maintain their power in the countryside. To this day, for instance, there is no sign of an agricultural workers' trade union in South Africa.

Clearly, the gentry in other parts of South Africa (with the partial exception of Natal) derive from that of the Cape Colony and, initially, of its old core area, the south-west Cape. Very often, rich farmers in the Eastern Cape and the Free State, for instance, were lineal descendants of Swartland or Boland gentry who were able to buy into sheep farms, most probably as a result of greater reserves of capital, or credit-worthiness. It would therefore seem necessary to determine when the gentry were able to achieve something approaching hegemony within the Cape Colony.

There would seem to be two inter-related but distinguishable aspects of this question. One is loosely political, referring to the date at which the gentry came to achieve a relatively high degree of influence over the lower organs of government, particularly in the countryside, and were able to transmit some of the power so gained through to the central government, over whose decision-making processes they gained considerable influence, if not direct power. This is a process which it is difficult to date with any precision. Clearly, it long pre-dated the establishment of Parliamentary assemblies and government (in 1854 and 1872, respectively), even though the establishment of these institutions was long a goal of the gentry (though their enthusiasm was perhaps somewhat tempered by the fear, ultimately unwarranted, that they would be dominated by the English-speaking Cape). On the other hand, it is not justified to push the process back too close to the foundation of the colony. In this context it is important to make a distinction between the degree of power which a farm owner had over his labourers, which was clearly very considerable as long as they remained slaves - and long after - and what which the slave-owning group had with respect to the central government, which was probably less than in any other contemporary slave-owning colony. (17) There is no indication that the power of the

Dutch East India Company (VOC) was in any way diminished, or indeed seriously threatened, at the Cape until well into the eighteenth century, once it had ridden out the storms consequent on the dismissal of Willem Adriaan van der Stel. (18) Only with the Patriot movement of the 1780s were the gentry able to challenge the control of the Company officials who had ruled the Cape for over a hundred years, and only with the fall of the Dutch East India Company and the conquest of the Cape by the British did they become fully equal partners in the running of the Cape Colony.

It should be stressed that this periodization is somewhat hypothetical, as is no doubt inevitable with such a loose concept as hegemony or even control. Nevertheless, there is considerable circumstantial evidence that such a shift did take place. First, the government officials were increasingly drawn from the rural farming community, and remained fully receptive to its wishes. For the major period of VOC rule this was not the case. Company officials were in theory not allowed to own farms and, while undoubtedly some of them continued to do so even after Willem Adriaan van der Stel and his clientele had been forced to sell up, they could do so only by subterfuge. (19) Under the British, in contrast, the Fiscaal, the leading law officer of the colony, was one of the Cape's richest farmers. (20) Equally significantly, Cape officialdom ceased to be a closed group, recruiting its new members from Europe but not from outside its own network at the Cape. In 1779, for instance, of the 94 officials employed in the central administration at Cape Town, 48 had been born at the Cape, but they were all the sons of former VOC officials. (21) The contrast with the period some twenty-five years later, as described by Freund, is striking. In his view, which seems thoroughly justified, although he incorrectly projects it too far back into the past, the Cape Town officials "were not a distinct economic class" but "blended naturally into the wealthy farming families of the western Cape". By the first decade of the century there were rich families - he names the Van Reenens and the Cloetes - in which "some members were farmers while others were officials", and many of the other richest members of the gentry were connected by various marriage alliances to these officials. The officials functioned as the political link between the government and the white farming community, since they tended to remain in office no matter which newly arrived European group was in power. Thus not only did they provide a degree of continuity across the troubled period when the vicissitudes of war gave the Cape four different governments within a decade and a half, but also they were able to incorporate the newcomers, whether British or Batavian, to the gentry in a way which would have been abhorrent for the officials of the VOC in the mid-eighteenth century. (22)

What was true for the central administration was even more the case for the district administrations. In the last years of the eighteenth century the heemraden and district administrations in general substantially increased their power vis-à-vis the central government, gaining the right to handle far more substantial court cases than hitherto. (23) At the same time they maintained their grasp on the distribution of land, such an important counter in the system of control on the South African countryside. (24) This power, moreover, was clearly in the hands of the richest farmers within the districts, who formed the rural elite in each of the districts and monopolized the positions of authority within the civil - and indeed military and ecclesiastical - administration. The landdrost had relatively little freedom of action should he wish to work against these dominant local notables, but normally and increasingly the appointed magistrates and the gentry accommodated each other's interests for the control and prosperity of the countryside. As Freund put it:

The landdrost administered from a weak position and the most successful landdrosten, such as Faure and Van der Riet, although sometimes able to maintain an independent point of view, had to know very well how to accommodate local interests. (25)

It would be a gross exaggeration to suggest that these processes represented a capture of the state by the gentry. Particularly a colonial administration, responsible to and taking orders from Amsterdam or London, could not allow itself to become subservient to one particular interest group within the colony,

be it ever so crucial for political control and economic prosperity. Rather, the interpenetration of gentry and official groups gave the rich farmers much of what they needed at the local level, in terms of control over labour, over land and over public works. This did not entail that the economic measures promulgated from Cape Town or London with regard, for instance, to customs duties, were always to their liking, nor did it mean that there were not various efforts inspired by the philanthropic movements within and outside South Africa to change the nature of the relationship between the gentry and their labourers. Nevertheless, the degree of gentry power where it really mattered, in the districts of Stellenbosch, Drakenstein, Tulbagh or Swellendam, meant that these efforts would without difficulty be turned from their intended path.

This shift in the power relations within the Cape Colony was to a certain extent signalled by the outbreak of the Patriot movement around 1780. As will be argued later in this paper, the ideology of this movement was in great part a reflection of the interests of the gentry, and it found its greatest support in the country districts of the south-west Cape. In a sense, indeed, the very fact of the movement shows how far power relations had shifted. Earlier in the century, such a challenge to the authorities of the VOC, by a very high proportion of the most important in the colony, would have been inconceivable.

As always in historical explanation, the first vital question in the explanation of this shift, if it is admitted that it occurred at a particular moment, is to explain why it was at just that time that it occurred. In this case, it is clear that the most important structural cause was a changed balance of economic clout between the gentry and the Dutch East India Company. It would, of course, be too economic to ascribe this transformation entirely to the combination of an increasingly unprofitable and financially weakened VOC and the cumulative effects of the increasing prosperity of the Cape farming community. Nevertheless, it is clear that without this combination of circumstances the struggle for gentry participation in the running of the colony would have taken an entirely different form, if it had occurred at all. The VOC, as an institution, had lost confidence; the gentry, as a class, had gained it, and indeed for the first time were able to see themselves as a distinct and powerful group.

The decline in the fortunes of the Dutch East India Company can be clearly seen from the basic figures of its income and expenditure. Until 1780 there was never a decade in which the revenue it received from the sale of its products in Europe was less than the total cost of its equipage, which represented virtually all its costs, including the financing of its running losses within Asia. Thereafter, in contrast, whereas its expenditure over the period 1780-1795 was f 299 million, its income was no more than f 207 million. In other words, the former exceeded the latter by 44 per cent. (26) Moreover, the Cape was, as it had always been, one of the significant contributors to the total deficit, making a loss of over f 300,000 a year. Throughout the 1780s major efforts were made to reduce this sum, but largely without result. (27) The combination of the long-term ossification of the Company's decision structures, the costs of territorial rule in the East and the increasing competition from English, Danish and Chinese merchants, with the shocks of the fourth Anglo-Dutch war (1780-84), had driven the VOC to the point of bankruptcy (28), so that the old certainties on the relationship between the company and its subjects could no longer hold.

While the impending fall of the VOC has been a well recognized feature of late eighteenth century history (29), it has not been usual for historians to take the "rise of the gentry" as a main theme for the history of the Cape countryside during that period. To do so requires a major revision of the accepted, or at least traditional, view of the Cape economy under the VOC. It is more normal to see the farmers of the wheat and wine districts of the south-west Cape as debt-ridden, inefficient operators, only able to make a reasonable living if they could get their hands on one of the exceedingly lucrative revenue leases for the sale of wine or meat. They suffered from the creeping disease known as "overproduction", so that, far too often, their wine had to be poured away down the rivers and their wheat left to rot in the barns, because the price it would fetch in Cape Town would not cover the cost of transporting it there. The dynamic sector of the Cape economy was in the interior,

among the trekboers. Even that was not over-dynamic, since the advantages of this way of life are seen to lie in the rewards of subsistence farming and stock-raising in providing a higher standard of living for the same investment, and not in the cash rewards that could be gained from running cattle and sheep on the Karroo, the Camdeboo or the Zuurveld. (30)

Clearly, to challenge this view requires a full-scale reinterpretation of the Cape economy in terms of its relation to the world economy as represented by what was still one of the two premier capitalist organizations of the time, the Dutch East India Company. This is not the place to do that in detail, especially as the full analysis requires the lengthy exposition of trustworthy (and other) statistics. The basic points must be summarized, however. (31)

First, at least from the middle of the eighteenth century, the agricultural sector of the Cape economy continuously expanded. To take the simplest measure of this expansion, the production of wine and - although to demonstrate this requires considerable ingenuity, with decreasingly reliable statistics - grain increased without halt, as indeed did the colony's holdings of stock. (This point, though, is of less immediate relevance to the present argument.) For instance, in 1720 there were rather over two million vines in the colony, in 1750 just under four million, and in 1790 about nine and a half million. Considering there is also evidence that the productivity of the vines also increased during the century, the increase in wine production can be seen to be very considerable. As regards wheat, corrected figures for production, which take into account the farmers' growing unwillingness to declare their harvest correctly, show that around 1720 about eighteen thousand muid wheat were harvested a year, around 1750 thirty thousand, and around 1790 over fifty-five thousand. (32) This growth naturally occasionally produced gluts, since the market was of a finite size, even though grain in particular was exported in fair quantities to the east and to Europe from the middle of the century. Nevertheless, these gluts were far rarer than is generally envisaged, and, when there was a sudden increase in demand, with the arrival of a large foreign fleet or the stationing of an increased garrison in time of war, for instance, grain was frequently in short supply. (33) On one occasion, a million pounds of wheat had to be imported from the United States to cover a threatening shortfall. (34) In the short term, perfect articulation of supply and demand is evidently impossible with such products, which are subject to the vagaries of the weather and for which production decisions have to be made well in advance of the moment of marketing. (35) In the not all too long term, in contrast, the evidence would seem to suggest that the necessary adjustments of supply and demand were made with relatively great efficiency.

In a sense, the very fact of agricultural expansion is evidence for this. Even if Leonard Guelke (36) is right to suggest that the extent of expansion of the pastoral economy derived from the lack of an alternative providing a reasonable level of existence for those with little capital, nevertheless sufficient capital was clearly being generated within South Africa (37) to allow continual investment in agriculture. (38) Maybe the profits so gained were not spectacular, and maybe, had it been possible to transfer funds out of Cape Colony with any ease, the degree of expansion would not have been so rapid, and the rate of profit within the country consequently higher. (39) All the same, there was sufficient money to be earned from wine and wheat farming for these two activities to be seen, in the long term, as worth expanding.

Although farming was very largely able to finance its own expansion, it should be pointed out that hard currency - foreign exchange as it were - was necessary to enable the planting of vineyards and the growing of greater acreages of wheat. In the first place, tools, ploughs and other equipment had to be imported, or, if they were not, at least the raw materials had to be, and then made up by the increasing number of artisans in Cape Town and the south-west Cape countryside. No iron or other metal was smelted in the Cape colony until well into the nineteenth century. Secondly, and more importantly, labour had to be imported. Even though the decline of the Khoisan population may not have been as great as has previously been thought (40), it would be vain to argue that it actually grew during the eighteenth century. Of course, increasing numbers of Khoisan were imported into

the colonial labour process, but very many of these were forced to take service with the frontier trekboers. To a very large extent, the expansion of agricultural production for the Cape market was possible only because of the ready supply of slave labour. This had to be imported and paid for. The Cape slave population was in no sense self-reproducing, except perhaps in the last years of slavery. Rather, the indications are clear that, without the continual topping up of the slave trade, the slave population of the Cape would have declined, as indeed it did after 1807. In the eighteenth century, the salient features of the Cape slave population, in demographic terms, were the low fertility of the women, at least compared to that of the Cape whites, very possibly a high death rate (41), and, above all, a wild imbalance in the sex ratio. No group which had 405 men for every hundred women, as the burgher-owned Cape slaves did in 1749, could possibly remain constant over a long period without considerable immigration - in this case, of course, the forced immigration of the slave trade.

Nevertheless, the slave population of the Cape grew at an average rate of 2.47 per cent per annum over the period 1720 to 1790. (42) Moreover, the rate of growth was, if anything, higher in the latter part of the century. Over the period 1764-8 to 1784-8, the annual rate of growth was 2.82 per cent per annum. This was not an exclusively urban phenomenon. Over the same period slave numbers in the agricultural districts of Stellenbosch and Drakenstein increased by 3.24 per cent per annum. Clearly, the growing of grain and grapes allowed for continued investment in labour - by far the most important "commodity" required in the production process of these goods - to step up the further growing of these crops. In the long term, despite the complaints of farmers who, as always, considered themselves disadvantaged by government marketing and taxation policies, this growth is not consistent with a view of Cape agriculture that sees it recurrently glutting an insufficient market. Clearly, taken as a whole, the agricultural sector of the Cape economy was sufficiently prosperous and profitable to make continued investment and expansion viable and attractive.

Further evidence for this growth in prosperity can be found in the physical structure of the Cape farms. Only in the latter part of the eighteenth century was there any significant building in Cape farmhouses - or, rather, it was from this period that they were rebuilt with considerable luxury and at great expense. Those symbols of the South African gentry, the Cape Dutch farmhouses, date almost exclusively from the period 1770 to 1820. (43) With their complicated plaster-work and luxuriously timbered yellowwood ceilings, to say nothing of the furniture they contain, these houses in themselves witness the fact that their owners, the wine farmers of the south-west Cape, were doing well enough to create their own imitation of French chateaux, even if it was to be some time before their wine came to approach that of Europe.

Visitors to the Cape around 1780 certainly described the life of these farmers in glowing terms. S. P. van Braam wrote that he had seen "a magnificence which I am certain in general can be found in no other colony, nor even in the richest cities of any country in the world". (44) The Commissioner Hendrik Breton, who was at the Cape in 1783, wrote that he had seen unequalled prosperity at the Cape and that "on various farms, that I expressly visited, I found a far from simple life, and nothing except signs of prosperity, to the extent that, in addition to splendour and magnificence in clothes and carriages, the houses are filled with elegant furniture and the tables decked with silverware and served by tidily clothed slaves". This was possible, to a certain extent, because of the boom caused by the very war that did so much to reduce the Company to bankruptcy, but it was also a sign of the long-term growth in wealth of the richer Cape farmers. (45)

Neither Van Braam nor Breton was a fully impartial witness, it is true. Both were concerned to blacken the reputation of the Cape farmers and show how unreasonable the charges of the Cape patriots were. Nevertheless, that does not make their testimony valueless, especially as the Patriots themselves, probably the originators of the overproduction myth of the eighteenth century Cape economy, did not present any convincing evidence of their plight. In their petition of 1779 - before, it should be noted, the outbreak of the war that was so valuable to the Cape -

they gave as an example of the problems caused by the Cape marketing system the glut of 1757. (46) It is reasonable to assume that, had there been a similar crisis year since then, they would have brought it to the notice of the Heren XVII. A disease which had not returned for twenty-two years can scarcely be thought endemic.

Naturally this new prosperity was not spread evenly throughout the colony. In order to benefit from it, a man or woman needed a fairly considerable initial base. It was generally the well established farmers who were able to expand their operations. While clear proof of this is as yet lacking, it can be shown that the same families remained active as wine farmers throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Various surnames recur with great regularity in all the opgaaf lists. Of the 53 families (47) in which at least one member owned 10,000 or more vines in 1731 in Stellenbosch and Drakenstein districts, 29 still did in 1752, 22 in 1782 and as many as 19 in 1825. (48) Of the 70 families which fulfilled the same condition in 1752, 38 were still present in 1782 and 30 around 1825; of the 83 in 1782, 55 could still be found 43 years later. Moreover, the surviving families were in general among the most significant. In 1825 (49), the 19 families which had been present in every year since 1731, which were investigated, had between them 41 per cent of the total vines in the colony and formed 43 per cent of all those farmers who had 20,000 or more vines.

It is very difficult to know precisely how much weight should be put on these figures, especially as there seem to be no standard tables with which they can be compared and the continual expansion of wine farming allowed families to maintain themselves in ways that would have been impossible in a contracting industry. On the other hand, prima facie they would seem to be a strong argument for a relatively high degree of continuity within the most important sector of Cape agriculture. The circulation of the Cape farming elite cannot have been as rapid as has sometimes (50) been claimed.

In part because of this continuity within the various leading gentry families, the division of wealth within the gentry did not become extreme. This can best be measured in terms of slave holdings, since slaves were at once the best index of a farmer's productive capacity, an important luxury, and a symbol of wealth. Only one farmer in the history of the colony, so far as I know, admitted to having more than one hundred slaves. This was Martin Melck, who had eleven farms and was also the lessee of the Cape wine franchise for many years. (51) But Melck, the Cloetes of Constantia and their fellow plutocrats remained very exceptional within the Cape context, perhaps as a result of partible Roman-Dutch inheritance law which mitigated against the maintenance of large estates over the generations. Rather, as is shown in Table I, which gives slave-holding figures for the two major agricultural districts, there was a clear tendency for the numbers of middle-level farmers to increase throughout the eighteenth century, both in absolute terms and as a proportion of the total number of slave owners. The Cape gentry consisted of a relatively undifferentiated broad mass of farmers, rather than a small elite with whom it would have been far easier for the VOC to do deals. There was, of course, a small group of very rich contractors, particularly for the wine and meat franchises, but their influence became less as the century wore on, as they became submerged in the growing tide of substantial, but not exceptionally rich, farmers. In South Africa, as elsewhere, the "rise of the gentry" also entailed "the decline of the aristocracy".

On the other hand, it is clear that at a very local level the substantial farmers formed a cohesive and dominant group. The most extreme example of this is undoubtedly the immediate neighbourhood of Stellenbosch. Around 1806, for instance, 478 of the 628 slaves in and around the village were owned by no more than eleven households out of a total white population of 330. It was this small group which claimed for itself the positions of heemraden, church deacons, officers in the militia, and so forth. (52) It should be noted that very local groupings cannot be easily identified earlier in the colony's history - without major effort that is now slowly proceeding - because the eighteenth century opgaaf rolls do not give place of residence except in terms of the exceedingly large districts. Equivalent cliques, though not as powerful or wealthy, were to be found throughout the Boland and the Swartland. It was the conglomerate of these groups, which merged into the richer stock-breeders of, for instance, the Bokkeveld or Swellendam, that made up the Cape gentry.

It is against this background that the Cape Patriot movement of the 1780s and 1790s developed. It would, of course, be vain to suggest that the movement itself was purely the result of the economic changes that occurred during the latter decades of the century. On the one hand, the immediate trigger for the explosion of political feeling was the high-handed action of the Fiscaal against one particular Burgher, Carel Hendrik Buitendag.(53) On the other hand, overseas events did much to impel the Kapenaars into action.

The revolt of the thirteen colonies on the North American coast may have served as an example for both the Netherlands and its dependencies (54), while from 1781 on the Patriots at the Cape were able to gain sustenance from those Dutch politicians and populists who were challenging the authority of the Prince of Orange. (55) As opperbewindhebber (chief director) of the VOC, the Prince was as much the target of the Cape action as of that in the Netherlands, and various Dutch patriots were greatly concerned with the problems of the Dutch colonial empire and its ruling companies. (56) Nevertheless, as it developed, the Cape Patriot movement became increasingly concerned with the local interests of the Colony as they affected the gentry. The initial pamphlets spread around Cape Town in 1778 might have derived their arguments from the ideas of the enlightenment and in particular from the anti-Orangist strain within Dutch political thought. Once the movement got organized, however, politics drew their inspiration, as always, from the major issues of local society, in particular the division of wealth.

This orientation is particularly clear in the Burgher memorial of 1779, which was drawn up by four representatives of the Cape Burghers, Jacobus van Reenen, Barend Jacob Artoys, Tielman Roos and Nicholaas Godfried Heyns. These four men, who were to present the memorial to the Heren XVII in Holland, had been chosen by the three Burgerraden of Cape Town and the four Heemraden of Stellenbosch and Drakenstein as the representatives of 404 other burghers who, presumably, subscribed to its tenets. It can thus be taken as representing the views of a large proportion of Cape burghers. Somewhat over 15 per cent of the Cape's free adult males (excluding those in service of the VOC and the Khoisan) associated themselves with it. (57)

After a somewhat unconvincing attempt to portray the Cape economy as being in desperate straits, the memorial consisted of two parts, a vehement attack on the activities of various Company officials and a list of suggestions for the better organization of the colony. The main charges against the officials were two-fold. On the one hand were attacks upon the stakes of the burghers. Particularly, the Fiscal, Mr W. C. Boers, and the secretary of the Council of Policy, O. M. Bergh, were accused of standing upon their own dignity to an unwarranted extent and of meting out summary and unjustified punishments to burghers for piffling offences. Implicit in these charges is a claim by the burghers to treatment equivalent with the Company officials. In a muted fashion they were attacking the hierarchical system of the colony and demanding a position of equivalence for themselves. No longer would they acquiesce in being dutiful subordinates to the regenten of the VOC.

More important were the burghers' attacks on the corruption and speculation of the officials. Throughout the colony's history there had been complaints that members of the government disobeyed the Heren XVII's prohibition against private trade and the ownership of land and that the perquisites that the officials engrossed were exorbitantly high. (58) Whether matters got worse during the 1770s is debatable. Theal, for instance, claimed that Ryk Tulbagh, the governor who had died in 1771, "had kept a watchful eye on every official, and allowed no one to overstep the directions concerning farming and trading, or to take a fee that he was not entitled to". Van Plettenberg, who succeeded him, in contrast is said to have "permitted his subordinates to do almost as they chose. The result was a condition of affairs in which no transaction with government could be carried out without bribery, in which many of the officials farmed and traded openly and the colonists generally became discontented".(59) Nevertheless, Tulbagh himself died an exceedingly wealthy man, which could in no way have been derived in any large measure from his salary. (60) Perhaps matters had got laxer under Van Plettenberg. Certainly they had got more organized. There were no longer any complaints, as there had been seventy years earlier, that the officials were monopolizing production and out-farming the settlers. The middle-sized wine and

wheat farms of the south-west Cape were by now far too efficient and well established for that to have been feasible. Rather, the major complaints that were made were against the two trading firms, Cruywagen and Kie and Le Febre and Kie, which both had several high officials among the partners and which dominated the import trade, making large profits as a result of their oligopolist position. To a certain extent these attacks came from those of the Patriots who were themselves Cape Town merchants, as the Patriot movement was never an exclusively gentry phenomenon. (61) Against this, the farmers realized that the two firms kept the prices for the imported goods they were increasingly buying at a higher level than would have been the case given a liberalization of trade. At that level, the interests of the gentry and the Cape merchants coincided, while at the same time the buoyant agricultural class was attempting to control its own marketing.

The same coincidence of interest can be seen in the demands that the Patriots made for the reorganization of the colony. Several of the clauses related to matters exclusively affecting the Capetonians. These included complaints about illegal trading by small stall-holders on the beach of Table Bay and by the various Chinese and Javanese exiles who had been banned to the Cape and were said to be behind much slave theft. Others were of more general nature, such as the various measures to reduce the arbitrariness of Cape justice and generally to cheapen it. The demands for free trade and for the right of Kapenaars to run their own ships to the East and to Holland would also benefit both townsmen and farmers, especially as these ships would largely export agricultural products and import slave labour, which, since it was intended to trade with Madagascar and Zanzibar, would largely be used in the countryside. (62) In this class of demand, the most important was that the Burghers might be allowed to punish their own slaves "without being allowed to tyrannise them", that the costs of chaining or gaoling a slave might be reduced. The monopoly of the legal use of force, even inflicted by a master on his own slave, had long been one of the bulwarks of Company rule. (63) In challenging it, the burghers were making a very real claim for co-dominance in the most vital aspect of colonial society, its labour relations.

More clearly to the advantage of the gentry were demands that the Company be driven out of its hinge position in the buying of grain and wine, especially that destined for export. In this way the gentry hoped to be able to force up the price of these two products since the VOC always tended to derive the maximum profits from these goods by fixing the prices at the lowest practicable level. At the same time the rationalization of the land policy of the Cape which the memorial proposed could only have led to even more land being engrossed by the wealthier farmers of the Cape.

One notable absence from this memorial is any mention whatsoever of the meat market or the pagt, much hated by the interior stock farmers. (64) This was because there were few, if any, of the interior farmers represented in the Patriot movement. Their political upsurge would take a different, more violent and in some ways more radical course in the 1790s. (65) Moreover, one of the burgher representatives who composed the memorial, Jacobus van Reenen, had himself made a fortune as meat pagter, and his son now held that lucrative contract. (66) The Patriots were always cool-headed enough not to attack their own interests.

That these opinions were general throughout the Cape farming population can be seen from a request that was submitted to the Council of Policy in February 1784 by 14 of the most substantial Cape farmers. (67) They had always maintained their distance from the Patriots, probably because they felt the need to keep their lines of communication open to a government which could still dispose of many favours. Their memorial was thus free of the acerbity of the Patriots' demands, while in any case gentry opinions had by this stage been somewhat tempered by the economic boom of the early 1780s. Nevertheless, the signatories of the 1784 memorial (68), trying to protect themselves against the effects of the slump they expected to follow the ending of the War, made economic demands that were very largely similar to those of the Patriots, although they were far more concerned to stress the poverty in which the stock boers of the interior lived. The constitution that was suitable when the Cape was no more than a refreshment station would no longer serve, they believed, so that overseas trade among the burghers now had to be allowed.

The other demands of the Patriots were largely political, as they demanded far greater responsibilities for the Burgher Raad, and that that body be made elective. As such, they were not shared by the more conciliatory 1784 signatories. Nor were they met. De Mist had plans to allow elections to the consultative bodies he set up in 1804, but these were quietly dropped and the high Tory governors of the Cape from 1806 on were glad to retain the appointments to consultative organs in their own hands. (69) Only in 1836 were there elective municipal boards and in 1854 a representative assembly in which gentry were fully represented.

This assembly replaced a Legislative Council in which the unofficial majority was selected by the Governor "out of the chief landed proprietors and principal merchants of the colony". (70) In a sense this symbolized the new alliance that ran the Cape after 1800. Once its rulers had ceased to be merchants themselves, and to use the powers of office to ensure their own and their Company's advantage, the mercantile elite saw that their own prosperity depended in large measure on the well being of agricultural capital and there was no sign of major conflict between the producers and the distributors. (71) Both farmers and traders became shareholders in the Cape country banks, set up after 1836. (72) Moreover, the government itself had every interest in supporting the wine producers. In 1825 Lord Charles Somerset, as authoritarian a governor as any in the Cape's history, was prepared to inaugurate a Select Committee for the improvement of Cape wines and to chair the inaugural meeting. (73) Moreover, except for those measures that were forced on them from London, the Cape government did nothing to disturb the pattern of labour relations that had been established so advantageously for the Cape gentry. The Commissioners of Enquiry were surely right when they wrote, in 1826, that "there is nothing in the character or in the general conduct of the body of the people of this colony that implies a spirit of disaffection to the government". (74) Informal, tacit bargains had been struck which meant that the Cape government accepted the influence of the Cape gentry. Later this was transformed into the formal co-dominance that has lasted, more or less, ever since.

-----oOo-----

Notes

- (1) I am being deliberately vague as to the nature of these groups and their relation to one another. Nevertheless, whatever position is taken in the current debate on the fractionality of South African capital, my argument, I believe, holds.
- (2) I do not know what proportion of "white" farming land is currently owned by corporate companies as agribusiness, or as diversification of investment, or the extent to which there are still speculative land companies of importance. On the other hand, in 1954, it was estimated that 20 per cent of "white" farms had no whites living on them. With the recent squeeze on labour tenants, this is no doubt no longer the case. See Francis Wilson, "Farming, 1866-1966", in M. Wilson and L. M. Thompson (eds), The Oxford History of South Africa, 2 vols (Oxford, 1968-71), II, p. 105.
- (3) Stanley Trapido, "South Africa in a comparative study of industrialisation", Journal of Development Studies, VII (1971).
- (4) Mike Morris, Apartheid, Agriculture and the State: farm labour question, SALDRU working paper 8 (Cape Town, 1977).
- (5) L. M. Thompson, The Unification of South Africa, 1902-1910 (Oxford, 1960), pp. 336-48.
- (6) T. R. H. Davenport, The Afrikaner Bond (1880-1911) (Cape Town, 1966).

- (7) Stanley Trapido, "Liberalism in the Cape in the 19th and 20th centuries", The Societies of Southern Africa in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (henceforth CSP), Vol. 4 (London, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, 1973).
- (8) Proceedings of a public meeting held in Cape Town of 16 July 1831 to take into consideration the State of the Wine Trade, Commerce, Agriculture and the Want of a Legislative Assembly (Cape Town, 1831), p. 28.
- (9) Colin Bundy, The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry (London, 1979), Ch. 6; Henry Slater, "Land, Labour and Capitalism in Natal: the Natal Land and Colonisation Company, 1860-1948", JAH, XVI (1975).
- (10) Robert Ross, Adam Kok's Griquas: a study in the development of stratification in South Africa (Cambridge, 1976), Chs. 6 and 7.
- (11) Tim Keegan, "The Restructuring of Agrarian Class Relations in a Colonial Economy: the Orange River Colony, 1902-1910", JSAS, V (1979), p. 255.
- (12) Stanley Trapido, "Landlord and Tenant in a Colonial Economy: the Transvaal 1880-1910", JSAS, V (1979), pp. 26-58; Richard Cornwell, "Land and Politics in the Transvaal in the 1880s", CSP, 4 (1973).
- (13) In this interpretation, I differ from that made by Leonard Guelke. See his "The early European settlement of South Africa, 1652-1779", University of Toronto PhD thesis, 1974, "Frontier settlement in Early Dutch South Africa", Annals of the Association of American Geographers, 66 (1976), pp. 25-42, his debate with William Norton in ibid., 67 (1977), pp. 463-7, and "The White Settlers, 1652-1780" in Richard Elphick and Herman Giliomee (eds), The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1820 (Cape Town and London, 1979), pp. 41-74. Against this, see my "Capitalism, Expansion and Incorporation on the South African frontier" in H. Lamar and L. M. Thompson (eds), The Frontier in History: comparative perspectives (New Haven and London, 1981). The research of Susie Newton-King on Graaff-Reinet district should do much to clear up problems on the relations between subsistence pastoralism, market orientation and labour conditions. See also V. C. Malherbe, "Diversification and Mobility of Khoikhoi Labour in the Cape Colony, 1795-1820", MA thesis, University of Cape Town, 1978.
- (14) Cf Trapido, "Landlord and Tenant"; Trapido, "Liberalism"; and Bundy, Rise and Fall.
- (15) Stanley Trapido, "Aspects of the Transition from Slavery to Serfdom: the South African Republic, 1842-1902", CSP, 6 (1976), pp. 25-7; Keegan, "Restructuring", pp. 235-6.
- (16) J. S. Marais, The Cape Coloured People, 1652-1937 (London, 1939), pp. 179-215, is still the best analysis of a neglected episode.
- (17) I argue this in "The Rule of Law at the Cape of Good Hope in the eighteenth century", Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, IX, 1 (1980), 5-16.
- (18) Gerrit Schutte argues fairly convincingly that this dismissal had little long-term effect. See his "Company and Colonist at the Cape", in Elphick and Giliomee, Shaping, pp. 192-6.
- (19) For the operations of J. H. Blankenberg in this respect, see Cape Archives, MOOC 14/36/ii.
- (20) William B. Freund, "Society and Government in Dutch South Africa: the Cape and the Batavians, 1803-6", PhD Yale (1971), p. 87. The father of W. W. van Rijnveld, the man in question, was already a large farmer under the VOC, but was then the butt of the gentry, not their ally: see C. Beyers, Die Kaapse Patriotte gedurende die laatste Kwart van die achttiende eeu en die voortlewing van hul denkbeeld, 2nd ed (Pretoria, 1967), p. 45.
- (21) Schutte, "Company and Colonist", p. 187.
- (22) Freund, "Society and Government", p. 88.
- (23) P. J. Venter, "Landdroos and Heemrade (1682-1827)", Archives Yearbook for South African History, III, 2 (1940), pp. 22-9.
- (24) Ibid., pp. 70-8.
- (25) Freund, "Society and Government", pp. 40, 88.
- (26) F. S. Gaastra, "The VOC in Azië, 1680-1795", in Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden, IX (Bussum, 1980), p. 463.

- (27) See in particular the papers in Algemeen Rijksarchief, Den Haag, VOC 4347. Also A. L. Geyer, Das Wirtschaftliche System der Niederlandischen Ost-Indischen Kompanie am Kap der Guten Hoffnung, 1785-1795 (Munich and Berlin, 1923), pp. 9-38.
- (28) Johan de Vries, De economische achteruitgang der Republiek in de achttiende eeuw (Leiden, 1968), p. 179.
- (29) Though perhaps not sufficiently by all South African historians, who are frequently too little aware of the international context within which that country's history has been played out.
- (30) This interpretation of the Cape economy as a whole derived from S. D. Neumark, Economic Influences on the South African Frontier, 1652-1836 (Stanford, 1956). Guelke's criticisms (cited in note 13 above) only reinforce Neumark's "frontier-centric" view.
- (31) This derives from as yet uncompleted work being carried out in Leiden by Dr P. van Duin and myself.
- (32) These figures have been derived from the opgaaf rolls (tax assessments) in the Algemeen Rijksarchief. The latter two (wheat only) have been constructed by multiplying the reported figures by a factor (1.5 in the former case, 3 in the latter), which is an estimate of the degree to which the opgaaf rolls can be considered untruthful. These factors are largely based on estimates of the requirements of the Cape market. They cannot be precisely correct but, given the growth of that market, and the massive jump in recorded figures after 1795, when the opgaaf rolls became, at least temporarily, more accurate, the general trend must have been of that order. See also J. H. D. Schreuder, "Die geskiedenis van ons graanbou (1752-1795)", MA, Stellenbosch (1948), and D. J. van Zyl, "Die geskiedenis van graanbou aan die Kaap, 1795-1806", AYB, 1968, I.
- (33) This is a major theme in Van Zyl, "Graanbou".
- (34) See the contract in ARA, VOC 4315, 576.
- (35) cf G. R. Hawke, Economics for Historians (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 117-119. It is notable that the sector where an increase in price resulted in a substantial increase in supply, indicative of supply elasticity or, in other words, "overproduction", was meat. Even this may have resulted in part from a shift away from the sale of oxen as draught animals to their sale as meat.
- (36) See the various works cited above, note 13.
- (37) There is no evidence of any major investment in South African agriculture by foreign capitalists in this period.
- (38) As we have seen (footnote 19 above), even Company officials, forbidden by law to own farms at the Cape, would occasionally buy agricultural land, putting in a relative as the shadow owner, even though they, more than anyone else, were able to send their money overseas and invest it there.
- (39) In his An Account of Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa in the Years 1797 and 1798, 2 vols (London, 1801-4), II, pp 406-10, John Barrow argues that very low returns on investment were made in the grain and, particularly, wine sectors. The reason for this is, very largely, the sum the farmers had to pay as interest on their capital. On the other hand, if much of the wine farming expansion was self-financing and if it was exceedingly difficult for South African capitalists to invest outside the colony - both of which suppositions seem largely to be true - then the problems Barrow's calculations present for the argument of this paper are largely nullified.
- (40) Robert Ross, "Smallpox at the Cape in the eighteenth century" in African Historical Demography (Edinburgh, 1977), pp 416-428. The argument that the Khoikhoi disappeared under the impact of western diseases was developed early in the nineteenth century in an attempt to whitewash the practices of South African colonialism. See Richard Elphick, Kraal and Castle: Khoikhoi and the Founding of White South Africa (New Haven and London, 1977), p. 236.
- (41) This is clear for the slaves owned by the VOC but, living as they did in the exceedingly unhealthy conditions of the Company slave lodge, they were certainly not representative of the colony as a whole. It is to be hoped both that the demography of the Company's slave lodge (for which "family reconstitution" is

- possible) and the much more significant, but far more elusive, developments among privately owned slaves will be worked out in the next few years. In the meantime, see James C. Armstrong, "The slaves, 1652-1795", in Elphick and Giliomee, Shaping, pp. 87-8, 94-5.
- (42) In fact, for the averages of the periods 1719- 3 and 1789-93.
- (43) H. Fransen and M. A. Cook, Early Building of the Cape, 2nd revised edition (Cape Town, 1980). For analogous use of this sort of information, see W. G. Hoskins, "The rebuilding of rural England, 1570-1640", Past and Present, IV (1954). See also the comment of C. de Jong, Reizen naar de Kaap de Goede Hoop ... 1791-1797 (Harlem, 1802), p. 139: "Het bouwen is hier niet slechts een liefhebberij, het is een drift, een dolheid, een besmettelijke razernij, die meest alle mensen heeft aangetast."
- (44) Cited in S. D. Naude, "Willem Cornelis Boers", AYB (1950), II, p. 413.
- (45) Cited in ibid., p. 414.
- (46) Beyers, Kaapse Patriotte, pp. 33-4.
- (47) In this context, by "family" I mean those people who have the same surname.
- (48) For 1825, the lower limit for inclusion was the ownership of 20,000 vines. The sources for these statements are the opgaaf rolls for the relevant years in the Cape Archives, as prepared for computer analysis by Hans Heese, and D. J. van Zyl, Kaapse Wyn en Brandewyn, 1795-1860 (Cape Town and Pretoria, 1975), pp. 312-341.
- (49) These were the families Cloete, De Villiers, De Vos, Du Plessis, Du Preez, Du Toit, Joubert, Le Roux, Louw, Malan, Marais, Minnaar, Morkel, Myburg, Retief, Roux, Theron, Van Brakel and Van der Byl.
- (50) e.g. Freund, "Society and Government", p. 81.
- (51) See J. Hoge, "Martin Melck", Tydschrift vir Wetenschap en Kuns, IV (1938).
- (52) Freund, "Society and Government", p. 40.
- (53) Beyers, Kaapse Patriotte, pp. 25-6.
- (54) Ibid., pp. 170-8.
- (55) The most available discussion of this is Simon Schama, Patriots and Liberators: revolution in the Netherlands, 1780-1813 (New York, 1978), Ch. 3.
- (56) G. J. Schutte, De Nederlandse Patriotten en de kolonien: een onderzoek naar hun denkbeelden en optreden, 1770-1800 (Groningen, 1974).
- (57) Printed in Kaapse Geschillen (otherwise known as Kaapse Stukken), published by order of the States General, 4 volumes (The Hague, 1785), I, pp. 29 f. See also Beyers, Patriotte, pp. 26-7, 32-61.
- (58) This, of course, has been the basis of the charge against Willem Adriaan van der Stel in 1705-7. For further examples, see O. F. Mentzel, Life at the Cape in the Mid-Eighteenth Century, being the biography of Rudolf Siegfried Alleman, translated by M. Greenless (Cape Town, 1920), pp. 78, 128-130; and O. F. Mentzel, A Geographical and Topographical Description of the Cape of Good Hope (1787), translated by G. V. Marais and J. H. Hoge, edited by H. Mandelbrote, 3 volumes (Cape Town, 1921-1944), I, pp. 27, 138. These works relate to the 1730s and 1740s, although they were written much later, perhaps after Mentzel had heard of the charges of the Patriot Movement.
- (59) G. McC. Theal, History of South Africa under the Administration of the Dutch East India Company, 2 volumes (London, 1897), II, pp. 156-7.
- (60) This can be seen from the remittances his executors transmitted to his heirs in the Netherlands, recorded in the VOC's administration of wissels.
- (61) Tensions between the two groups were later to develop. See Schutte, "Company and Colonist", p. 202.
- (62) See Armstrong, "The Slaves", p. 83; R. Elphick and R. Shell, "Intergroup Relations: Khoikhoi, settlers, slaves and free blacks", in Elphick and Giliomee (eds), Shaping, p. 139; F. R. Bradlow and Margaret Cairns, The Early Cape Muslims (Cape Town, 1978), p. 139.
- (63) Ross, "Rule of Law".

- (64) e.g. Carel van der Merwe, c.s. to Landdrost Graaf-Reinet, in Minutes of Graaff-Reinet Landdrost and Heemraden, 1 November 1790, CA GR 1/1, 36-7.
- (65) On this, see Herman Giliomee, "The burgher rebellions on the Eastern Frontier, 1795-1815", in Elphick and Giliomee, Shaping, pp. 338-343.
- (66) G. Wagenaar, "Johannes Gysbertus van Reenen - Sy aandeel in die Kaapse Geskiedenis tot 1806", MA, Pretoria (1976).
- (67) Printed in Beyers, Kaapse Patriotte, pp. 323-9.
- (68) The first signatory, J. M. Cruywagen, was a brother of the partner in the trading firm Cruywagen en Kie.
- (69) W. M. Freund, "The Cape under the transitional governments, 1795-1814", in Elphick and Giliomee, Shaping, p. 230.
- (70) Cited in T. R. H. Davenport, "The consolidation of a new society: the Cape Colony" in M. Wilson and L. M. Thompson (eds), The Oxford History ..., I, p. 230.
- (71) This is, admittedly, still a hypothesis which, if untrue, would mean that much of this paper would have to be revised. For one of the few studies of merchant firms in the nineteenth century Western Cape, see A. P. Buirski, "The Barrys and the Overberg", MA thesis, Stellenbosch (1952).
- (72) See E. H. Arndt, Banking and Currency Developments in South Africa, 1652-1927 (Cape Town, 1928).
- (73) G. McC. Theal (ed), Records of the Cape Colony, 36 volumes (London, 1897-1905), XXV, pp. 370-5.
- (74) Ibid., XXVII, p. 397.

-----oOo-----

Table I.	<u>Slave holding</u>		Stellenbosch				<u>Total.</u>
	<u>1 - 9</u>		<u>10 - 19</u>		<u>20 +</u>		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
1731	42	64.5	11	16.9	12	18.5	65
1741	44	62.0	14	19.7	13	18.3	71
1752	63	68.5	18	19.6	11	12.0	92
1761	61	65.6	19	20.4	13	14.0	93
1773	71	65.7	24	22.2	13	12.0	108
1782	91	65.9	31	22.5	13	12.0	138
	Drakenstein						
1731	133	81.6	22	13.5	8	4.9	163
1741	170	81.0	31	14.8	9	4.3	210
1752	167	82.3	9	14.3	7	3.4	203
1761	228	80.3	43	15.1	13	4.5	284
1773	263	74.3	75	21.2	16	4.5	354
1782	316	68.4	110	23.8	36	7.8	462

Source: Worden "The distribution of slaves in the Cape Colony during the Eighteenth Century", Unpublished paper 1979.

N.B. Until 1752 Swellendam was included under Drakestein.