

# The Rise of the Cape Gentry

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## I

Over the last two centuries, among those groups who have formed part of the ruling class of South Africa, the 'gentry' have been continually represented.<sup>1</sup> By gentry, I mean the relatively prosperous, market-oriented farm owner-operators, almost invariably white and in general considerable employers of labour.<sup>2</sup> By the mid-twentieth century they came to own and control the vast majority of South Africa's agricultural land outside the African 'reserves'.<sup>3</sup> It is their position of dominance that has shaped the character of much of the 'white' South African countryside. With the exception of the sugar estates of Natal, plantations were not known in South Africa, and even in Natal these did not entirely dominate the colony.<sup>4</sup> And where large company holdings were accumulated, they were usually held for rent and speculation until the price of land had risen sufficiently for them to be turned into farms.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly it would be wrong to equate the emergence of a gentry group with the establishment of white settlement. Rather the emergence of the gentry in any particular region of southern Africa can be dated to that moment when the

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<sup>1</sup> I am not here trying to specify the changing nature of these groups nor their relation to one another.

<sup>2</sup> Even when discussing their original locus, England, historians have been unable to agree on precisely who the gentry are, although this lack of definitional rigour has not prevented – indeed has rather furthered – an immense literature. For a recent summary, see G.E. Mingay, *The Gentry: the rise and fall of a ruling class* (London and New York, 1976). For a previous application of the term to the same groups as I am discussing in this paper, see Gerrit Schutte (or perhaps his translators), 'Company and Colonists at the Cape', in R. Elphick and H. Giliomee (eds.), *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652–1820* (Cape Town and London, 1979), 191; for a rather later period, see Basil A. le Cordeur, *The Politics of Eastern Cape Separatism, 1820–1854*, (Cape Town, 1981), 3, and subsequently. In this case it was the rich 1820 settlers who called themselves 'gentry'.

<sup>3</sup> Although in 1954 it was estimated that 20 per cent of 'white' farms had no whites living on them. 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, 105.

<sup>4</sup> Adrian Graves and Peter Richardson, 'Plantations in the Political Economy of Colonial Sugar Production: Natal and Queensland, 1860–1914', *Journal of Southern African Studies* VI (1979) 221–7.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Slater, 'Land, Labour, and Capitalism in Natal: the Natal Land and Colonisation Company', *Journal of African History*, XVI (1975).

class relations in the countryside were restructured so as to enable the production of cash crops<sup>6</sup> on a fairly extensive scale under the immediate control of the landowner or his representative. This is in contradistinction to two other methods of exploiting the territory that the whites had conquered from Africans. First, there was the possibility that the whites, for example the *trekboere*, would themselves indulge in what was effectively subsistence agriculture and pastoralism only peripherally bound to the market. Even then they tended to employ, and harshly exploit, Khoisan labourers. Moreover, the extent to which even the most distant *trekboer* was divorced from the market can be – and often has been – greatly exaggerated.<sup>7</sup> The second mode of exploitation was based on the extraction of surplus from African peasants.<sup>8</sup> 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,<sup>9</sup> and certainly in the classic colonial form of the Cape before 1834. Indeed, although a certain amount of readjustment was needed, there is nothing to suggest that there was a major restructuring of class relations after emancipation.<sup>10</sup> By then, it is suggested here, the pre-eminence of the gentry within Cape society had been established. As more and more is being learnt of the history of the white-owned farms of South Africa, it is becoming clearer that there were many continuities in the basic character of agrarian ruling

<sup>6</sup> In this context, wool is considered a cash crop, as, with more reservations, is meat.

<sup>7</sup> In this interpretation, I differ from Leonard Guelke. See his ‘The early European settlement of South Africa, 1652–1779’, University of Toronto Ph.D. thesis, 1974, ‘Frontier settlement in Early Dutch South Africa’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 66, (1976), 25–42, his debate with William Norton in *ibid.* 67 (1977), 463–7 and ‘The white settlers, 1652–1780’, in Elphick and Giliomee (eds.), *Shaping*, 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: North America and Southern Africa Compared*, (New Haven and London, 1981). The research of Susan 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.

<sup>8</sup> Stanley Trapido, ‘Landlord and Tenant in a Colonial Economy: The Transvaal 1880–1910’, *JSAS*, V (1979); ‘“The Friends of the Natives”: Merchants, peasants and the political and ideological structure of liberalism in the Cape, 1854–1910’, in Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore (eds.), *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa* (London, 1980); Colin Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* (London, 1979).

<sup>9</sup> Stanley Trapido, ‘Aspects of the transition from slavery to serfdom: the South African Republic, 1842–1902’, *The Societies of Southern Africa in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (henceforth SSA), (London, Institute of Commonwealth Studies), VI, (1976); Peter Delius and Stanley Trapido, ‘Inboekselings and Oorlams: the Creation and Transformation of a Service Class’, *JSAS*, VIII, (1982); Tim Keegan, ‘The restructuring of agrarian class relations in a colonial economy: the Orange River Colony, 1902–1910’, *JSAS*, V, (1979), 235–6.

<sup>10</sup> J.S. Marais, *The Cape Coloured People, 1652–1937* (London, 1939), remains the best analysis of a neglected episode. It is to be hoped that the work of Marv Rayner will do much to

groups.<sup>11</sup> This is not only the case in those areas of the South-West Cape where the farms have been continuously worked, producing the same crops, for over two hundred years. It is at least arguable that some of the structures that were evolved in the Cape in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were taken over and modified as settlers conquered the interior and established their rule. For this reason, it is all the more important to re-examine the origins of the Cape gentry, and the period at which they came to dominate the colonial countryside.<sup>12</sup>

## II

It is not easy to be precise as 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. Clearly, this process 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 English-speakers). But 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, especially slaves, and that which the slave-owning group had with respect to the central government, which was probably less than in any other contemporary slave-owning colony.<sup>13</sup> 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 Adriaen van der Stel.<sup>14</sup> Only with the fall of the Dutch East India Company and the growth of 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.

It should be stressed that this periodization is somewhat hypothetical; nevertheless there is considerable evidence that such a shift did take place. One important indicator is that by the late eighteenth century, government officials

<sup>11</sup> This insight is coming in particular from the research of Nigel Worden, Mary Rayner, Susan Newton-King, Robert Shell, Pieter van Duin and myself.

<sup>12</sup> For my own work, see *Cape of Torments: Slavery and Resistance at the Cape of Good Hope*, (London, 1983, forthcoming) and Pieter van Duin and Robert Ross, *The Cape Economy in the Eighteenth Century* (forthcoming). Most of the strictly economic data in this paper derive from this joint work.

<sup>13</sup> See R. Ross, 'The rule of Law at the Cape of Good Hope in the Eighteenth Century', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, IX (1980), 1-15.

<sup>14</sup> Gerrit Schutte, 'Company and Colonists', 192-6 argues convincingly that this dismissal had

were increasingly drawn from the rural farming community, and receptive to its wishes, although for the major period of VOC rule this had not been the case. In 1779, for instance, 48 of the 94 officials employed in the central administration at Cape Town had been born at the Cape, but they were all sons of former VOC officials.<sup>15</sup> The contrast with the position some twenty-five years later, as described by Freund, is striking, although he incorrectly projects his analysis too far into the past.<sup>16</sup> In his view, 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 nineteenth century there were wealthy families – he names the van Reenens and the Cloetes – in which 'some members were farmers while others were officials' and many of the other richer gentry were connected to these officials by marriage alliances. Under the VOC, company officials were not allowed to own farms. While some undoubtedly continued to do so even after Willem Adriaen van der Stel and his clients had been forced to sell up, they could do so only by subterfuge.<sup>17</sup> Under the British, in contrast, the *Fiscaal*, the leading law officer of the colony, was one of the Cape's richest farmers. Such officials functioned as a 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 they were also able to incorporate the newcomers, whether British or Batavian, into the gentry in a way which would have been abhorrent for the officials of the VOC in the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup> At the same time they maintained their grasp on the distribution of land, an important counter in the system of control on the South African countryside.<sup>20</sup> 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*

<sup>15</sup> Schutte, 'Company and Colonists', 187.

<sup>16</sup> William B. Freund, 'Society and Government in Dutch South Africa: The Cape and the Batavians, 1803–6', Ph.D. Yale (1971), 87, 88.

<sup>17</sup> For the operations of J.H. Blankenburg in this respect, see Cape Archives, MOOC 14/36/ii.

<sup>18</sup> Freund, 'Society and Government', 88. The father of W. W. Van Rijnveld, the *Fiscaal* 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), 45.

<sup>19</sup> P.J. Venter, Landdros and Heemrade (1682–1827)', *Archives Yearbook for South African History*, III, 2 (1940), 22–9.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 70–8.



had relatively little freedom of action to work against these dominant local notables; increasingly the appointed magistrates and the gentry accommodated each other's interests for the control and prosperity of the countryside.

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.<sup>21</sup>

It would be a gross exaggeration to suggest that these processes represented a capture of the state by the gentry. A colonial administration, responsible to and taking orders from Amsterdam or London, could not allow itself to become entirely 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 in terms of local control over labour, land and public works. This did not mean 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 gentry and their labourers. Nevertheless, the degree of gentry power 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. It would be too economistic to ascribe this transformation entirely to the combination of an increasingly unprofitable and financially weakened VOC and the cumulative effect 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 a 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.

### III

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.

<sup>21</sup> Freund, 'Society and Government', 40, 88.

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.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> The long-term ossification of the Company's decision making structures, the costs of territorial rule in the East and the increasing competition from English, Danish and Chinese merchants, combined with the shocks of the fourth Anglo-Dutch war (1780–1784), had driven the VOC to the point of bankruptcy,<sup>24</sup> so that the old certainties in the relationship between the company and its subject could no longer hold.

The effects of this decline in the Company's fortunes on the Cape was decisive. It gave rise to a considerable level of criticism of the VOC in the Netherlands itself, as part of the general Patriot attack on the institutions of the *ancien régime*.<sup>25</sup> The East India Company was after all one of the main bulwarks of the established order in eighteenth century Dutch society. The Prince of Orange, who stood at the head of the complicated federal political structure of the Netherlands, was at the same time *opperbewindhebber* (chief director) of the Company, with considerable power over appointments.<sup>26</sup> The *Heren XVII* were all important members of the ruling oligarchy of the United Provinces. Thus the attack on the Prince and the *regenten* gave the opponents of the VOC in the Cape an entree into the highest circles of Dutch political life, so that their complaints eventually found their way even to the States-General.<sup>27</sup>

The economic decline of the Company had further consequences for the Colony. Company officials and even colonists were able to trade more extensively on their own account. In general terms, the VOC held a monopoly in only a relatively small number of goods and services, namely Dutch shipping between Asia and Europe and various spices – nutmeg, cloves, mace and cinnamon – which were grown exclusively in the Company's possessions in Ceylon and the Moluccas.<sup>28</sup> Apart from spices, coffee, sugar and Indian tex-

<sup>22</sup> These figures are drawn from F.S. Gaastra, 'The VOC in Azië, 1680–1795', *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, IX, (Bussum, 1980), 463.

<sup>23</sup> See in particular the papers in Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague, VOC 4347; also A.L. Geyer, *Das Wirtschaftliche System der Niederländischen Ost-Indischen Kompanie am Kap der Guten Hoffnung, 1785–1795*, (München and Berlin, 1923), 9–38.

<sup>24</sup> On this see Gaastra, 'VOC' and Johan de Vries, *De economische achteruitgang der Republiek in de achttiende eeuw*, (Leiden, 1968), 179.

<sup>25</sup> Simon Schama, *Patriots and Liberators: Revolution in the Netherlands, 1780–1813*, (New York, 1977); with regard to the colonies, see especially G.J. Schutte, *De Nederlandse Patriotten en de koloniën: Een onderzoek naar hun denkbeelden en optreden, 1770–1800* (Groningen, 1974).

<sup>26</sup> Gaastra, 'VOC' 434. Various of the Prince's protégés held important posts at the Cape, notably Governors van Plettenberg and van de Graaff and the military commander, Robert Gordon. See Schutte, *Nederlandse Patriotten*, 15.

<sup>27</sup> Schutte, *Nederlandse Patriotten*, Ch. IV.

<sup>28</sup> Gaastra, 'VOC', 461. It should be noted that, as articles of trade within Asia and at the Cape, they contributed in other ways to the Company's income.

tiles, the Company's own sales were largely limited to high bulk, low value goods such as timber and iron ware.<sup>29</sup> By the mid-eighteenth century, the monopoly goods brought in less than a quarter of the eventual income of the Company realised in Amsterdam. Much of the trade on VOC ships, including that in slaves, was in private hands. Low bulk European products were sent out in the small sea-chests that each sailor of the VOC was allowed to take with him. A well-organised system ensured that these were always profitably filled and that they were delivered into the right hands in Cape Town or further east.<sup>30</sup> Together with payment for slaves, which were brought from the East in small numbers by VOC sailors<sup>31</sup> and to a certain extent remittances from Company servants, this meant that a minimum private income of f 420,000 was sent to the Netherlands annually in the 1770s, largely to pay for imports, via the official channels of the VOC alone.<sup>32</sup> In addition it was possible to draw bills on other Companies for the same purpose.<sup>33</sup>

Though the VOC's remaining strength at the Cape allowed officials a large share of this private trade, they were not monopolists of it. Independent Cape merchants were certainly inconvenienced by limitations on the total amount of bills of exchange allowed to them. And as a percentage, the Company officials' share of bills of exchange increased in the period 1749 to 1780.<sup>34</sup> But the total of burgher bills had risen and they sent greater quantities than the officials through the subsidiary channels. When Cape burghers demanded, and eventually received, the right to fit out ships for their direct, unhindered participation in the Asian trade they were building on a previous tradition of trading and on capital accumulated in such activities.<sup>35</sup>

Further, contrary to some of the accepted historiography, the VOC's hold on agricultural commodities at the Cape, though important, was very far from absolute. There were sharp differences between the various commodities. The

<sup>29</sup> Most accountbooks of the VOC's trade at the Cape disappeared in the destruction of the archive of the V.O.C.'s financial department in the nineteenth century. For two that survived, for 1770-1 and 1771-2, see Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague, (ARA), VOC 4265, 302-333 and VOC 4268, 161-189.

<sup>30</sup> Many examples of the system can be seen in the records of estates of deceased persons kept by the Orphan Chamber in the Cape Archives. For a specific example, see Gerard Wagenaar, 'Johannes Gysbertus van Reenen - sy aandeel in the Kaapse Geskiedenis tot 1806', MA thesis, University of Pretoria, (1976), Ch. VI.

<sup>31</sup> Ross, *Cape of Torments*, Ch. 2.

<sup>32</sup> K.M. Jeffreys (ed.), *Kaapse Archiefstukken 1779* (Cape Town, 1929), 304-315, 319-338, 359-364.

<sup>33</sup> Beyers, *Kaapse Patriotte*, 44.

<sup>34</sup> ARA see VOC 4178 and *Kaapse Archiefstukken*, 1780, 268-275 and 308-312. It is unfortunately impossible to know whether any of the burghers were partners or straw men of Company officials. For the difficulties of *wissel* transfers to the Netherlands, see Geyer, *Wirtschaftliche System*, 80-83; for complaints from burghers and officials, see H.C.V. Leibbrandt, *Pecis of the Archives of the Cape of Good Hope. Requesten*, I, (Cape Town, 1905), W.S. van Rijnveld, *Aanmerking over de Verbetering van het vee aan de Kaap de Goede Hoop, 1804*, edited by H.B. Thom (Cape Town, 1942), 51.

<sup>35</sup> Schutte, *Nederlandse Patriotten*, 87. See also C.F.J. Muller, *Die Oorsprong van die Groot Trek*, (Cape Town and Johannesburg, 1974), 147.



VOC had only a very minor share in the wine market, and the nature of the market meant that any attempt at price fixing would only have forced the Company to buy the lowest quality wines.<sup>36</sup> The exception was in the products of the renowned Constantia estate, whose high reputation allowed the Company good profits in Europe. (Nevertheless, the restrictions the VOC placed on the free sale of Constantia wine did not prevent the owners of the farms from being among the very richest of the Cape burghers.<sup>37</sup>) As regard grain and meat, the other two main agricultural products, the Company was responsible for a large proportion of the purchases. It was the Company's exports of wheat which set the marginal price on the grain market,<sup>38</sup> while the butchers who held the contract to supply the Company – which gave them various other, far more lucrative privileges – seem to have had around half the meat trade in their hands.<sup>39</sup> This did not mean, though, that the Company could entirely dictate price formation. The officials in South Africa had to meet the requirement of the fleets and of the other VOC factories which relied on the Cape for wheat and bread. In times of bad harvest and high demand there were certainly shortages of wheat at the Cape,<sup>40</sup> while the stock farmers on occasion refused to sell if they thought the price was too low.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, the VOC's control over markets, only marginally increased by administrative measures, was decreasing. As the eighteenth century progressed, the number of foreign ships that put into the Cape increased. In 1772, it surpassed the number of Dutch ships.<sup>42</sup> While the direct importance of shipping for the Cape's economy can be exaggerated, certainly the presence of the foreigners made the VOC's control over the market steadily weaker. Not only did they buy refreshments themselves – unless VOC measures against them drove the price up too high<sup>43</sup> – but they also contributed greatly to the prosperity of Cape Town itself, so that the internal market became more and more important for the Cape farmers.<sup>44</sup> The VOC could no longer exercise its patronage to control colonial society.

<sup>36</sup> In the 1770s, the VOC exported about one fifth of the Cape's wine production. See Van Duin and Ross, *Cape Economy*, for more detailed analysis of the wine, grain and meat markets.

<sup>37</sup> G.J. Jooste, 'Die Geskiedenis van wynbou en wynhandel in die Kaapkolonie, 1753–1795', M.A., Stellenbosch, (1973), 132 f.

<sup>38</sup> This was particularly the case in the decades 1740–1780, when wheat prices were low and stagnant and exports relatively high. Thereafter, internal demand increased sufficiently for Company's strength in the market to be diminished.

<sup>39</sup> The most valuable analysis of the meat market is Wagenaar, 'Johannes Gysbertus van Reenen'.

<sup>40</sup> (ARA) VOC 4315, f. 576. In the period of the first British Occupation, there were continual wheat shortages. See D.J. van Zyl, 'Die Geskiedenis van Graanbou aan die Kaap, 1795–1826', *Archives Yearbook for South African History* (1968), 1.

<sup>41</sup> See Jeffreys, *Kaapse Archiefstukken, 1782 190–198*, Records of the Council of Policy, 10.6 and 14.6–1782.

<sup>42</sup> Beyers, *Kaapse Patriotte*, 333–5.

<sup>43</sup> Wagenaar, 'Johannes Gysbertus van Reenen', 83.

<sup>44</sup> This is argued at some detail in Van Duin and Ross, *Cape Economy*.



## IV

While the impending fall of the VOC has been a well recognized, if not fully analysed, feature of late eighteenth century Cape history, 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 hand on one of the 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.<sup>45</sup> This is a view that has taken hold of historians largely because they took at face value the statement of the farmers themselves as to their own prosperity, always a most dangerous historical practice. In their petition of 1779 – before, it should be noted, the outbreak of the war that was so valuable to the Cape – the farmers gave as an example of the problems caused by the Cape marketing system the glut of 1757. It is reasonable to assume that, had there been 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.<sup>46</sup>

In their views, in general, historians have followed the practice already established at the end of the eighteenth century by J. A. de Mist, in the memorandum which he wrote before he went to the Cape,<sup>47</sup> but de Mist's memorandum must be seen in the context of the political situation in the Netherlands. He was writing for the benefit of the revolutionary regime, with whom he was temporarily out of favour, and therefore it is not surprising that he made no attempt to extoll the virtues of the old order which they had over-

<sup>45</sup> For recent statements of this view, see M.F. Katzen, 'White settlers and the origin of a new society, 1652–1778' in Wilson and Thompson, *Oxford History*, I, 198; Schutte, 'Company and Colonists', 204; Richard Elphick and Herman Giliomee, 'The structure of European domination at the Cape, 1652–1820', in Elphick and Giliomee, *Shaping*, 368. Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore, *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa* (London, 1980), 20–21, would seem to accept a weaker version of this view, stressing the monopoly position of the VOC rather than the production difficulties of the farmers. This view of the Company and the Cape market is also implicit in such older works as A.J.H. van der Walt, *Die Ausdehnung der Kolonie am Kap der Guten Hoffnung: Eine historisch-ökonomische Untersuchung über das Werden und Wesen des Pionierslebens im 18. Jahrhundert*, (Berlin, 1928); P.J. van der Merwe, *Die Noorwaartse Beweging van die Boere voor die Groot Trek (1770–1842)*, (The Hague, 1937) and *ibid.*, *Die Trekboer in die Geskiedenis van die Kaapkolonie*, (Cape Town, 1938). The major statement of revision is to be found in Freund, 'Society and Government'.

<sup>46</sup> Beyers, *Kaapse Patriotte*, 33–4.

<sup>47</sup> J.A. de Mist, *The Memorandum of Commissary J.A. de Mist*, edited by K.M. Jeffreys, (Cape Town, 1920), 175–6.

thrown.<sup>48</sup> Aside from Freund's thesis, it is in the works of Neumark and Guelke<sup>49</sup> that these views come closest to being tested. Both, however, are primarily concerned to explain the reason for the expansion of stock farmers into the interior, rather than to investigate the nature of agricultural society in the South-West Cape. Nevertheless, they have to make contrasts between the agricultural and pastoral sectors of the economy, and therefore show how difficult it was for young men without much capital to establish themselves as arable farmers. This perspective, however, means that they do not pay sufficient attention to the possibilities for arable farming for those who had already gained a foothold in the business. Guelke, indeed, does recognise the increased wealth of wine and wheat farmers towards the end of the century, but he does not develop these insights.<sup>50</sup>

To challenge the accepted view requires a reanalysis of the Cape's agricultural economy both as a whole and from the perspective of the individual farmer. To begin with the former,<sup>51</sup> it is for this purpose enough to show a considerable level of expansion, at least from the middle of the eighteenth century. 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.) 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 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.<sup>52</sup> This growth 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

<sup>48</sup> On De Mist's career in the Netherlands, see Schama, *Patriots and Liberators* and C.N. Fehrman, 'Mr. Jacob Abraham Uitenhage de Mist (1749–1825)' in *Overijsselse Portretten* (Zwolle, 1958).

<sup>49</sup> S.D. Neumark, *Economic Influences on the South African Frontier, 1652–1836* (Stanford, 1957); Guelke, 'Early European Settlement', 'Frontier Settlement' and 'White Settlers'.

<sup>50</sup> Guelke, 'White Settlers', 66–7.

<sup>51</sup> This is investigated in greater detail in Van Duin and Ross, *Cape Economy*.

<sup>52</sup> These figures have been derived from the *opgaaf* (tax assessment) rolls. 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* figures can be considered untruthful. These factors are largely based on estimates of the requirements of the Cape market. For a detailed description of the procedures used, see Van Duin and Ross, *Cape Economy*. The resultant estimates cannot be precisely correct but, given the growth of that market and the massive jump in recorded figures after 1795, when the *opgaaf* became, at least temporarily more accurate, the general trend must have been of that order. As a result of the different taxation system, there is no reason to suppose that wine production was underrecorded to anything approaching the same degree.

from the middle of the century. Nevertheless, these gluts were far rarer than is generally envisaged. On the contrary, 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, grain was frequently in short supply.<sup>53</sup> On one occasion, a million pounds of wheat had to be imported from the United States to cover a threatening shortfall.<sup>54</sup> In the short term, perfect articulation of supply and demand was evidently impossible with such products, which were subject to the vagaries of the weather and for which production decisions have to be made well in advance of the moment of marketing.<sup>55</sup> In the longer term, in contrast, the evidence would seem to suggest that the necessary adjustments of supply and demand were made with relatively great efficiency.

Even if Leonard Guelke<sup>56</sup> 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 at the Cape<sup>57</sup> to allow continual investment in agriculture.<sup>58</sup> Had it been possible to transfer funds out of Cape Colony with any ease, the degree of expansion may not have been so rapid, and the rate of profit within the country consequently higher.<sup>59</sup> 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

<sup>53</sup> This is a major theme in van Zyl, 'Graanbou'.

<sup>54</sup> See the contract in ARA, VOC 4315, 576.

<sup>55</sup> c.f. G. R. Hawke, *Economics for Historians*, (Cambridge, 1980), 117–119.

<sup>56</sup> See footnote 7 above.

<sup>57</sup> There is no evidence of any major investment in South African agriculture by foreign capitalists at this period. The only exception in the period of VOC rule was the use of 6000 Rijksdaalders of funds from the defunct Dutch colony on Taiwan to provide starting capital for the Huguenots in the late seventeenth century. See *Realia: Register op de Generale Resolutien van het Kasteel Batavia, 1632–1805*, 3 vols (Leiden, The Hague, and Batavia, 1882–6), I, 209. I owe this reference to my colleague Leonard Blussé.

<sup>58</sup> As we have seen (footnote 15 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. They, more than anyone else, were able to send their money overseas and invest it there.

<sup>59</sup> 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 capitalist 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.

population may not have been as great as has previously been thought,<sup>60</sup> 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,<sup>61</sup> 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 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 of 1720 to 1790.<sup>62</sup> 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 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 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. 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.

<sup>60</sup> 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), 236.

<sup>61</sup> This is clear from 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 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.

<sup>62</sup> In fact, for the averages of the periods 1719–23 and 1789–93.



To turn to the individuals, two trends are evident in the course of the eighteenth century. First, the general level of wealth increased considerably. Leonard Guelke has shown that average net value of the estates of cultivators, as recorded in the inventories drawn up after their deaths, increased from 9300 guilders in the period 1731–42 and f 10430 between 1751 and 1762 to f 24330 in the period 1771–80. By this stage the discrepancy between the owner of cultivated estates and the stock farmers had widened enormously. In the first period pastoralists' estates averaged 40.4% of those of arable farmers. By the 1700s this had decreased to 11.7%.<sup>63</sup>

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 of Cape farmsteads – or rather it was then that they were built at considerable expense. In Graph I, the dates of building (or major alteration) of the surviving farms is given;<sup>64</sup> the great number which derive from the last third of the century is clear. They were particularly common in the wine growing areas of the Cape Peninsula, Stellenbosch and Drakenstein. With their complicated plaster-work and luxuriously timbered yellowwood floors and ceilings, to say nothing of the furniture they contained, these houses are in themselves witness to the fact that their owners, the winefarmers of the South-West Cape, were doing well enough to create their own unique chateaux, even if it was to be some time before their wine came to equal that of Europe. At this time, there were a few professional architects at the Cape who designed these houses, but in general their work was limited to Cape Town itself.<sup>65</sup> Rather the builders were anonymous craftsmen, probably mainly slaves. A tradition which is recorded from near Wellington is no doubt illustrative. As the descendants of the man who had the farm Welbedacht built remember it, their ancestor owned 'a slave who was a first-rate builder and even designed houses. He was hired or lent to neighbours or relations' and at least three houses are believed to be his work.<sup>66</sup>

Visitors to the Cape around 1780 certainly described the life of these farmers in glowing terms although in so doing some were attempting to show the

<sup>63</sup> Guelke, 'White settlers', 66.

<sup>64</sup> These data were abstracted from Hans Fransen and Mary Alexander Cook, *The Old Buildings of the Cape* (Cape Town, 1980). For each farmhouse, only the date of the first building, or of total rebuilding, was recorded. Stellenbosch/Drakenstein was taken to include Stellenbosch, Somerset West, Paarl, Franschoek and Wellington districts, Swartland to include Malmesbury, Darling, Piquetberg and Clanwilliam, and Overberg to include Tulbagh, Ceres, Worcester, Robertson, Caledon, Bredasdorp and Swellendam. Urban buildings were not included. For the use of analogous information, see W. G. Hoskins, 'The Rebuilding of Rural England, 1570–1640', *Past and Present*, IV (1954) and R. Machin, 'The Great Rebuilding: a reassessment', *Past and Present*, LXXVII, (1977). See also the comment of C. de Jong, *Reizen naar de Kaap de Goede Hoop 1791–1797*, (Haarlem, 1802), 139: 'Het bouwen is hier niet slechts een liefhebberij, het is een drift, een dolheid, een besmettelijke razernij die meest alle mensen heeft aangetast'. (Translation: 'Building is here not only a pleasure, it is a craze, a madness, an infectious rage that has attacked almost everyone'.)

<sup>65</sup> For the most important of these, see H. Roy de Puyfontaine, *Louis Michel Thibault 1750–1815: his official life at the Cape of Good Hope*, (Cape Town, 1972).

<sup>66</sup> Fransen and Cook, *Old Buildings*, 242.

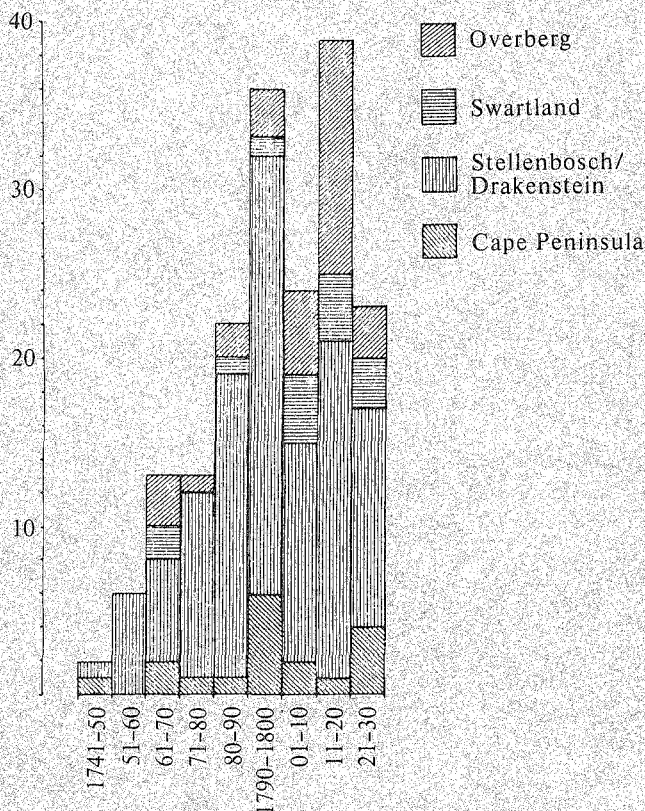


Figure 1 – The Building of New Farms

unreasonableness of the patriots' demands. 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'.<sup>67</sup> 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.<sup>68</sup>

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 in-

<sup>67</sup> Cited in S. D. Naude, 'Willem Cornelis Boers', *Archives Yearbook for South African History* (1950), II, 413.

<sup>68</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, 414.

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<sup>69</sup> 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.<sup>70</sup> 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,<sup>71</sup> the 19 families which had been present in every year investigated since 1731 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. They would, however 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 been claimed.<sup>72</sup>

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, it seems, 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.<sup>73</sup> 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

<sup>69</sup> In this context, by 'family' I mean those people who have the same surname.

<sup>70</sup> 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), 312-341.

<sup>71</sup> These were the families Cloete, De Villiers, De Vos, Du Plessis, Du Preez, Du Toit, Joubert, Le Roux, Malan, Marais, Minnaar, Morkel, Myberg, Retief, Roux, Theron, Van Brakel and Van der Byl.

eg. Freund, 'Society and Government', 81.

See J. Hoge, 'Martin Melck, *Tydschrift vir Wetenskap en Kuns* IV (1938)

of farmers, rather than a very 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 group of substantial, but not exceptionally rich, farmers.

Table 1 — *Slave holding*

	<i>1 - 9</i>		<i>Stellenbosch 10 - 19</i>		<i>20 +</i>		<i>Total</i>
	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
<i>Drakenstein</i>							
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 Drakenstein.

Obviously the gentry was itself not uniform. It had its own elite which could dominate a particular district. 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 villages 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.<sup>74</sup> 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. At the same time within each locality the commonality of interest between the greater and lesser farmers was maintained so that 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.

<sup>74</sup> Freund, 'Society and Government', 40.



## V

It is against this background that the Cape Patriot movement of the 1780s and 1790s developed. 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,<sup>75</sup> and 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,<sup>76</sup> 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.<sup>77</sup> 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.<sup>78</sup> 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 became organized, however, politics drew their inspiration from the major issues of local society, in particular the division of wealth.

This orientation is clear in the Burgher memorial of 1779, which was drawn up by four representatives of the Cape Burghers, Jacobus van Reenen, Barend Jan Artoys, Tielman Roos and Nicholaas Godfried Heyns. These four men, who were to represent 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.<sup>79</sup>

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 Fiscaal, Mr. W.C. Boers, and the secretary of the Council of Policy, O.M. Bergh, were accused of standing

<sup>75</sup> Beyers, *Kaapse Patriotte*, 25–6.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 170–8.

<sup>77</sup> Schama, *Patriots and Liberators*, ch. 3.

<sup>78</sup> Schutte, *De Nederlandse Patriotten*.

<sup>79</sup> Printed in *Kaapse Geschieden* (other wise known as *Kaapse Stukken*), published by order of the States General, 4 vols (The Hague, 1785), I, pp. 29 f. See also Beyers, *Kaapse Patriotte*, pp. 26–7, 32–61.

upon their dignity to an unwarranted extent and of meting out summary and unjustified punishments to burghers for piffling offences. Implicit in these charges was 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.<sup>80</sup> 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'. In contrast, Van Plettenberg, who succeeded him, 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'.<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, Tulbagh himself died an exceedingly wealthy man, which could in no way have been derived in any large measure from his salary.<sup>82</sup> Perhaps matters became laxer under Van Plettenberg; certainly the officials became 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.<sup>83</sup> But the farmers realized that the two firms

<sup>80</sup> 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. Greenlees (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.

<sup>81</sup> G. McC. Theal, *History of South Africa under the Administration of the Dutch East India Company*, 2 vols. (London, 1897), II, pp. 156–7.

<sup>82</sup> Although his annual salary was never more than f 2400, his executors transmitted at least f 105,000 to his heir in the Netherlands when they wound up his estate. See ARA, VOC 4265, 2900 and 409 and VOC 4268, 131.

<sup>83</sup> Tensions between the two groups were later to develop. See Schutte, 'Company and Colonists', p. 202.

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. Moreover, 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 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.<sup>84</sup> 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 cost 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.<sup>85</sup> 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 their privileged position in the buying in of grain and wine, especially that destined for export. It was not that they were particularly concerned about the price they would receive. They even proposed to leave the fixing of the grain price entirely in the Company's hands. But they hoped to have burghers, not company officials, appointed as the intermediaries. No doubt some of the signatories believed that they themselves would acquire these potentially lucrative positions. More important, at least for the agriculturalists, was the belief that burghers, whose tenure of office would be regularly renewable, would be free from any form of favouritism, so that there would be less danger of the market not being fairly spread. At the same time, the rationalization of the land policy, which the memorial also 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.<sup>86</sup> This was

<sup>84</sup> See Armstrong, 'The Slaves', 83; R. Elphick and R. Shell, 'Intergroup Relations: Khoikhoi, settlers, slaves and free blacks', in Elphick and Giliomee (eds.) *Shaping*, 139; F. R. Bradlow and Margaret Cairns, *The Early Cape Muslims* (Cape Town, 1978), 139; Ross, *Cape of Torments*.

<sup>85</sup> Ross, 'Rule of Law'.

<sup>86</sup> e.g. Carel van der Merwe, c.s. to Landdrost Graaff-Reinet, in Minutes of Graaff-Reinet Landdrost and Heemraden, 1 November 1790. Cape Archives: GR 1/1 36-7.

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.<sup>87</sup> 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.<sup>88</sup> 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<sup>89</sup> who 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,<sup>90</sup> 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, and overseas trade among the burghers now had to be allowed.

The other demands of the Patriots were largely political – an elected Burgher Raad with far greater responsibilities. These demands 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.<sup>91</sup>

The Cape Patriot movement did not by itself, result in the dominance of the gentry in the Cape Colony. The Governors, whether Dutch or British, retained too much power for that to occur. Nevertheless the competence of the gentry's representatives at the local level was not in doubt. In the early part of the nineteenth century it was evident that the government in Cape Town could not impose its will on the country districts without the acquiescence of the leaders of country society. The *heemraden*, whose powers were increasing at the time, were appointed from among the most notable and the most experienced individuals of the districts, and they had to be owners of landed property to be

<sup>87</sup> On this, see Herman Giliomee, 'The burgher rebellions on the Eastern Frontier, 1795–1815', in Elphick and Giliomee, *Shaping*, 338–343.

<sup>88</sup> Wagenaar, 'Johannes Gysbertus van Reenen'.

<sup>89</sup> Printed in Beyers, *Kaapse Patriotte*, 323–9.

<sup>90</sup> The first signatory, J. M. Cruywagen, was a brother of the partner in the trading firm Cruywagen en Kie.

<sup>91</sup> W. M. Freund, 'The Cape under the transitional governments, 1795–1814', in Elphick and Giliomee, *Shaping*, 230.



eligible for this office.<sup>92</sup> It is not surprising that they did nothing to the disadvantage of the class to which they belonged.

This can clearly be seen from the reports of the Commissioners of Enquiry into the affairs of the Colony, who concluded their investigations in the 1820s. They had been sent out under the impulse of humanitarian concern with the colony's affairs and were thus very sensitive to the problems caused by the concentration of power in the hands of the local notables. Their criticisms were of two main kinds. First, it was the *heemraden* who determined the level of land taxation for their fellow farmers, a position which gave them considerable opportunities to exercise their influence and maintain the structure of rural society.<sup>93</sup> More importantly, the *heemraden* had enormous powers as to the regulation of labour relations in the colony. The Commissioners who saw the matter more in terms of race than of class wrote that their

views of impartiality or of justice in cases in which the coloured classes were engaged before them, were much persecuted by the prejudiced and habits that have become almost hereditary amongst them, as well as the lower classes of the white inhabitants. As tribunals of justice, therefore, or even as forming collective magistracy of police, invested with considerable power over the coloured inhabitants and with a discretionary power over the white inhabitants, there was liable to much abuse in consequence of its remoteness from observation or control, we cannot . . . contemplate the continuance of them without endeavouring to point out the means at least of correcting the evils they have engendered.<sup>94</sup>

The statistics which the commission collected regarding the jurisdiction of the *heemraden* would seem to bear this out.<sup>95</sup> It is true that there were a large number of convictions for maltreating a slave or a Khoisan, but it is not clear in how many of these cases the accused was the owner himself, and in how many one of his employees.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, as leaders of local society, the *heemraden* had a duty, as they saw it, to prevent such brutality as could lead to revolt. They could also punish slaves for bringing false complaints and accusations, and did so, almost as often as, and more severely than, they punished those who ill-treated their labourers. For the rest, barring a large number of cases of assault, (probably largely between slaves),<sup>97</sup> the major effect of the *heemraden* was aimed at a revealingly undifferentiated set of offences, 'desertion, vagabonding and theft'. Even though the office of *heemraad* was abolished, in accordance with the advice of the commissioners, there is no

<sup>92</sup> For an overview of their powers, see Report of the Commissioners of Enquiry on the Administration of Government, printed in G. McC. Theal (ed.), *Records of the Cape Colony*, 36 vols. (London, 1897-1905), (henceforth *RCC*), XXVII, 356-8 and the Report of the Commissioners of Enquiry upon Criminal Law and Jurisprudence, *RCC* XXXIII, 47 ff.

<sup>93</sup> *RCC* XXVII, 377, 406.

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*, 377-8.

<sup>95</sup> *RCC*, XXXIII, 329-339.

<sup>96</sup> It is certainly true that in the eighteenth century most cases of brutality towards slaves, which came to the notice of the authorities, were committed by hired overseers, or by sons of the slave owners. See Ross, *Cape of Torments*.

<sup>97</sup> If they had been slaves, the likelihood of their being

evidence that the local administrations subsequently became any less responsive to gentry interests, while the introduction of a jury system certainly strengthened the position of property owners in the suppression of more serious 'crimes'.<sup>98</sup>

The reverse side of this power can be seen in the reaction to attempts on the part of the Government to impose unwelcome measures on the slave owners of the Cape. Driven on by humanitarian impulses in Great Britain, the Cape Government introduced the systems for the control of slave treatment which had been adopted in the British West Indies. The result was total non-cooperation. The Burger Senate in Cape Town refused to promulgate the relevant ordinances, forcing the Governor to do so on his own, an action of dubious legality. None of the *Heemraden* were present when the landdrost published the Ordinance. The punishment books that were supposed to be filled in by each owner were simply ignored. Out of 3024 slave owners in the Cape and Stellenbosch districts, no more than 76 completed their returns in June 1831, and a year later the number had dropped to two. A Dutch Reformed clergyman who tried to persuade his flock to abide by the regulations was forced to abandon his *gemeente*. The authorities in Cape Town simply could not impose their will on the countryside against the wishes of the local gentry.<sup>99</sup>

This power could take root and gather its strength because there was no major conflict of interests between the gentry of the South-Western Cape and the other major sections of colonial society. Rather they developed a sort of working alliance with all of them, as the others realised that their interests were closely tied to those of the gentry. Three major groups have to be discussed. First, there were the farmers of the other districts of the Cape Colony. These were generally pastoral farmers, although the development of coastal shipping allowed the establishment of wheat farms along much of the southern coast where the problems of transport had previously made commercial grain growing impossible.<sup>100</sup>

The economy of the east of the colony, too, was beginning to catch up on the West. The growth of the towns of the east – Port Elizabeth, Graaff-Reinet and Grahamstown, above all – testifies to the wealth that was being generated in the area during the first third of the nineteenth century. Initially, this was based on meat, on the presence of large numbers of British troops on the frontier provided a market that had not previously existed outside the South-West Cape. Even though the contract system survived for Cape Town, the requirements of the army and the increasing competition which the con-

<sup>98</sup> On this, see Mary Rayner, 'Slaves, Slave-owners and the British State: the Cape Colony 1806–1834', *SSA*, XII (1982), 26, 31; I. E. Edwards, *Towards Emancipation: A Study in South African Slavery*, (Cardiff, 1942), 126–135.

<sup>99</sup> Rayner, 'Slaves, Slave-owners and the British State', 27–8; Edwards, *Towards Emancipation*, 102, 120; Mrs Jane Philip to L.M.S., 31.10.1832, L.M.S. archives (now in the School of Oriental and African Studies) South Africa 13/1/D.

<sup>100</sup> There had been an abortive attempt to start coasting traffic from Mossel Bay in the 1780s. Robert Ross, 'Capitalism, Expansion and Incorporation', 216, and references cited there.

tracted butchers had to face from smouses led to a period of great prosperity for at least some of the eastern Cape pastoralists.<sup>101</sup> This was not without its problems. The increase of the white population was driving more and more would-be pastoralists into the marginal lands to the north of Graaff-Reinet.<sup>102</sup> The uncertainty of the frontier areas made life for the farmers in the Tarka area (around Cradock) particularly precarious.<sup>103</sup> From these areas, therefore, the main body of the *Voortrekkers* would come. But there were sufficient numbers of prosperous stock farmers in the rich lands of the Camdeboo and towards the coast, even by the last decades of the eighteenth century, and certainly thereafter, for conflicts between west and east to be kept within reasonable bounds. Their concerns, for improved conditions of commerce and for the regulation of labour relations (achieved very largely by the Caledon code of 1809 and the proclamation of 1812 on the position of the Khoikhoi), were far too similar for the differences to get out of hand.<sup>104</sup> The coming of large-scale wool production from the 1830s on only strengthened this alliance.<sup>105</sup> The sectional pressures of Eastern Cape separatists, centred on Grahamstown and with relatively little support outside the immediate neighbourhood of the town, could do little to disturb it. The particular circumstances of Grahamstown's position with regard to the Xhosa frontier were too peculiar for it to be otherwise.<sup>106</sup>

Secondly there was no serious clash of interests between the farmers and the growing merchant elite of the colony. Once its rulers had ceased to be merchants themselves, and to use their power of the office to ensure their own and the Company's prosperity, the mercantile elite saw that their own prosperity depended in large measure on the well being of agricultural capital. There is no sign of major conflicts between the producers and distributors, although on occasion there were differences of opinion on various matters of customs duties, for instance.<sup>107</sup> But in general their interests ran parallel, for so far as can be ascertained given the meagre level of research into mercantile capital at the Cape.<sup>108</sup> For instance, both merchants and farmers became shareholders in the Cape country banks, set up after 1836.<sup>109</sup> Many western Cape young men seem to have used a trading trip as a *smous*, as agent for one of the Cape Town

<sup>101</sup> RCC XXIX, 478 and XXXV, 250f.

<sup>102</sup> Van der Merwe, *Noordwaarse Beweging*, Ch. IV and VII.

<sup>103</sup> G. D. J. Duvenage, *Van die Tarka na die Transgariëp: Die Emigrasie uit die noordoostgrensdele van die Kaapkolonie, 1835–1840* (Pretoria, Johannesburg and Cape Town, 1981).

<sup>104</sup> Herman Giliomee, 'Die Administrasie-tydperk van Lord Caledon (1807–1811)', *Archives Yearbook for South African History*, (1966), II, 174 f.; Susan Newton-King, 'The Labour market of the Cape Colony, 1807–1828', in Marks and Atmore (eds.), *Economy and Society*, 176–7.

<sup>105</sup> See Tony Kirk, 'The Cape Economy and the expropriation of the Kat River settlement, 1846–1853', in Marks and Atmore (eds.), *Economy and Society*.

<sup>106</sup> On Cape separatism, see Basil A. le Cordeur, *Eastern Cape Separatism*.

<sup>107</sup> Van Zyl, *Kaapse Wyn en Brandewyn*, 205–6.

<sup>108</sup> For one of the few studies of merchants in the Western Cape, see A. P. Buirski, 'The Barrys and the Overberg', unpublished MA thesis, University of Stellenbosch, (1952).

<sup>109</sup> On this, see E. H. Arndt, *Banking and Currency Developments in South Africa, 1652–1927* (Cape Town, 1928).



merchant houses, to acquire capital with which to set up as farmers.<sup>110</sup> The western Cape merchants were active in financing the development of wool production in the east, to the chagrin of those Grahamstown men who hoped themselves to control the flow of capital from London, but not, so far as can be ascertained, to that of the woolfarmers.<sup>111</sup> It was only with the development of African peasant farming in the Eastern Cape that a relatively small proportion of merchants – those concerned to service the peasants – came into conflict with the Cape landowners.<sup>112</sup> But even then, the majority of merchants were aligned with the gentry, and frequently represented them in the political bodies. The demand for vagrancy laws and for masters and servants legislation, which formed the basis of the gentry's control of the countryside in the post-emancipation period, came from them both.<sup>113</sup>

A very similar accord of interests came into being between the gentry and the third major group, the Cape central Government. The Government needed revenue, which could only come from increasing the prosperity of the colony. This could only come if the agriculture of the colony would be made more profitable. Thus the colonial Government came to act as a lobby for the interests of the wine farmers and merchants, in particular, in London, and to do all it could at the Cape to improve the quality of the product that they could export.<sup>114</sup> At the same time the Cape Government did all it could to make the conditions for commercial farming as favourable as possible, maintaining the structure of labour relations to the advantage of the farmers, in so far as it was able.

Admittedly, until the 1850s, the Government was an independent body, responsible to London, but not to any institution within the Colony. For this reason, it could on occasion be forced by London to impose measures that were not desired by the gentry, most notably in the various measures for slave amelioration that culminated in emancipation and in Ordinance 50, which removed legal disabilities for the Khoisan.<sup>115</sup> But these measures were exceptions, as was the opposition they experienced. It was far more usual for the Governor to defend the slave-holders and their successors against humanitarian attacks from London.<sup>116</sup> Indeed it was the fear of this collusion

<sup>110</sup> Roger Beck, personal communication.

<sup>111</sup> Le Cordeur, *Eastern Cape Separatism*, 125–9.

<sup>112</sup> Stanley Trapido, 'Friends of the Natives', 259–268.

<sup>113</sup> On Vagrancy, see W. M. MacMillan, *The Cape Colour Question: A Historical Survey*, (London, 1927), 222–4, 243–6; on Masters and Servants laws, see Colin Bundy, 'The abolition of the Masters and Servants Act', *South African Labour Bulletin*, II (1975), 37–40. For a survey of white reactions to it, see Cape of Good Hope, Legislative Council, *Master and Servant: Documents on the Working of the Order in Council of the 21st July 1846* (Cape Town, 1849).

<sup>114</sup> van Zyl, *Kaapse Wyn en brandewyn*, 51–63.

<sup>115</sup> On slave amelioration, see Rayner, 'Slaves, slave owners and the British State', and Edwards, *Towards Emancipation*; on Ordinance 50, see Newton-King, 'Labour Market' and L. C. Duly, 'A Revisit with the Cape's Hottentot Ordinance of 1828', in Marcelle Kooy (ed.), *Studies in Economics and Economic History*, (Cape Town, 1972).

<sup>116</sup> This was certainly true of Lord Charles Somerset and the *Fiscaal* of the time, Sir John Truter. See, e.g. the reactions to the Financial Ordinance of 1823, in RCC XXIV, 309–312. It was probably less true of Somerset's successor, Acting-Governor Sir Richard Bourke.



which prevented London from granting representative institutions to the colony before it did.<sup>117</sup> But, in the event the British Government had neither the will nor the means to counteract the constellation of power in the colony. From the 1820s onwards the Governor was assisted by a Legislative Council in which the nominated unofficial majority was selected 'out of the chief landed proprietors and principal merchants of the colony'.<sup>118</sup> This symbolized the new alliance that ran the Cape from the end of the eighteenth century. For all their strictures on the *heemraden*, the Commissioners of Enquiry were 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 disattention to the government'.<sup>119</sup> 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.

<sup>117</sup> Edwards, *Towards Emancipation*, 161. Given the later actions of the Cape Parliament this was probably a reasonable judgement on the part of the Colonial Office. It is certainly symptomatic that the large proprietors at the Cape were prepared to barter a long-term emancipation programme for the establishment of a representative assembly. See *Proceedings of a Public Meeting held in Cape Town on 18 July 1831 to take into consideration the State of the Wine trade, Commerce, Agriculture and the Want of a Legislative Assembly*, (Cape Town, 1831), 28.

<sup>118</sup> Cited in T. R. H. Davenport, 'The consolidation of a new society: the Cape Colony', in Wilson and Thompson (eds.), *Oxford History*, I, 320.

<sup>119</sup> *RCC*, XXVII, 397.