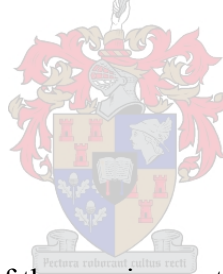


# **“It is Drought, Locusts, Depression ... and the Lord knows what else”:**

## **A socio-environmental history of white agriculture in the Union of South Africa, with reference to the Orange Free State c. 1920-1950**

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Thesis presented in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts  
(History) at the University of Stellenbosch

Prof. S.S Swart

March 2009

*Declaration*

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the owner of the copyright thereof (unless to the extent explicitly otherwise stated) and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

Date: 16 February 2009

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## Abstract

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Although the environment is of obvious and primary importance in agriculture, the historical relationship between agriculture and the environment has not been widely researched. A socio-environmental paradigm provides a useful, inter-disciplinary framework for writing history. It takes into account the fact that ‘natural disasters’ are not merely *happening to* farmers, governments and communities, subsequently disturbing economic growth-patterns and reverberating amongst policy-makers and politicians. The relationship is much more reciprocal. The environment is not perceived as a player that sometimes disrupts the historical narrative, forcing the plot in a certain direction before returning to the wings. It is rather perceived as an agent within agricultural history. The social-cultural as well as material relationships between people (in this case white farmers), state and the environment are explored as an ecosystem.

The thesis focuses on a time period after the First World War to just after the Second World War (c.1920 – c.1950). It asks questions: whom and what has informed the ideas of the state with regards to agriculture and to what extent did it filter through to the farming communities themselves? The motives behind these approaches are explored. The thesis will also look at how officials translated the policies, legislation and education into what was perceived as functional for the farmers and effective for the environment, tracing how it changed over time. The shifting perception of the farmers about the environment and themselves, and the role of the state played in ‘management’ of the environment are analysed, using press correspondence, marketing campaigns and popular texts.

Two themes that garnered much debate in the agricultural sector at the state, farmer and environment interface, include the ‘disasters’ of soil erosion and locust plagues. On the level of ‘scientific agriculture,’ the shift from Europe as a point of reference to the United States is discussed. This is done against the backdrop of South Africa’s semi-arid landscape and how farmers came to grips with this ostensibly hostile environment in an era where mechanisation and urbanisation are thought to have radically altered the conceptualisation of the natural environment.

## Opsomming

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Die omgewing is van ooglopende en primêre belang in landbou. Tog bestaan daar tans min navorsing wat die verhouding tussen landbou en die natuur op historiese grondslag ondersoek. Sosio-omgewingsgeskiedenis bied 'n nuttige, inter-disiplinêre raamwerk vir geskiedskrywing. Dit neem die feit in ag dat 'n natuurlike rampe' nie slegs bloot *met* boere, regerings en gemeenskappe gebeur en daardeur ekonomiese groeipatrone versteur en onder beleidsmakers en politici weerklank vind nie. Inteendeel, die verhouding is baie meer wederkerig. Die omgewing word nie slegs gesien as 'n speler wat soms die narratief onderbreek en in 'n ander rigting dwing voor dit weer agter die skerms tree nie. Dit word eerder beskou as 'n rolspeler in die landbougeskiedenis, waarvan die sosio-kulturele sowel as die materiële verhoudings tussen mense (in hierdie geval wit boere), die staat en die omgewing as ekosisteem ondersoek word.

Die tesis neem die tydperk net na die Eerste Wêreldoorlog tot pas na die Tweede Wêreldoorlog in oënskou. Vrae word gestel rondom wie en wat die idees van die staat met betrekking tot landbou gevorm het, en tot watter mate dit tot die boerdery gemeenskappe deurgedring het. Die motiewe agter hierdie benaderings, en hoe die amptenare die beleidrigtings, wetgewing en voorligting wat as noodsaaklik vir boere n tot voordeel van die omgewing geag is aan boere oorgedra het, word ondersoek ten doel om verandering oor tyd daarin na te speur. Die veranderende persepsies van boere oor die omgewing en hulself, asook die rol van die staat in die 'bestuur' van die omgewing, word ook geanaliseer deur van korrespondensie in die pers, bemarkingsveldtogte en populêre tekste gebruik te maak

Twee temas wat baie debat uitgelok het in die raakvlak tussen die landbou-sektor, die boer en die omgewing, is die 'rampe' van gronderosie en sprinkaanplae. Op die vlak van 'wetenskaplike boerderykennis' word die klemverskuwing vanaf Europa na Amerika as hoof verswysingspunt onder die loep geneem. Dit word gedoen teen die agtergrond van Suid-Afrika as semi-droë landskap en die wyse waarop boere 'n klaarblyklik vyandige omgewing in 'n era waar meganisering en verstedeliking die konsep van die natuurlike omgewing oënskynlik radikaal verander het, verwerk het.

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My family,my parents who supported me beyond measure and taught me a love for learning and knowledge, and my sister who keeps me grounded.

And finally I wish to thank God for being my constant Companion and for reassurance.

*I dedicate this thesis to my late grandfathers, a farmer and a gardener.*

## List of Abbreviations and Note on Translation

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ARC-PPI: Agricultural Research Council, Plant Protection Institute

*LW: Landbouweekblad*

OA: Onderstepoort Archive

SANA: South African National Archives

VAB: Free State Archives

VOC: Vereenigde Oos-Indische Compagnie

USA: United States of America

Please note that all the translations from Afrikaans to English are my own; exceptions will be noted in the footnotes. Where there is a significant nuance in meaning, the original Afrikaans will be quoted in the footnote.

The title quote comes from one of CM van den Heever's novels: "Dit is die droogte, sprinkane, depressie ... die Vader weet nog wat alles."

(C.M van den Heever quoted by A. Coetzee, *'n Hele Os vir 'n Ou Broodmes: Grond en die Plaasnarratief sedert 1595* (Cape Town: Van Schaik, Human Rousseau, 2000):85.

## Table of Contents

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### Table of Contents

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Declaration   | i   |
| Abstract  | ii  |
| Opsomming   | iii |
| Acknowledgements  | iv  |
| List of Abbreviations   | v   |
| Table of Contents   | vi  |
| List of Tables and Figures  | ix  |
| CHAPTER 1   |     |
| INTRODUCTION: Literature Review and Methodology                                     |     |
| 1.1 Introduction  | 1   |
| 1.2 Socio-environmental history: an interdisciplinary venture                       | 1   |
| 1.3 Histories of states, people, power and the environment                          | 3   |
| 1.4 Environmental and socio-environmental history of Southern Africa c. 1980 – 2007 | 7   |
| 1.5 Socio-environmental histories of Afrikaners                                     | 13  |
| 1.6 Sources and methodology   | 16  |
| 1.7 Conclusion  | 20  |



## CHAPTER 2

“Soil erosion is volk erosion”: Officials, Experts and Soil Conservation c. 1920 – 1950

|  |    |
|--|----|
| 2.1 Introduction   | 22 |
| 2.2 Soil erosion and soil conservation: terms and definitions  | 24 |
| 2.3.1 The first official engagement with soil in the Orange Free State and the Union c. 1809 – 1914. | 29 |
| 2.3.2 The Final Report of the Drought Investigation Commission, 1923                                 | 33 |
| 2.3.3 Education and farming as <i>profession</i> : c.1924 -1929                                      | 36 |
| 2.3.4 The Soil Erosion conference, 1929.   | 38 |
| 2.4 The Great Depression and its aftermath c. 1929 – 1941.   | 40 |
| 2.5 The Veld and Forest Conservation Act of 1941.  | 44 |
| 2.6 Reconstruction and the war against soil erosion: c. 1941- c. 1950.                               | 45 |
| 2.6.1 The Reconstruction Committee, 1943.  | 46 |
| 2.6.2 The National Veld Trust.   | 48 |
| 2.7 The Soil Conservation Act of 1946  | 52 |
| 2.8.1 Afrikaner nationalism and soil erosion, c. 1930 – 1950.  | 57 |
| 2.8.2 Soil erosion as war c. 1939-1950.  | 67 |
| 2.8.3 Farming with Nature – not against Nature.  | 70 |
| 2.8.4 Saving the Soil or Staying Solvent: The farmer’s dilemma.                                      | 72 |
| 2.9 Conclusion   | 74 |

## CHAPTER 3

“We have much to learn from America”: Influences of America on white South African Agriculture, c. 1920-1950.

|  |    |
|--|----|
| 3.1 Introduction.  | 77 |
| 3.2 Environmental and agricultural comparison: USA and South Africa. | 81 |
| 3.3 Dust Bowl and South Africa, c. 1930 – 1950.                      | 86 |
| 3.4 The influence of American legislation, c. 1933 – 1946.           | 88 |
| 3.5 The influence of an American ideology of “progress.”             | 91 |
| 3.6 The American influence on education.                             | 93 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| 3.7 American influence in agronomic science.  | 97  |
| 3.8 The American influence in the mechanisation of agriculture.   | 101 |
| 3.9 Active propagation by the United States?  | 102 |
| 3.10 Conclusion.  | 107 |
| <br>  |     |
| CHAPTER 4   |     |
| “To kill the locusts, not the farmers”: Officials, Farmers and the Plagues of Pharaoh, c. 1920 -1950                        |     |
| 4.1 Introduction  | 110 |
| 4.2 The locusts and grasshoppers of South Africa.   | 110 |
| 4.3 The destruction of locusts.   | 115 |
| 4.4 The science of destruction.   | 118 |
| 4.5 The politics of destruction c. 1920 – 1936.   | 125 |
| 4.6 The agents of destruction: neighbours and locust officers.  | 134 |
| 4.7 The religion of destruction.  | 140 |
| 4.8 Black Africans and locust destruction.  | 148 |
| 4.9 Conclusion.   | 150 |
| <br>  |     |
| CHAPTER 5   | 153 |
| “A time of Depression, Drought and Locust destruction”: Drought and agriculture in the Union of South Africa, c.19120-1950. |     |
| 5.1 Desiccation and drought: descriptions and definitions.  | 154 |
| 5.2 Drought as historic phenomenon in South Africa.   | 158 |
| 5.3 Drought, desiccation and erosion.   | 162 |
| 5.4 The trauma of drought.  | 166 |
| 5.5 Soil and identity.  | 168 |
| <br>  |     |
| CONCLUSION  | 172 |
| <br>  |     |
| SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY   | 178 |

## List of Tables and Figures

---

### Tables:

|           |   |     |
|-----------|---|-----|
| Table 2.1 | Showing Draft Bill presented by Veld Trust and presented before parliament.<br>(Based on B. Dodson, "Above Politics? Soil Conservation in 1940s South Africa," <i>South African Historical Journal</i> 50 (May 2004): 58.)  | 53  |
| Table 4.1 | Government expenditure on anti-locust campaigns.<br>(Based on <i>Report of the Proceedings of the Inter-State Locust Conference 30 July to 3 August 1934</i> , (Pietermaritzburg: <i>The Natal Witness</i> , 1935), 37.)  | 116 |
| Table 4.2 | Brown locust swarms killed in relation to government expenditure 1920-1926. (Based on J.T Potgieter, <i>A Contribution to the Biology of the Brown Swarm Locust</i> Science Bulletin 82, Stellenbosch-Elsenburg College of Agriculture of the University of Stellenbosch Scientific Bulletin 6, (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1929): 5.) | 117 |
| Table 5.1 | Percentage of average monthly rainfall July 1932- June 1933.<br>(Based on T.E.W. Schumann, "Die Jaar se Weerstoestande in die Unie," <i>Boerdery in Suid-Afrika</i> (December, 1933): 523.)   | 154 |
| Table 5.2 | Percentage of total area declared drought disaster district.<br>(S.J. de Swardt, "Staatsvoorsiening teen Droogte: Die omvang van die Droogtevraagstuk," <i>Boerdery in Suid-Afrika</i> (June 1941):17.)   | 155 |

### Figures:

|            |  |    |
|------------|--|----|
| Figure 2.1 | An example of advertising capitalising on the call for 'progressive' farming. The heading of this advertisement reads "The time for scientific farming has come."<br>Source: <i>Landbouweekblad</i> (24 March 1920):1947.  | 31 |
| Figure 2.2 | This cartoon captured how soil erosion was portrayed as being 'above politics.'<br>Source: <i>Rand Daily Mail</i> (17 May 1946).   | 58 |
| Figure 2.3 | Soil erosion (especially leeching) was often portrayed in advertisements for fertiliser such as this as an enemy with criminal intent. The advertisement on the left reads "ban the robber" and the one on the right "do not rob your soil."<br>Source: <i>Landbouweekblad</i> (20 September 1944):22 and (28 March 1945). | 69 |

- Figure 2.4 “Contour your ridges and save your soil” Advertisers were usually much more prone to focus on saving the soil as making good business sense. 70  
Source: *Landbouweekblad* (13 December 1950):2.
- Figure 2.5 This advertisement equates soil exploitation to poverty, through using mining images. 71  
Source: *Landbouweekblad* (1 November 1944):24.
- Figure 2.6 This advertisement promises efficient machines for Soil and Water Conservation, ‘at low cost.’ 73  
Source: *Landbouweekblad* (7 December 1949):62.
- Figure 3.1 Maps of South Africa and the United States, showing major isohyets. 81  
Source: W. Beinart and P. Coates, *Environment and History: The taming of nature in the USA and South Africa*. (London: Routledge, 1995).
- Figure 3.2 Two examples of mechanisation in America coupled with images of progress, both from the *Landbouweekblad*. The image on the left gave “more examples of highly mechanised agriculture in America” and the one on the right pictured America’s largest maize-belt. 92  
Source: *Landbouweekblad* (1December 1948):64 and (21 March 1945).
- Figure 3.3 This map, with the USA and the TVA prominently occupying the centre of the world is an illustration of the company’s global ambitions. 106  
Source: Ekbladh, D. “‘Mr. TVA’: Grass-Roots Development. David Lilienthal, and the Rise and Fall of the Tennessee Valley Authority as a Symbol for U.S. Overseas Development, 1933-1973.” *Diplomatic History* 26 (Summer 2002).
- Figure 3.4 The TVA ideology is strikingly visualised on the cover page of this book by its first president. 107  
Source: Ekbladh, D. “‘Mr. TVA’: Grass-Roots Development. David Lilienthal, and the Rise and Fall of the Tennessee Valley Authority as a Symbol for U.S. Overseas Development, 1933-1973.” *Diplomatic History* 26 (Summer 2002).
- Figure 4.1 Map showing the major outbreak areas of the brown locust, part of which falls in the south western Free State. 113  
Source: J.C. Faure, *The Life-History of the Brown Locust*. T.U.C. Bulletin 4 (Pretoria 1923).

- Figure 4.2 An advertisement for BHC. Note the war metaphor, with the bigger-than-life locust and the heading that reads: The volk's food is threatened! 119  
Source: *Die Landbouweekblad*, (6 December 1950): 37.
- Figure 4.3 The inscription on the back reads: "Field conference in Aberdeen district with field and technical staff. B.H.C: Much nicer and holier than the arsenic of yore." Death by arsenide was slow, taking up to three days. Judging on the people present, which include entomologists like Faure and Du Plessis, the photo must have been taken in the 1940s. 122  
Source: ARC-PPI.
- Figure 4.4 The subtitle reads: "What the farmer of today works." Farmers were kept from planting and harvesting by the locust plague. Note the diminutive black worker carrying what can be a bucket of water to wet the bait, but is probably the poison mixture to be used in the pump. 130  
Source: *Landbouweekblad* (5 December 1924): 772.
- Figure 4.5 One company, S.A Farm Industries, capitalised on the locust outbreaks, buying dried and dead locusts. 133  
Source: *Landbouweekblad* (21 November 1924):686.
- Figure 4.6 The caption here reads "Despairing because locusts from other districts ate all his veld. Farmers sometimes blamed other farmers and districts for letting the locusts 'escape.'" 134  
Source: *Landbouweekblad* (19 March 1924): 1281.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### Literature Review and Methodology

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#### 1.1 Introduction.

The goal of this literature review is to orientate the thesis within the current historiography, as well as to provide a background on the literature upon which this thesis draws. It is divided into four sections. Firstly, the interdisciplinary nature of socio-environmental history, as is of consequence to this thesis, will be discussed. Secondly, an overview of the secondary sources will be given, starting with works that do not necessarily come from self-conscious socio-environmental history. These works are nevertheless seminal scholarship on rural histories and. Moreover, they sometimes also include the environment as factor. One must be careful not to over-interpret the inclusion or exclusion of nature as an active player in many of these works; sometimes 'nature' merely does not fall within the scope of the specific text. Sometimes, however, it is possible to infer the intellectual climate from how the environment has been included or excluded. After looking at these more general works, a synopsis of South African environmental history will be presented, locating the thesis within this historiography. Thirdly, the lacuna this thesis seeks to address in the above historiography, namely Afrikaner environmental history in a non Cape-centric location, will be explored.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently *how* the thesis seeks to add to the historiography will be explained, including the methodologies and sources used in writing the thesis. Lastly, a quick overview of the layout of the proceeding chapters will be given.

#### 1.2 Socio-environmental history: an interdisciplinary venture.

This thesis is positioned within the broad field of environmental history. More specifically, its point of departure is socio-environmental history. Socio-

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, the word Afrikaners will be used to refer to white people who spoke Afrikaans or a form thereof as mother tongue. In this time-frame, this was mostly its accepted meaning. This nomenclature is frequently contested of course. Also see H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People*. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2003, xix

environmental history includes the social and political histories of rural South Africa, whereas ‘pure’ environmental history can tend to lean towards environmental determinism. Although socio-environmental history as a distinct field of South African history is rather new, there is not necessarily a paucity of sources with regards to the role of ‘nature’ or the ‘environment’ as a potential broker in historical change. The environment has featured in a variety of in-depth studies ranging from Marxist to liberal and also nationalist studies, but only by the end of the 1990s historiographies of environmental history in South Africa started to appear.<sup>2</sup> Since then the scholarship affiliating itself specifically with environmental histories proliferated, especially with regards to the Cape Colony.<sup>3</sup>

This literature review will trace some salient points along this continuum, especially pertaining to the agrarian environment of South Africa, and seek to show at which coordinates the thesis plots itself.<sup>4</sup> As already stated, not all of the works drawn upon are self-consciously moulded as socio-environmental histories, but many of the ideas and interpretations encapsulated in them can be drawn upon by socio-environmental historians. Apart from the fact that “socio-environmental” only surfaced as a discernable category of analysis in South African history in the past decade or so, one will deny a wealth of sources if one insists on forcing histories in specific moulds, and then disregard those one do not agree with. Works of history, due to their subject matter, cannot be written, nor survive, in isolation from the subjects broached by other disciplines. This is especially true with regards to socio-environmental history, where the historian has to actively engage not only with other historians but also with other disciplines in order to write credible history. A history of soil conservation and locust plagues can hardly be convincing if it does not even glance at soil science and entomology. History, however, also remains a specific endeavour, recording change over time in mostly anthropogenic contexts. A balance should be sought, and works

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<sup>2</sup> P. Steyn, “The Greening of our Past? An Assessment of South African Environmental History,” *New Contree* 46 (November 1999). <<http://h-net.org/~environ/historiography/safrica.htm>.>

<sup>3</sup> L. van Sittert, “The Nature of Power: Cape Environmental History, the History of Ideas and Neo-liberal historiography,” *Journal of African History* 45 (2004), 305.

<sup>4</sup> In his “Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History,” J.R McNeill provides a useful metaphor for this kind of historiography: “a series of soundings, of varying depths” as an extensive survey of all the literature published (in his case, on American Environmental History) would take “a century of summers” to read. Although the amount of literature pertaining to South Africa will maybe take one summer, I have tried to include many of the landmark books, and some of the important articles. J.R. McNeill, “Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History,” *History and Theory, Theme Issue* 42, (December 2003), 5-43.

of history can be located along the continuum of knowledge narratives. Then one has recourse to a variety of tools to write history, consciously deciding which to use and which to stow away for now. The only prerequisite, of course, is to use them well, otherwise one risks a work that might come across as clumsy.

### **1. 3 Histories of states, people, power and the environment.**

Whereas environmental and socio-environmental history has been a discernable trend in history in the United States and United Kingdom since the late 1960s, academics working on Southern African history in the 1970s and 1980s were preoccupied with the political problems of race and class at the time. It is the social relations and the apparent contrariety of rural and urban spheres, black communities and white communities, and the struggle for access to resources such as land, which features most often in agrarian histories of South Africa, and not the actual environment or land fought for. When ‘nature’ features it is as an economic resource, more specifically a resource for the commercial surplus food production that has been a part of South African imperial history since the VOC planted a refreshment station at the Cape of Good Hope, and agriculture continued to be a dominant, if not *the* dominant agent of socio-political change until the discovery of minerals in the 1860s.

Although the role of nature in shaping some of the characteristics of South African history has first been mentioned by nationalist historians such as P.J. van der Merwe in his *Trekboer* trilogy,<sup>5</sup> the first historian of South Africa to genuinely include a critical description of people’s relationship with their environment in a book, is C.W. de Kiewiet in his 1949 *A History of South Africa, Social and Economic*.<sup>6</sup> He took environmental conditions as an active factor and not just the backdrop against which history’s actors performed. De Kiewiet emphasised his use of the influential 1923 Drought Commission Report<sup>7</sup> and included meteorological data and maps.<sup>8</sup> He

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<sup>5</sup> Starting with P.J. van der Merwe, *Die noortwaartse beweging van die Boere voor die Groot Trek (1770-1842)* (Den Haag, 1938).

<sup>6</sup> C.W. de Kiewiet, *A History of South Africa, Social and Economic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941). The first historical work in South Africa to make explicit use of the environment as a central actor was B.H. Dicke, in an essay that linked the failure of the Van Rensburg Trek to the threat of the tsetse fly. Steyn, “The Greening of our past,” 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Finale Rapport van die Droogte Ondersoek Kommissie, Oktober 1923* (Cape Town: State Press, 1923), [U.G. 49-'23.]

<sup>8</sup> De Kiewiet, *A History of South Africa*, xi.



underscored the semi-arid character of South Africa's interior, relating that, though drought in itself may not occur with increasing frequency in the twentieth century, man's influence weakened the "power of the land to resist drought."<sup>9</sup> He pre-empted many environmental historians at the end of the twentieth century with the active role he accords nature in his interpretation of history. Unlike many of his contemporaries, De Kiewiet did not suggest that it is mainly the acts of 'great men' that drove historical change.

The historical stage for 'great men' has become increasingly crowded as social and gender historians have, for example, added 'ordinary people,' 'women' and the 'subaltern'. In this regard, De Kiewiet was one of the first South African historians to include, for instance, the misreading of the environment by governing structures and farmers alike as a possible reason for the failure of some colonial enterprises. De Kiewiet's conclusion with regards to why the Dutch East India Company at the Cape remained small, is an example of this:

"The real sinning of the Dutch East India Company was not so much in its monopoly as in its effort to insist upon a type of settlement more suited to the climate and conditions of Europe than of South Africa."<sup>10</sup>

Although he mostly steered clear from the trappings of environmental determinism, he tended to over-simplify the Boers' relationship with nature on the one hand stating that:

"The life of the Boers was the story of their relations with the climate and the soil of the country which they made their own"<sup>11</sup>

and on the other hand that:

"The energy and determination of the early settlers were not conspicuously used in wresting from the soil all the fruits that it would yield...Much of the energy and determination of the Boers was used more against the natives than against Nature"<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> De Kiewiet, 189.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

The first mentioned quote especially, corroborated Swart's theory that "the Afrikaans 'colonisation' of the landscape is part of an insistence of the natural right to belong,"<sup>13</sup> but, unlike Swart, he did not follow up on why he gives the argument such weight. Furthermore, it seems as if De Kiewiet implicitly put "Nature" and "Natives" on the same level as forces "opposing" Boer intrusion. 'The natural right to belong' is however, a concept that will be expounded upon through the course of the thesis. Although the environment and relationships with nature factor in De Kiewiet's work, it remained at its heart an economic history, where nature is seen as an economic resource.

After De Kiewiet, the most salient secondary sources to this thesis were those focussing on farming in South Africa or rural South Africa from the 1970s onwards. In the liberal tradition, Wilson's section on farming in South Africa in *The Oxford History of South Africa* (1971)<sup>14</sup> put the spotlight on how agriculture after the mineral revolution shaped racial relationships in South Africa, and the role it played in preventing the formation of an interracial working class. 'Nature' is a backdrop, a colourful but largely inanimate landscape against which racial relationships played out, as the following quote from the introduction made clear:

"No one who wishes to understand the history of South Africa in the century that followed the discovery of diamonds can ignore the *platteland*. For the *platteland* was the cradle of Afrikaner life and nationalism...It was into the soil of the farms that the first English settlers set their roots... It was as agricultural labourers that Indians were indentured into the country. It was in the vineyards and wheatlands of the Western Cape that the shattered Khoi became the coloured people."<sup>15</sup>

In the Marxist tradition, agriculture, with 'nature' as its base, was taken as one of the main modes of production in 'rural areas', and as such has also been a topic for studies such as Colin Bundy's *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry*

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<sup>13</sup> S.Swart, "The Ant of the White Soul: Popular Natural History, the Politics of Afrikaner Identity & the Entomological Writings of Eugène Marais," W. Beinart and J. McGregor, eds. *Social History and African Environments*. (Oxford: James Currey; Athens: Ohio University Press; Cape Town: David Phillip, 2003), 226.

<sup>14</sup> F. Wilson, "Farming 1866 - 1966," M. Wilson and L. Thompson, eds. *The Oxford History of South Africa*. Vol II, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

(1979).<sup>16</sup> The subjects of the book are black Africans in South Africa, and the role of nature in itself was generally restricted to a “good year” or a “bad year.”<sup>17</sup> The book is consequential for this work, however, in its exploration of rural economic relationships of agricultural production. The struggle for natural resources and how this shaped pre-industrial society is also seen as definitive in frontier histories of South Africa. The most influential work in this regard is that of Leonard Thompson and H. Lamar in *The Frontier in History – North America and South Africa Compared* (1981).<sup>18</sup>

Moving on to an industrialising South Africa, the most important work focusing on agriculture as such in the region under discussion in this thesis is that of Timothy Keegan. His 1981 dissertation<sup>19</sup> on the transformation of agrarian society and economy in industrializing South Africa is the strongest empirical foundation for most social or economic histories on the region. It does not, however, concern itself with nature or the environment *per se*; the role assigned to it is that of an outside intrusive force, responsible for droughts and pestilences, certainly secondary to the human relationships of race, class and money. An aside reference to nature included, for example, the remark that the perception of some Boers were that natives belong to the natural elements they have to battle with, like drought or locusts.<sup>20</sup> Apart from its merit as an important work on agriculture in South Africa, Keegan’s dissertation was also vital as one of the few that focus on the region outside the Cape Colony and Natal. It was rather situated in the Orange Free State, broadly sharing the geography that is under discussion in this thesis.

Specific historical analysis of ‘nature’ or the ‘environment’ as a component of a larger social history was dealt with in W. Beinart, P. Delius and S. Trapido, *Putting a Plough to the Ground: Accumulation and Dispossession in Rural South Africa, 1850-*

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<sup>16</sup> C. Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* (London: Heinemann, 1979).

<sup>17</sup> J. Lewis, “The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry: A Critique and Reassessment,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 11. (October 1984), 2-3. Lewis quotes it in a different context than I do here.

<sup>18</sup> H. Lamar and L. Thompson, *The Frontier in History: North America and Southern Africa compared* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981).

<sup>19</sup> T.J. Keegan, “The Transformation of Agrarian Society and Economy in Industrialising South Africa: The Orange Free State Grain Belt in the Early twentieth Century,” D.Phil diss. (University of London, 1981).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

1930 (1986).<sup>21</sup> These essays explore different aspects of how rural relations changed in the wake of the mineral revolution, putting the spotlight on rural relationships between people, race and class. Staying with social histories, *The Seed is Mine: The Biography of Kas Maine*,<sup>22</sup> is the much lauded 1996 biography by Charles van Onselen that drew on creative research work to describe the history of the impact of the industrialisation of agriculture and the changing political atmosphere on a sharecropper in the Maize Triangle in the north west of South Africa. The work includes a depiction of the environmental conditions and the impact that it had on the lives of those who worked the land, not only economically, but also socially and psychologically.

Even though the above mentioned works are not readily classified as works of socio-environmental history, socio-environmental history is one of the most interdisciplinary strands of history. As such, it has much to give and much to take from other frameworks of history, especially social history. Socio-environmental history can be seen as literally from the roots up, and can thus also draw on other histories to find its own coordinates within South African historiography. On a more theoretical level, this includes broader themes in historiography as such, but on another level, ‘nature’ as grappled with in this thesis, is not easily pinned down to a few square metres or subject to anthropocentric boundaries.

#### **1.4 Environmental and socio-environmental history of Southern Africa c. 1980 – 2007.**

The field of socio-environmental history may be relatively young in and on South Africa as such, but it has been a discernable ‘school’ in the discipline of history in the United States since the late 1960s and early 1970s, energised by the popular environmentalist activism of the time.<sup>23</sup> In the subsequent years it gained societies,

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<sup>21</sup> W. Beinart, P. Delius and S. Trapido, S. eds. *Putting a Plough to the Ground: Accumulation and Dispossession in Rural South Africa 1850-1930* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1986).

<sup>22</sup> C. van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, A South African Sharecropper 1894-1985* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996).

<sup>23</sup> D. Worster, “Transformations of the Earth: Toward an Agroecological Perspective in History,” *The Journal of American History* 76 (March 1990):1088. Again, depending on how inter- and intra-disciplinary boundaries are drawn, one could argue that Frederick Jackson Turner’s sometimes environmentally deterministic frontier thesis was the first major work of environmental history. F.J.

journals and special units at universities, often linked to antebellum studies. Momentous works include Samuel P. Hayes (*Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, 1959)<sup>24</sup> or the works of the don of environmental history, Donald Worster (*Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, 1978)<sup>25</sup> and the widely read work of William Cronon (*Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, 1991).<sup>26</sup> The methodologies used and conclusions drawn in these works have informed environmental histories globally.

Imperative for South African histories, environmental history has been a clearly detectable strand in studies of colonialism and empire, with Alfred Crosby's *The Colombian Exchange* (1972)<sup>27</sup> often seen as the pioneering study. Concentrating specifically on Africa, David Anderson's 1984 article in *African Affairs* "Depression, Dust Bowl, Demography, and Drought: The Colonial State and Soil Conservation in East Africa during the 1930s"<sup>28</sup> has frequently been referred to in subsequent studies.

It was, however, mostly since the late 1980s that environmental histories of empire proliferated, with specific subsections on Southern Africa. The first work of note is probably that of David Anderson and Richard Grove *Conservation in Africa: People, Policies and Practice* (1987),<sup>29</sup> where social scientists engaged with biological scientists in writing on different topics of African conservation history. The book is of particular importance because it brought the agency of Africans to the fore, dispelling myths of blanket-slovenliness where African peoples and conservation are concerned. The topics covered mostly colonial and post-colonial approaches to conservation, concentrating on indigenous knowledge. White people featured chiefly as part of the bureaucracy.<sup>30</sup>

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Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1893* (Washington: Publisher Unknown, 1894): 199-227.

<sup>24</sup> S.P Hayes, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1959, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> D. Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>26</sup> W. Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1991).

<sup>27</sup> A. Crosby, *The Colombian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport: Westport Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> D. Anderson, "Depression, Dust Bowl, Demography and Drought: The Colonial State and Soil Conservation in East Africa during the 1930s" *African Affairs* 83 (1984):321-343.

<sup>29</sup> D. Anderson, and R. Grove, eds, *Conservation in Africa: people, policies and practice*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>30</sup> E.g chapter 3, J.McCracken, "Colonialism, Capitalism and Ecological Crisis in Malawi: a Reassessment," 63 -79.

In 1989, a Special Issue of the *Journal of Southern African Studies* on the politics of Conservation in Southern Africa (Vol 15, No 2, 1989) focussed on a variety of socio-environmental histories, including conservation policies and National Park histories by Jane Carruthers (Kruger National Park in South Africa) and Terrence Ranger (Matobo National Park in Zimbabwe).<sup>31</sup> Although the topics were a bit haphazard, it was an important step towards establishing a broad historical field that took the environment as its point of departure. One strand that became clear is the history of wildlife conservation in Ranger and Carruthers articles. Conservation is not only a topic of terrestrial histories, and Lance van Sittert turned his focus to histories of Cape fisheries and conservation.<sup>32</sup> Perceptions of wilderness and game parks are also important themes within South African socio-environmental and environmental history that cannot be ignored if one is to engage seriously with perceptions of nature. In 1995, Carruthers' *The Kruger National Park: a Social and Political History*<sup>33</sup> explored how real and imagined bonds with nature are drawn upon by political brokers. South Africa is a country with considerable wildlife resources that play an active role in rural economies and societies. Tourism, an important part of wildlife conservation, brings with it its own politics. Although wildlife conservation differs in many aspects from agricultural conservation, some of the questions remain the same: what is conserved, why it is conserved and how does conservation impact on human societies.

Anthropologists Melissa Leach and James Fairheads' seminal study *Misreading the African Landscape: Society and Ecology in a Forest-Savannah Mosaic* was published in 1996.<sup>34</sup> The implication of the books' central conclusion - that colonial assumptions about savannah were frequently wrong, and that local management can actually improve the well-being of an ecosystem - reverberated beyond the discipline of anthropology and had a profound impact on later works on African environments.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> J.Carruthers, "Creating a National Park 1910-1926" and T.Ranger "Whose Heritage? The Case of Matoba National Park," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 15 (1989).

<sup>32</sup> E.g. L. van Sittert, " 'More in the Breach than in the Observance': Crayfish, Conservation & Capitalism c.1890-c.1939," *Environmental History Review* 17 (Winter, 1993): 20-46.

<sup>33</sup> J. Carruthers, *The Kruger National Park: a Social and Political History* (Durban:University of Natal Press, 1995).

<sup>34</sup> M.Leach and J. Fairhead, *Misreading the African Landscape: Society and Ecology in a Forest-Savannah Mosaic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>35</sup> J.R. McNiell, "Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History," 23.

One of the first volumes to concentrate on settler histories, thereby comparing South Africa to a different set of geographies, is *Ecology and Empire: Environmental History of Settler Societies* (1997)<sup>36</sup> edited by Tom Griffiths and Libby Robin. The book focussed specifically on the impact on and interaction with the environment by the political and economic brokers of settler societies in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. The chapters on South Africa concentrated specifically on the assertion of colonial authority in the ovine and bovine sectors of settler agriculture, as well as the role and function of National Parks in Afrikaner Nationalist myth creation. The book asked questions about the interaction between nature and culture, of how settlers of the empire came to terms with an ‘other’ natural world. It also portrayed how their ecological consciousnesses were shaped in a ‘home’ on the other side of the world, adapted to or resisted the new environmental conditions. The questions were, however, only answered where demographic take-over happened relatively easily and decisively,<sup>37</sup> and mostly only where the first few generations are concerned. Environmental histories of the empire in a longer, geographically broader view come to the fore again in Richard Grove’s *Ecology, Climate and Empire: colonialism and global environmental history, 1400 -1940* (1997).<sup>38</sup>

Whilst these works provided the global background for similar studies of South Africa, most of the specifically socio-environmental histories that focus on agriculture in Southern Africa are from the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Much of it is Cape-centric, focussing on the small English-speaking minority. Good examples are Karen Brown’s dissertation on *Progressivism, agriculture & conservation in the Cape Colony c. 1902 – 1908* (2002)<sup>39</sup> and William Beinart’s book *The Rise of Conservation in South Africa: Settlers, Livestock and the Environment 1770-1950* (2003).<sup>40</sup> They mainly covered agricultural problems in the Cape frontier regions. Beinart, who is arguably the most cited environmental historian on Southern Africa, has covered a vast area of environmental concerns as refracted through the prism of state-farmer

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<sup>36</sup> T. Griffiths and L. Robin, eds. *Ecology and Empire: Environmental History of Settler Societies* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997).

<sup>37</sup> That is, in Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

<sup>38</sup> R. Grove, *Ecology, Climate and Empire: Colonialism and Global Environmental History, 1400 - 1940*. (Cambridge: The White Horse Press, 1997).

<sup>39</sup> K. Brown, “Progressivism, Agriculture and Conservation in the Cape Colony circa 1902-1908.” DPhil diss. (University of Oxford, 2002).

<sup>40</sup> W. Beinart, *The Rise of Conservation in South Africa: Settlers, Livestock and the Environment 1770-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

relationships, especially where issues of conservation in a variety of forms arose. This included, amongst others, studies of soil conservation as form of colonial control, the history of jackal eradication and vermin control, and an in depth study of the history of sheep farming in the Cape region. *South African Environmental History: Cases and Comparisons* (2003)<sup>41</sup>, edited by Stephen Dovers, Bill Guest and Ruth Edgecombe, contained chapters written by many of the most frequently cited historians on South African environmental history, and is perhaps the most comprehensive volume on South African environmental history to date, in any case with regards to methodological and theoretical approaches. The volume has one major shortcoming though, in that six of the eleven ‘cases’ are located in KwaZulu Natal,<sup>42</sup> and of the remaining five, four focus on the former Cape Colony,<sup>43</sup> again making it English and Cape-centric.

The best recent example of a fusion of social and environmental history set against a more localized backdrop of the landscape of agriculture is most likely *Environment, Power and Injustice: A South African Environmental History* (2003) by Nancy Jacobs.<sup>44</sup> This work is centred on the semi-arid environment of the Northern Cape Kuruman District. Key work on soil-conservation specifically as an important vehicle for political mandates has been done by Belinda Dodson, whose 2004 article “Above Politics? Soil Conservation in 1940s South Africa” in the *South African Historical*

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<sup>41</sup> R. Edgecombe and B. Guest eds. *South Africa's Environmental History: Cases and Comparisons*. (Athens: Ohio University Press, Series in Ecology and History and Cape Town: David Phillip, 2002, 2003).

<sup>42</sup> B. Ellis, ‘White Settler Impact on the Environment of Durban, 1845-1870’; J. Lambert, “‘The titihoya does not cry here anymore’: The Crisis in the Homestead Economy in colonial Natal”; J. Sithole, “‘I can see my *umuzi* where I now am... I had fields over there but now I have none’: An ecological context for the *izimpi zemibango* in the Pinetown district in South Africa, 1920 -1936”; H. Witt, “The Emergence of Privately Grown Tree Plantations”; E. Kotze, “Wakkerstroom: Grasslands, fire and war – past perspectives, present issues” (Wakkerstroom, is located on the border of Mpumalanga with KwaZulu-Natal) and G. Thompson, “The dynamics of ecological change in an era of political transformations: An environmental History of the Eastern Shores of Lake St Lucia” all in S. Dovers, R. Edgecombe and B. Guest eds. *South Africa's Environmental History*.

<sup>43</sup> N. Jacobs, “The Colonial Ecological Revolution in South Africa: The Case of Kuruman”; W. Beinart “The Environmental origins of the Pondoland Revolt”; S. Archer “Technology and ecology in the Karoo: A Century of Windmills, Wire and Changing Farm Practice” and L. Van Sittert, “Our irrepressible fellow colonist’: The Biological Invasion of the Prickly Pear (*Opuntia ficus-Indica*) in the Eastern Cape, c. 1890 c. 1910.” The only case-study that falls within a distinctly different region is the very technical chapter by J. McAllister “Fire and the South African Grassland Biome,” in S. Dovers, R. Edgecombe and B. Guest (eds) *South Africa's Environmental History: Cases and Comparisons*.

<sup>44</sup> N. J. Jacobs, *Environment, Power and Injustice: A South African Environmental History*. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).



*Journal* is based on groundbreaking archival work.<sup>45</sup> Whilst Jacobs' book set the scene for debunking declensionist narratives, Dodson's work together with that of Beinart's earlier mentioned book on conservation, opened new avenues for looking at political motivations behind conservation issues. A similar approach with regard to official documents and scientific discourse will be taken in this thesis, although it will also seek to assess the motivation behind why popular opinion could be influenced by means of nature conservation issues – why it resonated with farmers. Mostly grappling with the official documents and the memoranda in the archives, this aspect was not explored in depth by Beinart and Dodson.

'The environment', needless to say, cannot be fenced in by the imaginary boundaries of nation-states. The interdependent ecological and political histories of South Africa and Lesotho, as well as the interdisciplinary nature and thorough research of Kate Showers 2005 monograph, *Imperial Gullies: Soil Erosion and Conservation in Lesotho*,<sup>46</sup> makes it a work of great consequence. It also illustrates, as Elizabeth Musselman says of Jacobs' book, how "power relations are mediated through and against, but not determined by the state and environment."<sup>47</sup>

The above works are located within the broad theme of agriculture, and more importantly for this work they include cultivation practices. Histories of soil erosion and soil conservation play a major part in the cited works of Anderson, Beinart, Jacobs, Dodson and Showers. This is partly due to the amount of paperwork created by the bureaucracies involved, as well as the impact of the United States Dust-Bowl crisis of the 1930s, that was widely published and to a great extent shaped conservation thinking in the western world and its empires.

Very little, however, has been done on the history of locust plagues in South Africa that is not rooted in entomology or popular fiction. . The only exception seems to be an essay written by A.de V Minnaar, who wrote a short essay describing the events of

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<sup>45</sup> B. Dodson, "Above Politics? Soil Conservation in 1940s South Africa," *South African Historical Journal* 50 (May 2004): 49-64.

<sup>46</sup> K. Showers, *Imperial Gullies: Soil Erosion and Conservation in Lesotho* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005).

<sup>47</sup>E.G. Musselman, "Review: Environment, Power and Injustice: A South African Environmental History by Nancy Jacobs," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 36 (2003): 447.

the 1933-1937 locust invasions in Zululand.<sup>48</sup> Both Brown (2002) and Beinart (2002) very briefly referred to it, but as ancillary evidence in much broader cases.<sup>49</sup> Even American works are few and far between. The major exception is the ‘entomological thriller’ of J.A. Lockwood, *Locust: The Devastating Rise and Mysterious Disappearance of the Insect that Shaped the American Frontier* (2004), focussing on the only locust plagues, that of the now presumably extinct Rocky Mountain locust, known to have occurred in the United States.<sup>50</sup>

A significant number of works on environmental history and socio-environmental history are also important for the ways in which they chart histories of human interaction with nature within agricultural premises. Sometimes this is mediated through disease, such as veterinary histories of Karen Brown, or through the relationships between people and animals. It is also done in the ‘animal turn’, in which mostly domesticated animals like horses, donkeys and dogs, as explored by, amongst others, Lance van Sittert and Sandra Swart.<sup>51</sup>

### **1.5 Socio-environmental histories of Afrikaners.**

Apart from some of Swart’s work on Boerperde and other horses,<sup>52</sup> as well as some of Carruther’s studies on the importance of National Parks that links environmental history with the social history of Afrikaners in the first half of the twentieth century, the socio-environmental history of this group largely remains to be written.<sup>53</sup> As the

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<sup>48</sup> A.deV. Minnaar, “The Locust Invasion of Zululand 1933-1937,” *Natalia* 20 (1990):30-42.

<sup>49</sup> W. Beinart, “Environmental origins of the Pondoland Revolt” in R. Edgecombe and B. Guest eds. *South Africa’s Environmental History: Cases and Comparisons* (Athens: Ohio University Press, Series in Ecology and History and Cape Town: David Phillip, 2002) and K. Brown, “Progressivism, Agriculture and Conservation.”

<sup>50</sup> The book is called an “entomological thriller” by author Annie Proulx on the soft-cover edition of Basic Books (2005). As will be explained in chapter 3, there are not any locusts in Northern America, only grasshoppers. J.A. Lockwood, *Locust: The devastating rise and mysterious disappearance of the insect that shaped the American Frontier* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

<sup>51</sup> S. Swart, “‘But Where’s the Bloody Horse?’: Textuality and Corporeality in the ‘Animal Turn,’” *Journal of Literary Studies* (23 September 2007). L. van Sittert and S. Swart eds. *Canis Africanus* (Cape Town: Brill, 2008).

<sup>52</sup> This form only part of the wide-ranging oeuvre of both these authors. See for example S. Swart, “‘A Boer and His Gun and His Wife are Three Things Always together:’ Boer Masculinity and the 1914 Rebellion.” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24 (December 1998): and Carruthers, “Creating a National Park 1910-1926.”

<sup>53</sup> The same is largely true of socio-environmental histories of the Apartheid and post-Apartheid eras where Afrikaners are concerned. Exceptions include, for instance, P. Steyn’s Master’s dissertation on South African environmentalism from 1972-1992 in South Africa, albeit more on diplomatic level.

above literature review shows, much has been done on the colonial environmental history of Southern Africa, particular the Cape region. Understandably, most of the work pertains to the demographic majority of South Africa, the black populations. They are histories that, frequently (but not always) recognise the diversity of ‘the African population.’ Also receiving frequent attention, especially by Beinart and Grove, is a very small but significant minority, the English-speaking settlers as well as scientific and botanic experts hailing from Britain.<sup>54</sup> (Again, this may partly, and reasonably, be due to the amount of paperwork these officials and settlers tended to create). The colonial state apparatus with regards to policies that are geared towards shaping the interaction between people and nature put in place by these experts and politicians imported from Britain, as well as their (white) South African counterparts, are also consistently under discussion.<sup>55</sup>

When Afrikaners are considered in socio-environmental history it is usually, the ‘dead white men’ and the political structures and policies they made with regards to the black populace and game parks, which are considered. Ordinary white farmers, outside of the designations of oppressors or landowners doling out land to sharecroppers, are rarely considered. A notable exception comes not from history, but from literary debates on the *plaasroman*.<sup>56</sup> Very little history has been written yet that is comparable to that of how settlers of the empire came to terms with an ‘other’ natural world, as mentioned earlier of the volume edited by Griffiths and Robin. Beinart too concurred that “we know very little about Afrikaner ideas about drought and the extent to which they were formalised into conservationist concerns.”<sup>57</sup> The

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M.S. Steyn, “Environmentalism in South Africa, 1972-1992: an Historical Perspective,” (MA dissertation, University of the Orange Free State, 1998).

<sup>54</sup> Beinart, *The Rise of Conservation and Grove Ecology, Climate and Empire*, especially chapters 2 and 3, both drawing on John Croumbie Brown.

<sup>55</sup> W. Beinart, “Introduction: The Politics of Colonial Conservation,” *Journal for Southern African Studies* 15 (January 1989). Grove, *Ecology, Climate and Empire* and more recently, J.M. Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert: Agrarian Doctrines of Development and the Legacies of British Colonialism Series in Ecology and History*: (Ohio University Press 2007) and W. Beinart and L. Hughes, *Environment and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>56</sup> The most authoritative work is that of J.M Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven and London: Radix in association with Yale University Press 1988). He deals directly with the *plaasroman* in chapters 3 and 4 of the book.

<sup>57</sup> W. Beinart, “South African Environmental History in African Context” in Edgecombe and Guest, *South Africa’s Environmental History*, 216. The point is also made by Carruthers with regards to Afrikaners, hunting and natural history. J. Carruthers, “Tracking in Game Trials: Looking Afresh at the Politics of Environmental History in South Africa,” *Environmental History* 11.  
<<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/eh/11.4/carruthers.html>. >

reason for these lacunae can perhaps be found in the way environmental rhetoric is perceived to be frequently used by Afrikaner Nationalists to justify ideologies and policies from eugenics to forced removals. However, though demographically very much in the minority, the Afrikaners in general and Afrikaner farmers in particular, did profoundly impact on South African history.

Despite trends in current historiography, the socio-environmental history of Afrikaners is not necessarily the proverbial white elephant that comes as a unique but useless gift. The state-farmer-environment relationship of Afrikaner communities<sup>58</sup> in the first half of the twentieth century is significant for several reasons.

Firstly, whites laid claim to more than 80 per cent of the land and black commercial farming severely deteriorated due to constrictive laws that was already put in place before the inception of Apartheid, access to land is one of the major pivots on which South African history hinges.<sup>59</sup>

Secondly, seen from a political, more top-down level, as has been written on by Dodson, Beinart, Jacobs, Showers amongst others, conservation policies, especially those concerning soil conservation, has often served as a vehicle of nationalism or a means to a political end. Political ends were increasingly malleable as Afrikaner political ends as the twentieth century progressed.

Thirdly, on a cultural level, the movement from farms to cities in the wake of industrialisation had an immense influence on the identity politics of the Afrikaner, especially as the relationship with the soil is perceived of as so strong, it features linguistically in markers of identity such as the terms *landzoon* (literally: son of the land (soil) and Boer (literally: farmer) implies. Landscape imagery of ‘*hierdie wye en droewe land*’ (this wide and melancholy country), as being an empty space settled by an independent *volk*, was seminal in the construction of Afrikaner myths of origin. They were an indigenised people, but occupied an interstitial state of being “no longer European, not yet African,”<sup>60</sup> and their relationship with nature was to a certain extent mediated as such. Impacting on this, was also the increasing globalisation of networks

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<sup>58</sup> The majority of the English-speaking population was urbanised much earlier than the majority of the Afrikaans population.

<sup>59</sup> The most important one being of course the 1913 Native Land Act.

<sup>60</sup> Coetzee, *White Writing*, 11.

of knowledge exchange, with Afrikaners orientating themselves towards other ‘western civilisations’ whilst coping with a ‘non-western’ environment.

It is then to *how* I propose to write a socio-environmental history of Afrikaner agriculture in the Free State from the 1920s to the 1950s that I now turn.

### **1.6 Sources and methodology.**

Environmental history, as Donald Worster succinctly put, “defies a narrow view of political boundaries and nationality.”<sup>61</sup> It also defies the narrow view of what history is about. J.R. McNeill broadly categorised environmental history in three interlocking rings that provides useful scaffolding on which to construct a theoretical and methodological framework, namely material, intellectual/cultural and political environmental histories. A material history involves changes in biological and physical environments, and how this has an effect on human societies. The cultural/intellectual branch analyses representations of nature in literature and arts, looking at how it changed and what it reveals about the societies that created them. Lastly, the political wing, considers law and state policy “as it relates to the natural world.”<sup>62</sup> Of these three, this thesis will mostly draw on the cultural/intellectual as well as political histories, as they fit best within the scope of this thesis.

As a socio-environmental history, the material aspects will be included in as far as it wants to know what role nature had in shaping the productive methods, and conversely, what impact these methods had on nature,<sup>63</sup> however, the focus here rather lies at how societal and cultural relations influence these productive methods and is influenced by it. As all environmental history,<sup>64</sup> socio-environmental history thrives on hybridity, and needs to draw extensively on the interdisciplinary character of their task. This thesis seeks to analyse how people (Afrikaner farmers and statesmen in this case) perceived nature, what values they attached to nature and how this was mediated through a web of meanings. For this it also draws on other

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<sup>61</sup> Worster, “Appendix: Doing Environmental History”, 290.

<sup>62</sup> McNeill, “Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History,” 6.

<sup>63</sup> Worster, “Doing Environmental History,” 290.

<sup>64</sup> Needless to say, this refers to environmental history as practiced by historians, not paleoscientists.

disciplines within the humanities, such as work done by ethnographers. As pointed out by Anderson and Berglund, ethnographers have:

“...realised, from their field experiences how perceptions of and values attached to landscape encode values and fix memories to places that become sites of historical identity. Such perceptions shift, either gradually or dramatically, over time, so that landscape becomes a form of codification of history itself, seen from the viewpoints of personal expression and experience.”<sup>65</sup>

On the other hand, one must also engage with other disciplines that fall outside the humanities, the so-called ‘hard-sciences’ such as biology, physics, climatology and entomology. Kate Showers, trained as a soil scientist, for instance, has shown how important it is to also include “technical problems of soil and water”<sup>66</sup> in history even if dwarfed by the social, political and economical dimensions in order to better understand the complexities that make up history. This is especially true where environmental ‘problems’ are concerned, as ecocritic Greg Garrard states:

“Environmental problems require analysis in cultural as well as scientific terms, because they are the outcome of an interaction between ecological knowledge of nature and cultural inflection.”<sup>67</sup>

Two major sources used in this thesis, scientific tracts and textbooks on the one hand, and the popular press on the other, need tools from these varied disciplines in order to extract historical information from them. Of these tools, most prominent will be those used by the science of ecology, soil science, entomology and literary criticism. The key is to use the tools of those disciplines to write history and not to misshape the history so that it is hardly recognisable as history anymore.

Arguably, the better one understands the hard-science, the more bases one has to claim empirical evidence. However, it remains a thin line to tread between understanding the actual environment and processes of environmental change, the meteorological data, the taxonomical history of the *Locustana pardalina* (Walker), and obscuring the actual socio-environmental history through engulfing it with data.

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<sup>65</sup> P.J Stewart and A. Strathern, *Landscape, Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives* (London: Pluto Press, 2003).

<sup>66</sup> K. Showers, *Imperial Gullies*, 312.

<sup>67</sup> G. Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge 2002), 14.

Putting the boots on that is, getting out of the archive and into the field, does not, after all carry the same meaning as donning the lab-coat.<sup>68</sup> So, instead of a glib presumption of interdisciplinary competency and spurious claims to unique intellectual or moral vantage points<sup>69</sup> secondary source materials in the ‘hard-sciences’ are based more on introductory textbook readings rather than specialised articles.<sup>70</sup> It is necessary to remark though, as with any history, one must be aware of the teleological dangers involved, and be careful not to impose twenty-first century world view or issue, such as current global warming fears, onto the people one is writing about.<sup>71</sup> It was a different world.

Scientific books will however, not only be read in their capacity as secondary material providing a stable knowledge of the ‘natural world’ to use that language, but, along with popular press, also for whatever discourses one can extrapolate. This pertains to influential textbooks of the 1920s to the 1950s, the agricultural magazines of the time, as well as some specimens of the *plaasroman*, (farm novel, comparable with the *Bauernroman*) a popular genre of the time that provides insight in the role of landscape in the identity-constructs of Afrikaner farmers. Reading such a variety of texts is, in a sense, part of the experiment Gerrard called for when he asked “what

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<sup>68</sup> Worster, “Appendix: Doing Environmental History.” He means that environmental historians cannot confine themselves to their desks and that actually engaging with the environment is important for the study thereof.

<sup>69</sup> As Lance van Sittert rather sardonically warns in L. van Sittert, “Our irrepressible fellow colonist’: The biological invasion of prickly pear (*Opuntia ficus-indica*) in the Eastern Cape, c. 1890 –c. 1910.” Dovers et.al., *South Africa’s Environmental History*, 159.

<sup>70</sup> Background reading included B.G. Norton, *Searching for Sustainability: Interdisciplinary Essays in the Philosophy of Conservation Biology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); D.L. Jackson and L.L. Jackson, *The Farm as Natural Habitat: Reconnecting Food Systems with Ecosystems* (Washington: Island Press, 2002); J.M. Erskine, *Ecology and land usage in Southern Africa* (Pretoria: The Africa Institute of South Africa, 1987); P.D. Tyson, and R.A. Preston-Whyte, *The weather and climate of Southern Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); R.I. Rotberg and T.K. Rabb, *Climate and History: Studies in Interdisciplinary History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); S. Sandford, *Desertification and Development: Dryland Ecology in Social Perspective*. (London: Academic Press, 1982); S.R. Gliessman, *Agroecology: The Ecology of Sustainable Food Systems* (Boca Raton, London, New York: CRC Press, Taylor and Francis Group, 2007).

<sup>71</sup> A large component of recent (popular) ‘socio-environmental history’ literature, specifically concerning the agricultural environment, also carries with it an emotive, often doom-laden tone, lambasting American mega-industrial farms, especially big grain conglomerates such as Arthur Daniels Midland and the global environmental, social and economical impact of these ‘evil multi-nationals’. In these works, authors’ sympathies are usually made abundantly clear. Examples of these works include more nuanced and well-researched books such as Anna Bramwell’s *Ecology in the twentieth Century* (New Haven, 1989) or, on the other side of the spectrum, popular works such as *The Fatal Harvest Reader* edited by Andrew Kimbrell (Washington, 2002) and Richard Manning’s *Against the Grain: How Agriculture has hijacked civilization* (New York, 2004). Films such as Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* (2005) has also been influential.

cross-fertilization is possible between literary studies and environmental discourse in related disciplines such as history, philosophy, psychology, art history, and ethics?”<sup>72</sup>

It is perhaps even better summarized by critic Terry Eagleton:

“What would be specific to the kind of study I have in mind... would be the kinds of *effects* which discourses produce, and how they produce them. Reading a zoology textbook to find out about giraffes is part of studying zoology, but reading it to see how discourse is structured and organised, and examining what kind of effects these forms and devices produce in particular readers in actual situations, is a different kind of project. It is, in fact, probably the oldest form of literary criticism in the world, known as rhetoric.”<sup>73</sup>

Not surprisingly, there are a number of pitfalls to avoid when using literary criticism, and I do not propose to venture too much into the quagmire that is postmodernism with its shifting or slipping word meaning, signifiers and signified, taking “a linguistic turn to the greater plain where meta-narratives swirl.”<sup>74</sup> As Gerrard reminds us, however, rhetorical analysis implies that “the meaning of tropes is closely related to their wider social context. They are, therefore, not fixed entities but develop and change historically.”<sup>75</sup> History remains the primary objective here, not literature analysis. Therefore the popular texts used are those that have a traceable readership, both amongst the state officials and the farmers. *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika*, the government publication for farmers, had a circulation figure of 10 000 copies by 1929.<sup>76</sup> *Die Landbouweekblad*, though struggling with advertising in the beginning, soon became quite successful, with a circulation figure of 8000 in 1920, and by 1924 it was 10 000.<sup>77</sup> Its readers and letter-writers mainly came from the Free State.<sup>78</sup> The circulation of the *Landbouweekblad* dropped again in the middle 1930s, it was mostly due to outside factors – such as restructuring within the National Press and the increasing urbanisation of Afrikaners. After the Second World War it grew again and

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<sup>72</sup> Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 3.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>74</sup> As described by and subsequently attempted by B.D. Lockingbill in *Dust Bowl, USA: Depression America and the ecological imagination, 1929-1941* (Athens: Ohio University Press 2001), 2.

<sup>75</sup> Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 8.

<sup>76</sup> Wilcocks, “Boodskap aan die Boer,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (July 1929):1 and (n/a) “Boerdery op Trek: Moeilikhede en Moontlikhede: Boere, daar moet Spanwerk wees!” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (October 1929): 295.

<sup>77</sup> C.F.J Muller *Sonop in die Suide: Geboorte en Groei van die Nasionale Pers 1915-1948* (Kaapstad: Nasionale Boekhandel): 585

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 584.



it is still the most popular Afrikaans magazine for farmers today.<sup>79</sup> It remained an important source of information and soundboard for farmers, however, and as such is a valid and valuable text for historians.

More conventional sources include archival research done in Pretoria, Cape Town and Bloemfontein. In Pretoria, the correspondence and speech files of agricultural and related ministers of the period under scrutiny proved most useful, especially the Veld Trust correspondence in the N.C. Havenga collection and the correspondence of General J.C.C. Kemp. The files of the Chief Entomologist and the Department of Agriculture are also obvious sources. The Agricultural Research Council is a state institution linked to the Department of Agriculture, and two bodies within this council also proved helpful, the Plant Protection Institute (hereafter ARC-PPI), who have not only the scientific information, but also the documentation of previous conferences, old photographs and the legendary ‘*sprinkaanbeamptes*.’<sup>80</sup> The Institute for Soil, Climate and Water (hereafter ISCW) is also a valuable source of scientific background, including meteorological data as well as scientific bulletins and frequently used scientific textbooks, as is the central library of the South African Department of Agriculture. In Bloemfontein, more region specific information was sought, including some municipal records and correspondence files. Moving out of the archive, the popular press of the era received scrutiny, including well-distributed weeklies such as the *Landbouweekblad* and *Huisgenoot* that also contain lively letter columns, further proof that a magazine was actually being read and not merely written. The government agricultural magazine, *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* was also consulted, but, as it is more difficult to assess whether or not the magazine was actually read, the focus will be more on it as an expression of government and bureaucratic thought.

## **1.7 Conclusion.**

Had this thesis been written in the early 1990s, it may well have formed part of the social history school with specific focus on the environmental aspects in the vein of Delius or Keegan. To use environmental and socio-environmental histories, it has

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<sup>79</sup> Muller, *Sonop in die Suide* 586.

<sup>80</sup> locust officers

been shown, is not merely jumping on a recent band-wagon in the wake of fears about global warming and other environmental disasters. It emerges from a variety of sophisticated works that can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century in South Africa.

There is already a substantial quantity of literature that specifically utilizes socio-environmental history in South(ern) African context, ranging from ovine, bovine, canine and equine histories to histories of disease, national parks, conservation, the soil and the sea. Nevertheless, the field is still relatively new and a few of the more sizeable gaps in the literature, some of which this thesis will address, have been pointed out. Thus a brief overview was given of the tools, people and places used in writing this thesis. Specific emphasis was placed on the use of literature and how and to what measure the interdisciplinary nature of the thesis will be attended. Lastly, a brief sketch of other primary sources was given.

The area of the Union of South Africa focussed on in this thesis, is in general that north of the Orange River, particularly the Orange Free State. Four features of agriculture in the Union of South Africa that had a pronounced impact on Afrikaner farmers in the interior will be explored. The first (chapter 2) is about what was perceived as one of the biggest threats to agriculture in the Union, namely soil erosion, and its impact beyond agronomy. The next chapter (chapter 3) will look at the influence of America on agriculture in the Union, evaluating the extent thereof and how it impacted on the state-farmer and nature relationship. The fourth chapter looks at yet another danger to agriculture in South Africa, namely locust plagues, and the scope of its impact, which too went beyond the entomological. The fifth, concluding chapter looks at 'drought' and 'aridity' as concepts that underpinned the features of agriculture discussed in the previous chapters. Lastly, some broader conclusions are drawn.

## CHAPTER 2

### “Soil erosion is volk erosion”<sup>1</sup>:

#### Officials, Experts and Soil Conservation c. 1920 - 1950

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##### 2.1 Introduction.

Soil erosion and soil conservation are two of the most evident and written about ‘interferences’ by ‘nature’ on farming in the first half of the twentieth century in South Africa. It was a threat to agriculture which had to be countered. As a natural phenomenon that can acutely be exacerbated through anthropogenic activity, such as agriculture, soil erosion serves as a prism through which the interrelationship between state, farmer and nature can be viewed.

In this chapter, state policies with regards to soil erosion, the Afrikaner farmers’ reactions to it, as well as the discourses in which they developed, will be discussed. It will also offer the reader a geographical and agronomic context of soil erosion. The chapter will then proceed chronologically, starting with the beginning of twentieth century state regulation of human intervention with soil in southern Africa up until the soil conservation conference held in Pretoria in 1929. Moving on to the second period, the discussion will range from c. 1929 until 1941, when the Forest and Veld Conservation Act 13 of 1941 was promulgated. The last section under discussion covers the rest of the war years and the reconstruction period immediately following World War II, up until c. 1950. Each of these sections has overlapping as well as distinct characteristics, the major ‘events’ mentioned serving to plot nodes leading to change. Following this, the main themes emerging from the engagement between state, farmers and nature as thrown into relief by soil erosion, will be explored.

In order to disentangle socio-environmental information from policy documents, a different ‘reading’ of these documents than just scrutinising dates or facts, is required. It is especially the case when looking for traces of something as intangible as the relationship between state, farmer and nature. One cannot, for instance, only rely on

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<sup>1</sup> “Gronderosie is Volkserosie” Phrase from Calman, “Reeds Sedert 1774 Smeek Ons Bodem: Red My!” *LW* (28 March 1945):17.

the pre-ambles of Acts, in which the Act is justified in less austere language than the conditions and the clauses following the pre-ambles. The geographer Amanda Cooper noted that, while legislation can be considered a primary indicator of policy, not all official policy and ideas are ultimately transformed into legislative enactments.<sup>2</sup> Where possible, indicators such as speeches, memoranda, letters and oral interviews can be included. It is also useful to qualify what is meant with ‘official.’ Is it just the acts and proclamations of a political state, or does it also include the statements and ideas of experts, scientists or culture brokers? In this thesis ‘official’ will be understood as the view taken by institutions of power – where this might include the state and the expert. As will be shown, at no time were the views of these role players homogenous; they sometimes varied not only in nuance but also in principle. It must be noted that, whilst many “white farms” were in actual fact run by black foremen, (black people also did far more physical labour on the farms) this chapter seeks to understand how officials targeted Afrikaners as a supposed “section” of the South African rural community.

Another source that is frequently used to measure the way government (and analysts and scientists) relayed information to farmers and how they reacted to this is through the popular weekly *Landbouweekblad*. This magazine was founded by the Nationale Pers as an Afrikaans foil to the *Farmer's Weekly*.<sup>3</sup> Therefore it must be kept in mind that, to a certain extent, this narrows the group under scrutiny to the *literate* Afrikaner farming community. One of the major risks of ‘reading’ articles and literature in order to distil an underlying discourse is that, for conclusions to be made, the burden of proof is so much greater. Just because a text has been read, it does not automatically mean that the reader’s conceptions about the world changed fundamentally. The fact that such a text could be produced and was reasonably sustainable in a certain time and space can however, point towards a certain *zeitgeist* that it could draw upon and add to.

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<sup>2</sup> A. Cooper, “Soil Conservation Policy in South Africa 1920-1992: the ‘Human Dimension’” (D.Phil diss., University of Natal, 1996), 82.

<sup>3</sup> Muller, *Sonop in die Suide*, 582.

## 2.2 Soil erosion and soil conservation: terms and definitions.

A short introduction into the more technical meanings of soil erosion and soil conservation will be given. This is done because soil erosion is not solely an imagined problem thought into reality by the establishment in order to pursue political aims in the Habermasian sense – but rather something that involves real problems such as food security. This is not to say that erosion is a purely mechanical problem that was explained in objective ways, but, as anthropologist Raymond Firth put it: “[r]eality may lie in the world of ideas, but illusion demands that the body be fed.”<sup>4</sup>

Soil erosion is a natural process – occurring even without human intervention. Natural or geological erosion includes slow processes of “exfoliation, carbonation and hydration” of rock, and takes place over millennia.<sup>5</sup> The rate of erosion can, however, be dramatically and irreversibly accelerated through human intervention. In the South African context, the two most serious consequences of accelerated soil erosion are the loss in soil fertility and the impact of soil loss on the hydrological cycle of the country. Soil fertility is used here in broad sense. It includes the friability of soil, the nutritive value and other factors that determine the capability of soil to support flora, which is important for supporting fauna and which are both determinant in human food security.

Soil erosion can technically be defined as what happens to soil when “disaggregating forces and forces of removal overcome the forces of internal resistance within the soil” or “when the rate of soil loss exceeds the rate of soil formation.”<sup>6</sup> In South Africa the three most important forms of soil erosion (especially in the time-period under scrutiny) are sheet erosion, rill erosion and the formation of dongas.<sup>7</sup>

Sheet erosion occurs when precipitation intensity exceeds the infiltration capacity of the soil. It is caused by the unconfined flow of water running across the surface,

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted by J. Pottier, *Anthropology of Food: The Social Dynamics of Food Security* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), Title page.

<sup>5</sup> H. A. Snyman, “Soil Erosion and Conservation,” N. Tainton, ed., *Veld Management in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press 1999), 358.

<sup>6</sup> Cooper, “Soil Conservation Policy in South Africa,” 47.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

removing thin layers of top-soil.<sup>8</sup> As sheet erosion is directly caused by rainfall impact, groundcover is of the utmost importance to prevent sheet erosion from taking place.<sup>9</sup> The link to agriculture should be obvious – the less efficient the ground cover, the more the erosion. With stock farming, overgrazing is the main culprit. Cropping is also a determinant in the risk of sheet erosion. It should also be noted that this is the least visually dramatic erosion and is not immediately noticeable – and therefore it is often seen as the most dangerous type. Rill erosion is the removal of soil in small channels. It happens mainly on arable land<sup>10</sup>, which makes it particularly detrimental to crop cultivation. Rills can also coalesce, forming dongas.<sup>11</sup> Dongas' large channels are only reparable with earth moving equipment<sup>12</sup>, and apart from the usual adverse effects of erosion, it also forms a physical threat to livestock as they can fall into it.

South African soil is generally perceived as being susceptible to erosion, due to South Africa's specific topography and climate. Orographic<sup>13</sup> anomalies play a dominant role in the rainfall patterns of South Africa, such as the distinct decline in rainfall from east to west.<sup>14</sup> Topography also includes slope parameters. The angle, length, shape and location of slopes have a direct impact on the rate and extent of soil movement.<sup>15</sup> In 1868, during the wars with the Basotho, the so-called Conquered Territories were incorporated as part of the Orange Free State. These territories included part of the fertile Caledon river valley rimmed by the Maluti Mountains, but left the less fertile foothills and steep slopes to the Basotho.<sup>16</sup> The orographic

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<sup>8</sup> M.E Ritter, "The Physical Environment: Weathering, Mass Movement and Erosion," (2006) <http://www.uwsp.edu/geo/faculty/ritter/geog101/textbook/massmovementweathering/watererosion.htm> Accessed on 9 July 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Snyman, "Soil Erosion and Conservation," 359.

<sup>10</sup> G.G Garland, "Soil Erosion in South Africa: A Technical Review" (Pretoria: National Department of Agriculture 1995), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Ritter, "The Physical Environment."

<sup>12</sup> (n/a) "Erosion and Sediment Control Measures," (Iowa Stormwater Partnership 2002) <http://dhn.ihr.uiowa.edu/runoff/erosion.htm>, Accessed on 9 July 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Relating to mountains, e.g. the influence of the Drakensberg on the rain patterns of South Africa (amongst other things, mountains have a significant impact on cloud formation).

<sup>14</sup> J.W. Rowland, ed., *The Conservation Ideal: Being the SARCCUS Record for the Period 1952 – 1970* (Pretoria: Southern Africa Regional Commission for the Conservation and Utilisation of the Soil 1974): 54. This is of course not the only variable. That particular rainfall pattern is due to a complex interplay of factors including air pressure systems and seacurrents, amongst other things.

<sup>15</sup> Cooper, "Soil Conservation Policy in South Africa," 52.

<sup>16</sup> H. Giliomee, *Die Afrikaners: 'n Biografie*, (Cape Town: Tafelberg 2004), 144. The environmental ramifications of this is fully discussed from the vantage point of Lesotho in K. Showers, *Imperial Gullies: Soil Erosion and Conservation in Lesotho* (Ohio: Ohio University Press 2005). Orange Free State Officials were aware of the fact that the political boundary did not correspond with 'natural' boundaries, and as early as 1913 the conservator of forests in the Orange Free State called for controls

characteristics of this valley, along with its relatively high location above sea-level, are influencing the amount and type of precipitation in the area directly. Important for this thesis, is to note that it also influences the water run-off,<sup>17</sup> which, together with rain splash and to a lesser extent wind erosion, is one of the major causes of soil-erosion.<sup>18</sup> Sediment loss due to rainfall is greatest in semi-arid areas, because the amount of rainfall is enough to cause erosion, but not enough to support a thick vegetative cover, whereas in arid areas the rainfall is so little it makes up for the lack of vegetative cover. In areas with higher rainfall, the vegetative cover is thick enough to counter the effects of downpour.<sup>19</sup> This means that the Free State is overall susceptible to sheet erosion. It is also susceptible to donga formation, due to the nature of the rainfall that most often comes down in short bursts.<sup>20</sup> As crop-cultivation increases the risk of rill and donga erosion, this adds to the vulnerability of the Free State to erosion, especially those parts in the north and east where crops are cultivated. Wind erosion is also a threat, especially during dry seasons and when pulverised soil (from ploughing or depleted veld) gets blown up in dust storms.<sup>21</sup>

The Orange Free State had been perceived as one of the worst degraded provinces in the Union in the first half of the twentieth century. Ecologically speaking, land degradation, which includes soil erosion,<sup>22</sup> is nowadays perceived to be less in the Free State than elsewhere in South Africa. It is also perceived to be less than during the last couple of centuries.<sup>23</sup> This leads us to the question whether soil erosion in the Free State has really been that severe, or whether it was mainly a perception. (Up until 1950, the head offices of the *Landbouweekblad* were in the Orange Free State, which

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in Lesotho in order to protect sources of the Orange and Caledon rivers for the benefit of both the Sotho and the South African settlers. W. Beinart, "Soil Erosion, Conservationism and Ideas about Development: A Southern African Exploration, 1900-1960," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 11, (October 1984): 63.

<sup>17</sup> W.R Thompson, *Moisture and Farming in South Africa* (South African Agricultural Series – Vol.14, Pretoria: Central News Agency Limited 1936), 135.

<sup>18</sup> Cooper, "Soil Conservation Policy in South Africa," 52.

<sup>19</sup> Snyman "Soil Erosion and Conservation," 361.

<sup>20</sup> C.T. Klugist, *Grundlagen und Entwicklungsrichtung der Landwirtschaftliche Erzeugung in der Suedafrikanischen Union* (Berlin: Verlagsbuchhandlung Paul Parey 1935), 31.

<sup>21</sup> J.C. Ross, *Soil Conservation in South Africa: A Review of the Problem and Development to Date* (Pretoria: Government Printer 1963), 1.

<sup>22</sup> Land degradation is difficult to define, but include erosive forms (e.g. rill erosion) as well as non-erosive forms (e.g. salinisation). This thesis mainly focuses on erosive forms.

<sup>23</sup> M. T. Hoffman and S. Todd, "A National Review of Land Degradation in South Africa: the Influence of Biophysical and Socio-economic Factors," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26 (December 2000):752.

might explain the prominence given to this area on its pages). One author, for instance, wrote about the Free State:

“[i]n this area with its steep ridges and high rainfall, Nature chastises the slightest misstep of man and grassless hills and gaping gullies in the valleys are the external signs of the merciless punishment that he hands out to the soil owner for the misuse of the soil.”<sup>24</sup>

Then again, travelling experts also remarked on the comparatively degraded state of especially the Eastern Free State:

“I do not like to visit the Eastern Free State. These dongas and soil-robbled rocky ridges might look impressive to a child and provide a nice playground for the little ones, but I am nevertheless still planning revenge against those who recklessly destroy our dear soil... It is such a real pity that there is still so much ignorance with regards to soil conservation and soil cultivation.”<sup>25</sup>

It is therefore clear that the Orange Free State was thought to be a recent victim of human abuse.

The loss of fertile soil due to anthropogenic intervention is not a recent phenomenon, nor even a specifically rural one. In South Africa there was always an awareness that, although the problem might be acute, it was hardly new. A series of articles on the history of soil erosion and land degradation was published in the *Landbouweekblad* in the late 1940s, written under the pseudonym Agricola (Latin for farmer).<sup>26</sup> The first known written (European) mentioning of the ‘misuse’ of soil by farmers in Southern Africa was in 1751, when Sparrman, the Swedish traveller, remarked that:

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<sup>24</sup> “In hierdie omgewing met sy steil rante en hoë reënval tug die natuur die geringste misstap van die mens en is graslose heuwels en diep-skeurende slote in die valleie die uiterlike bewys van sy meedoënlose straf wat hy aan die grondeienaar uitdeel vir wan-gebruik van grond.”

L. Olivier, “Sonderlinge Waterbewaringstelsel op O.V.S-Plaas: Reeks Damme en Geen Windpomp” *LW* (4 June 1947): 33.

<sup>25</sup> “In die Oostelike Vrystaat kom ek nie graag nie. Daardie slote en dongas en grondberooftde klipbanke mag imponerend lyk vir ‘n kind en lekker speelplek vir die kleingoed aanbied, maar ek beraam steeds maar wraak teen diegene wat ons dierbare bodem so roekeloos verniel... Dit is so bitter jammer dat daar nog soveel onkunde omtrent grondbewaring en grondbewerking heers.”

J.C. Greyling, “Skrikwekkende Omvang van Erosie in die Unie: Byna 200,000,000 Ton Vrugbare Grond Spoel Jaarliks weg na die See” *LW* (2 July 1947): 31.

<sup>26</sup> Agricola, “Gronduitputting in die Vroegste Dae” *LW* (25 May 1949): 47-48; “Gronduitputting en Bemesting in die 19de Eeu” (23 November 1949): 27; “Boerdery met Ploeg in die Een en Geweer in die Ander Hand” (7 December 1949): 28-29; “Die Geskiedenis oor die Agteruitgang van Ons Veld” (14 August 1949): 31-33; “Waterbewaring in die ou Dae” (19 April 1950): 36-37.



“In consequence of the fields being thus continually grazed off and the increase of cattle feeding on them, the grasses and herbs, which these animals most covet, are prevented continually more and more from taking root, while on the contrary the rhinoceros bush which the cattle always pass by and leave untouched, is suffered to take root and encroach on the place of others.”<sup>27</sup>

Soil erosion is also not an exclusively agricultural concern. Its impact, both economically and aesthetically, is also recognisable in urban settings. A South African example of this would include erosion caused by mining and industrial development in the Witwatersrand area.<sup>28</sup> The impact of soil erosion is also a variable in the country’s infrastructure. Both sheet-erosion and the formation of dongas<sup>29</sup> are possible consequences of road construction. Erosion in turn can hamper the development of infrastructure. From the beginning of the twentieth century, especially with the increasing urbanisation on to the Witwatersrand, the South African government did take cognisance of urban, industrial and infrastructural aspects of soil erosion. The most attention by far was however paid to the agricultural sector.

To counter soil erosion, soil and veld conservation methods were proposed by whites from as early as the VOC era, when the southern tip of Africa was a refreshment station for the Dutch East Indian Company (VOC) during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During this period, some ‘placaats’ issued to regulate the irrigation of vegetable gardens.<sup>30</sup> In the era concerned (c.1920-1950), soil and veld conservation methods were applied on a much wider scope than botany, mainly pertaining to forestry and agriculture. According to J.C. Ross, the influential policy-maker and soil conservationist, soil conservation referred to:

“provisions relating to the manner in which the land shall be prepared for sowing or planting;... temporary withdrawal of land from cultivation or grazing; ... grazing management... restriction of the number or kinds of livestock ... regulation or prohibition of veld-burning...control ... of veld or forest fires; the prohibition of burning kraal manure or other organic materials; and the

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in J.W Daneel, “’n Kritiese Oorsig van Enkele Grondbewaringsmaatreëls in Suid-Afrika,” (M.A Agric, University of Stellenbosch, 1975), 9.

<sup>28</sup> Cooper, “Soil Conservation Policy in South Africa,”44. Cooper studied at least ten of the most authoritative sources before reaching this conclusion.

<sup>29</sup> ‘Donga’ is the South African English for what is internationally more commonly known as “gullies.”

<sup>30</sup> Cooper, “Soil Conservation Policy in South Africa,”83.

treatment and maintenance of forests and plantations, including the disposal of waste.”<sup>31</sup>

Reclamation of denuded veld also played a significant role, especially in earlier conservation schemes where conservation actions referred to work of a mechanical nature, such as filling up a donga with machinery or constructing contours.<sup>32</sup> Soil conservation was also tightly bound to productivity, as was carefully worded by the *Report on the Reconstruction of Agriculture* (1943):

“Conservation implies the prevention of land abuse in farming... It aims at the adoption of systems and methods of land use that will promote stability in farming by increasing the efficiency of production, without detriment to soil, veld and water resources.”<sup>33</sup>

It is even more succinctly summed up by the Americans Kiefer and Black, in their 1948 report on post-war agriculture: “the best soil conservation is a matter of selecting just that level of productivity for the farm which will maximize its value for the owner.”<sup>34</sup> It follows from the above quotations that soil conservation primarily meant the application of human technologies to remedy something caused by human practices, with ‘nature’ as a somewhat passive location rather than an active agent. Scientifically speaking, it was a passive location to be manipulated in order to maximise production.

### **2.3.1 The first official engagement with soil in the Orange Free State and the Union c. 1809 – 1914.**

The first time soil conservation as a distinct concern featured in the paraphernalia of officialdom in the South African Union at large, be it legislation, policy documents or government reports, was during the first three decades of the twentieth century. During this time, concern with soil conservation largely featured from report to report, with little activity of note in between. This changed in the 1930s and 1940s, when activity around soil conservation became more frantic. The approach for the first part

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<sup>31</sup> Ross, *Soil Conservation in South Africa*,” 24.

<sup>32</sup> Snyman “Soil Erosion and Conservation”, p. 373.

<sup>33</sup> Department of Agriculture and Forestry, *Reconstruction of Agriculture: Report of the Reconstruction Committee of the Department of Agriculture and Forestry* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1943) [G.P.-S – 1943-4], 21.

<sup>34</sup> J.D. Black and M.E. Kiefer, *Future Food and Agriculture Policy for the Next Ten Years* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1948), 101. Quoted in Daneel, “’n Kritiese Oorsig,” 57.

of this section is therefore primarily structured chronologically from one report or policy to the next, up until the 1929 conference on soil conservation convened in Pretoria.

The first legislation regulating human intervention in nature in the Orange Free State were Acts such as Chapter 125 of the Orange Free State Law Book of 1891 or Act 32 of 1908<sup>35</sup> to regulate the burning of veld, which was seen as a great threat to animal fodder and to the soil.

The first official Union wide attempt to regulate the impact of humans on natural resources was the *Select Committee on Droughts, Rainfall and Soil Erosion of 1913/4*.<sup>36</sup> The inquiry, like many subsequent inquiries, was launched in order to assess the reasons for the periodic droughts in the Union of South Africa and in particular its effect on agriculture. The emphasis on agriculture is attributable to the fact that the Union was largely a rural society despite the mineral revolution that started less than half a century earlier.<sup>37</sup> Although the *Report* could not claim a significant decrease in rainfall patterns, it attributed the perceived desiccation of South Africa to soil erosion, indicating that the effect of the destruction of vegetation has been “calamitous in extreme.”<sup>38</sup> The report concentrated on mechanical soil conservation works as a means of reclamation,<sup>39</sup> like filling up the dongas and careful consideration before constructing what might become a dangerous road and railway construction.

Most of the emphasis, however, was put on educating the public on the problem before introducing legislation.<sup>40</sup> This had to be done through schools, public forums and the print media, aiming to firstly gain public trust and support. Although the report was the only state report until the *Drought Commission Report of 1922/23*, it was neither widespread nor really consequential. An article in the *Landbouweekblad* of 1920 would complain about the fact that “only 900 copies were printed and sold at

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<sup>35</sup> Cooper, “Soil Conservation Policy in South Africa,” 83.

<sup>36</sup> Daneel, “’n Kritiese Oorsig,” 11.

<sup>37</sup> H. Giliomee and B. Mbenga, *The New History of South Africa* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2007), 279.

<sup>38</sup> M.A Rabie, “South African Soil Conservation Legislation,” *Comparative and International Law Journal of South Africa*, (1974): 260.

<sup>39</sup> Cooper, “Soil Conservation Policy in South Africa,” 85; Rabie, “South African Soil Conservation Legislation,” 260.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*,

5s a piece” of a report “that is of such utmost importance to the country.”<sup>41</sup> The report basically concluded that the government first needed to engineer a socio-psychological shift in public awareness about responsibility towards the soil.<sup>42</sup> The matter was not treated with the same urgency as after the influential *Drought Investigation Commission Report* (see 2.3.2). This *Report* is nonetheless important in its acknowledgement of human responsibility for erosion, the fact that it was worsening because of the way farmers treated land as expedient even though the frontier has closed and that this supposed ignorance of the farmers must be addressed.

That some government officials’ and agriculturalists’ opinion of farmers, and their knowledge of nature with regards to tilling the soil, was low, was evident in the way

1470  
DIE LANDBOUWEEKBLAD. *Worsdag 24 Maart 1920.*

**Die Tijd van Wetenskaplik te Boer het Aangebreek.**

**Daar is geen tijd meer te verkwis op Landbou Gereedschap wat vir die boer nie ten volste van waarde is nie.**

Wanneer u van FICHARDT BPK. bestel kan u verseker wees van Landbou Gereedschap wat vir uw besondere benodigde bedoel is. Hulle is vervaardig om aan die strengste kondisies van Suid Afrika te voldoen.

OM MIELES MET DIE HAND TE PLANT IS TIJDVERSPIL.  
DIE SIMPLEX MIELIE PLANTER spaar veel tijd omdat hij die m&les gewen en op die regte manier plant.  
Gemaak van geheel staal. Kan van 3 vt. tot 3 voet 10 duim wyd geset word, welke vermindering jobeur deur twee minuten. Oopslitte wijd, hoog en sterk. Geset met skare om die vore te maak. Hij sal een suksesvolle oes versker.



Waar kij u een beter ploeg dan een OLIVER.  
DIE OLIVER No. 22 TWEE-VOOR PLOEG is ONOORTEKREKBAAR vir ploeg in enige soort grond. Vreeslos met agter wiel, en 15 duim korter. Wijgte van snij 24 duim. Gewig 415 lbs. Geheel staal en biesonder sterk. Soos illustreer.

OLIVER No. 20 ENKELE-VOOR PLOEG. So lig als wat hij sterk is. Wijgte van snij 7 x 3 duim. Gewig 185 lbs.

OLIVER No. 40 ENKELE-VOOR PLOEG. Gewig 150 lbs. Snij 9 x 16 duim. Begie die No. 20 en 40 is vrees met ijzerhandvatsels.

Ons sal blij wees om u onse voorraad te wies en volke biesonderhede te gee als u ons een besoek sal bring.

**G. A. Fichardt Bpt.,** *Die Algemene Voorsieners, Bo-Kerk en Charles Strate, Bloemfontein.*

farmers were often addressed in pamphlets and articles. Colonel H.S.D du Toit, one of the most important and well-known agronomists of the time, accused farmers of rather blaming “Heaven or God” when their harvests failed, rather than the real source of the failure, unscientific farming:

“When someone who cultivates his lands shallowly, badly and untimely, who sows wrong and bad seed and then expects a good harvest that he does not earn and is not entitled to, gets no harvest, he is then often inclined to blame the cause of the failed crop on Heaven or God, while his own bad brain and handiwork are actually the cause.”<sup>43</sup>

Figure 2.1: An example of advertising capitalising on the call for ‘progressive’ farming. The heading of this advertisement reads “The time for scientific farming has come.”  
Source: *Landbouweekblad* (24 March 1920):1947.

<sup>41</sup> A.H. Wallis, “Die reënval van Suid-Afrika” *LW* (April 1920): 1453.

<sup>42</sup> Daneel, “’n Kritiese Oorsig,” 11.

<sup>43</sup> “Iemand wat sij lande vlak, sleg en ontijdig bewerk, wat verkeerde en slegte saad saai en wat dan ’n goeie oes vermag wat hom nie toekom nie en waarop hij glad nie geregtig is nie, en krij so iemand geen oes nie dan is hij nog soms geneë om die oorsaak van so ’n misoes op die Hemel of die Here te pak, terwijl sy eie slegte brein en handewerk die oorsaak is.”  
H.S. du Toit, *Drooglandbou*. (Cape Town: Government Printer, 1919),12.

‘Outdated’ ploughing techniques are also useful as scapegoat for another commentator, who likens these methods to those of ‘the natives’, using the social hierarchies of the time as a rhetoric instrument; if white farmers do not plough deeply and profitably, they are no better than the ‘less civilised’ and ‘less progressed’ black farmers:

“In general, our farmers still underestimate the worth of good and deep ploughing, however, it is heartening to see that the majority of our cultivators are taking notice of good ploughing. More and more emphasis is laid on good, proper and deep ploughing. The time that we are ploughing like natives, who only scratch at the surface and through that accelerate the erosion of our soils, is passing... It does not help to only do things halfway; and then let things slide.<sup>44</sup> To humanity, knowledge and wisdom were given to properly cultivate everything... We must never forget that whilst nature is content with a small income of grain, humans are not.”<sup>45</sup>

In a subsequent article, he continues in this vein of disparaging shallow ploughing as something practised by ‘kaffirs’ with their ‘toy-ploughs’, causing erosion in the process:

“The kaffirs in our country plough with small, insignificant, little toy-ploughs. They only scratch the soil loose for a few inches, or the plough only touches ground here and there. Consequently, when the rain comes, the soil particles are flushed away.”<sup>46</sup>

This passage is redolent of the racist rhetoric of the time – describing black Africans and their methods of farming as childish, predicate on a linear (and racist) concept of progression. Interestingly, the argument was also used the other way round, that due

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<sup>44</sup> The Afrikaans idiom ‘laat Gods water oor Gods akker loop’ literally means “let God’s water flow over God’s soil”, which is particularly apt in this context.

<sup>45</sup> “In die algemeen besef ons boere nog te min wat goeie en diep ploeg beteken, dog is dit verblydend om te sien dat die groot gros van ons landbouers meer notiesie (sic) begin neem in goeie ploeg. Meer en meer nadruk word op goeie, behoorlik en diep ploeg gele (sic). Die tyd dat ons soos die inboorlinge ploeg, wat alleen die grond bo los krap en daardeur die wegvreting van onse gronde verhaas, gaan virby. Die boere begin al insien dat goeie bewerking van hul gronde beter betaal as om net die grond bo los te krap, Dit help ons nie om ‘n stuk werk half te dien en dan Gods water oor Gods akker te laat loop nie. Aan die mensdom is kennis en wysheid gegee om alles behoorlik te bewerk... Ons moet nooit vergeet dat die natuur tevrede is met ‘n kleine inkomste van graan dog die mens nie.”

Blinkoor, “Goeie bewerking van Gronde,” *LW* (7 June 1922).

<sup>46</sup> “Die kaffers in ons land ploeg met klein, niksbeduidende speelgoed-ploegies. Hulle krap net die grond los vir ‘n paar duim, of die ploeg vat net hier en daar grond. Gevolg is dat wanneer daar ‘n reent kom die gronddeeltjies weggespoel word.”

Blinkoor, “Grondverspoelings,” *LW* (30 August 1922): 319.

to their ‘civilised state’ white men could disturb the soil, “whilst the primitive man did not disturb the soil more than animals.”<sup>47</sup>

With regards to Afrikaner farmers, the message is lest you want to stay behind ‘them’; you should adopt ‘modern’ and ‘progressive’ methods. The description of farmers who do not heed the advice of the establishment as childish behaviour is not the premise of this particular author alone, in ‘handy hints’, another writer describes soil erosion as similar to “reckless children who are squandering their inheritance.”<sup>48</sup>

Advertisers too, picked up on the discourse, urging farmers to heed the call of farming scientifically – a process closely related with mechanisation. Figure 2.1 shows that companies such as G.A. Fichardt Bpt. must have benefited from this trend.

### **2.3.2 The Final Report of the Drought Investigation Commission, 1923.**

The *Report of the Drought Investigation Commission* is arguably one of the most influential ‘blue books’ published in South Africa in the first half of the twentieth century. Its influence was clear in more or less contemporary documents. It was, for instance, one of the main sources for the economic and urbanisation report of the Carnegie Commission on Poor-Whiteism in South Africa<sup>49</sup>, and seen as the “epoch-making” work on soil conservation by J.G.N Strauss, later Minister of Agriculture under whose auspices the 1946 Soil Conservation Act was promulgated.<sup>50</sup> It was also extensively reported on in the press. Additionally, it was published in the *Landbouweekblad*, as well as in the first few editions of *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika*, the journal published by the Department of Agriculture from 1926 onwards.<sup>51</sup> The report is also frequently perused by historians, from C.W. de Kiewiet in the 1940s, to William Beinart more than half a century later.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> J.M., “Vier Werelddele (sic) Bedreig: Woestyne Brei Genadeloos uit,” *Die Huisgenoot* (4 August 1944):15.

<sup>48</sup> P.L. Kriek, “Nuttige Wenke,” *LW* (25 September 194 (year illegible)): 1169.

<sup>49</sup> J.F.W. Grosskopf, *Part I, Economic Report: Rural Impoverishment and Rural Exodus*. 1932.

<sup>50</sup> Unie van Suid-Afrika Volksraaddebatte (hereafter HANSARD), (23 May 1946): 8464.

<sup>51</sup> *Die Landbouweekblad* 12 July 1922 – 27 September 1922; (n/a) “Die Droogtevragestuk” in *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (July 1926).

<sup>52</sup> C.W. de Kiewiet, *A History of South Africa: Social and Economic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941). W. Beinart, *The Rise of Conservation in South Africa: Settlers, Livestock and the Environment 1770-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

The report was commissioned by Sir James Rose-Innes, then administrator of the Union, on 2 November 1920, following the severe drought of 1919. This drought was estimated to have cost the Union £16,000,000,<sup>53</sup> a large sum of money for a dominion that just assisted Britain in the First World War. The commission was led by Du Toit, an advocate for dryland farming and ardent admirer of America.<sup>54</sup> He was not alone in his link with America, being joined by, amongst others, Reenen J. van Reenen, also a graduate from an American university.<sup>55</sup> An interim report was submitted in 1922 and deemed urgent enough to publish so long, but it was also incorporated into the final report.<sup>56</sup> The commission basically concluded that whilst rainfall patterns cannot be shown to decline, the impact of drought is exacerbated due to anthropogenic causes. The “secret behind drought loss”<sup>57</sup> according to the commission, is most notably direct soil erosion or practices leading to soil erosion such as “kraaling,”<sup>58</sup> and the overstocking of farms. Little mention is made of over-cultivation. Soil erosion was perceived to be the biggest threat to agriculture in the Union of South Africa, that “may even warrant intervention by the State,”<sup>59</sup> a view that the previous report was reluctant to take and that could upset the sensibilities of the supposedly conservative and stubborn, but politically important, white Afrikaans farmers. They were in fact very aware of this possibility. In one of the reports on the travels of the Commission in the *Landbouweekblad*, where it is warned that even though a man can be in charge of his own things as long as he does not use it to the detriment of others. If the land is however to be saved for future generations, the day will come when the state will not allow the farmer to “wash away his farm.”<sup>60</sup>

The conclusion, again, was that the education of farmers is more desirable than legislation.<sup>61</sup> Apart from education, the report also recommended better organisation of farmers and more control over the markets as this will increase efficiency amongst

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<sup>53</sup> *Finale Rapport van die Droogte Ondersoek Kommissie, Oktober 1923*. (Cape Town: State Press, 1923). [U.G. 49-'23], 2.

<sup>54</sup> Beinart, *The Rise of Conservation*, 241.

<sup>55</sup> More on this particular aspect in chapter 3 of this thesis.

<sup>56</sup> [U.G. 49 – '23], 2 and Rabie, “South African Soil Conservation Legislation,” 260.

<sup>57</sup> [U.G. 49 – '23], 6.

<sup>58</sup> Driving animals into a pen or a corral, a “kraal” (the word is acceptable in South African English) is a large outdoor structure, usually built from rocks, where stock was locked up in the night to mostly prevent jackals from preying on them. The word also connotes numerous cultural references which will not be ventured into now.

<sup>59</sup> [U.G. 49 – '23], 3.

<sup>60</sup> (n/a) “Reis van die Droogteondersoek- Kommissie,” *LW* (June 1921): 5.

<sup>61</sup> [U.G. 49 – '23], 17.

farmers, which will, according to the report, improve the dispersion of technical advice.<sup>62</sup> The report concluded that the primary responsibility for control of soil conservation lied with the state. The commissioners did not, however, intend to indicate that the state should take responsibility for the physical reclamation work, like the filling of dongas, but that it should rather sooner than later dictate the process of reclamation work in order to prevent the “wastage of our natural resource.”<sup>63</sup> The lack of progress with regards to soil conservation is then also blamed on the lack of action and control by the state.<sup>64</sup>

Soil conservation for the commissioners is then a mostly state-controlled intervention, aimed at “reparation, not betterment.”<sup>65</sup> The role of the farmer was to be educated and then to implement advice – though it is not really divulged exactly how this advice should be filtered through to the farmer other than through “propaganda.”<sup>66</sup> Although ‘nature’ as such was not dwelt upon, as is the case in almost all the official documents consulted, it was mostly seen as a very much reified something, separate from the farmer and the state. It was a resource to be managed. This was for instance the case with soil that was seen as a resource that is not infinite and can be depleted in case of abuse, much like minerals.<sup>67</sup> The report was clearly written from an economic perspective, and one should be careful not to force silences where there are none. It is nonetheless striking that the report overwhelmingly provides economic reasons for its urgency. Even though it does not completely lack ideological ‘padding,’ it maintains focus on the inquiry at hand – into the periodic droughts of South Africa and what can be done to alleviate their effect. It also maintains focus on the minority European population of the Union, without any significant reflection upon the fact that the larger ‘native’ part of the Union is hardly included, except when it comes to regulating livestock practices.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> U.G. 49 – ‘23], 18.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>68</sup> This could, however, be due to the fact that it was taken for granted that soil conservation in “Native Areas,” like ‘native’ agriculture, was the domain of the Department of Native Affairs.



The influence of the Report can be clearly seen in the decades that followed, with many of its recommendations, such as the dissemination of scientific, agricultural knowledge among white farmers, to which we now turn.

### **2.3.3 Education and farming as *profession*: c.1924 -1929.**

The prospect of educating farmers in matters such as soil conservation was broadened with the foundation of a Division for Extension work in 1923,<sup>69</sup> followed by the appointment of the first Agricultural Extension Officer in the Union only in January 1925.<sup>70</sup> Although agriculture was taught as a secondary school subject in the Union since the beginning of the century, it was done mostly at technical schools and often seen by the farmers themselves as being of little worth in public life.<sup>71</sup> Compounding the inefficiency of agriculture as a subject in secondary schools was the fact that very few farmers in general, and even less Afrikaner farmers ever made it to secondary school in this period.<sup>72</sup> According to statistics supplied in the 1930s, when school attendance already increased, 58 per cent of farmers did not make it past middle school (st VI).<sup>73</sup> This lack of education probably influenced their enthusiasm for and ability to read, especially more ‘difficult’ educational texts.

Afrikaner farmers were perceived by many of the officials (who were often English and educated abroad) to be antipathetic towards ‘experts’ and scientific farming, preferring to farm like their ancestors did, “farming like in the olden days.”<sup>74</sup> The motivation behind the extension service was to educate farmers through means of demonstrations, farmers’ days and through dispensing advice *when asked for it*. The extension officers were for the most part graduates from university and college agricultural faculties, which have been established around the country since 1898.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> (n/a) “Die Boer en die Staat,” *LW*, (23 January 1924): 969.

<sup>70</sup> A.d.V. Minnaar, “South African White Agriculture and the Great Depression (1929-1934).” (D.Phil.Lit. UNISA, 1988), 34.

<sup>71</sup> P.H Bredenkamp, “Die Landboustudierigting aan Sekondêre Skole vir Blankes in Transvaal – ’n Vergelykende Studie,” (D.Ed, Potchefstroomse Universiteit vir Christelike Hoër Onderwys, 1977).

<sup>72</sup> Giliomee, *Die Afrikaners*, 274-275.

<sup>73</sup> Helpmekeer-Kongres, 1935. Notule van die Negentiende Kongres van die Helpmekeer-Vereniging van die Kaapprovinsie, 23 – 24 April 1935, 9.

<sup>74</sup> D.J.Coetzee, “Die Toekomstige Boer en die Lewe: ‘n Blik in die Verlede,” *LW* (19 February 1930).

<sup>75</sup> The first agricultural college was Elsenburg, close to Stellenbosch. It was established in 1898, followed by Cedara in Natal (1906), Potchefstroom (1909), Grootfontein at Middelburg in the Cape

They were aware of the suspicion farmers held against experts. In his opening address to the Congress of Extension Officers held in 1929, Colonel H.S. du Toit (himself self-educated) warns the extension officers that, if they present themselves as ‘above’ the ordinary farmer, farmers will tend to ask “what can these clean little faces teach us?”<sup>76</sup> Note the diminutive form of address, plus the reference to masculinity (a beard was seen as a sign of masculinity and maturity in Boer culture).<sup>77</sup> All the extension officers present at that particular conference except one complained that farmers are conservative and unenthusiastic about science, and would sooner resort to folk wisdom.<sup>78</sup> The Minister of Agriculture at the time, General J.C.G Kemp, too realised that the farming community prefer to be self-reliant and rely on neighbours for advice, rather than seeking help from experts whom they felt might know the theory, but who are not ‘*boerende Boere*’ or practising farmers. In a memorandum to various agricultural schools, Kemp asked that they must be more sympathetic towards farmers. There was the complaint by farmers that they need to come far to the school, “hat in hand”, often to find the officials unhelpful and subsequently they complain to neighbours “stay away from those high people (*hoë mense*).”<sup>79</sup>

Farmers, it was agreed, would rather learn from other farmers than experts.<sup>80</sup> The means of education they proposed mainly focussed on the media – through films and spreading the agricultural journal of the Union Government, *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika*. Officers were encouraged to publish at least one article per year in this journal. There was also a demonstration train, or the “agricultural college on wheels”<sup>81</sup> on which officers served, stopping at farming towns all over the country. In addition to this, the question of urbanisation and upliftment of the *platteland* could simultaneously be addressed, they felt, when the sons and daughters are taught a love for the farm life.

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(1919) and Glen near Bloemfontein (1919). The first university faculty of agriculture was established at Stellenbosch and Pretoria in 1916. (Minnaar, “South African White Agriculture,” 33).

<sup>76</sup> “Wat kan die kaal gesiggies ons leer?”

H.S. du Toit in “Opening van Kongres van PLU[D?] “Distriksuitbreidingsbeamptes Kursusse en Konferensie gehou te Grootfontein, Middelburg, K.P.” May 1929, 3.

<sup>77</sup> S. Swart, “‘A Boer and His Gun and His Wife are Three Things Always Together’: Boer Masculinity and the 1914 Rebellion,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24 (December 1998): 747.

<sup>78</sup> “Distriksuitbreidingsbeamptes Kursusse en Konferensie gehou te Grootfontein, Middelburg, K.P.” (May 1929), 16.

<sup>79</sup> SANA A34/3 Memorandum to Potchefstroom School of Agriculture from Genl. Kemp, Minister of Agriculture, c. 1929, 2.

<sup>80</sup> “Distriksuitbreidingsbeamptes Kursusse en Konferensie gehou te Grootfontein, Middelburg, K.P.” (May 1929), 22.

<sup>81</sup> (n/a) “Buiteposte van die Departement,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (March 1927): 440.

When the sons and daughters realise that farming is the coming together of various scientific disciplines, it was argued, they will in turn develop their parents.<sup>82</sup> This drive to educate farmers and their children formed part of a greater discourse of keeping whites on the farms, slowing urbanisation and the problem of poor-whiteism that came with it. It also formed part of the quest for civilisation, touched upon earlier. Agriculture was seen as a measure of civilisation- specifically agriculture as in crop cultivation (as opposed to pastoralism, for which South Africa is ecologically better suited). The point was made unambiguously clear in an article in the *Landbouweekblad* of 19 February 1930:

“The cultural standard of a people can be measured in terms of the developmental level that such a people have reached in the area of agriculture. In order to understand its anthropological meaning, the term ‘culture’ means the measure of progress a people has reached in making use of nature. If no use is made of nature, but people are dependent on products like they are originally offered, then there can be no mention of a culture.”<sup>83</sup>

When Afrikaner farmers failed in their duty to extract from the land the way the ‘civilised nations’ do (even though they do so under different ecological conditions), they are in danger of losing their identity as a ‘civilised’ people.

### **2.3.4 The Soil Erosion Conference, 1929.**

By 1928, the language used to describe the soil erosion problem became more aggressive. Soil erosion was seen as one of the culprits in the economic downturn experienced throughout the Union, but particularly affecting farmers. In October 1928, erosion was described in a speech to the Agricultural Union as:

“a devastating cancer [and] the radium with which we can arrest the progress of this cancer in the filling up of slots and dongas and the preservation of our

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<sup>82</sup> “Distriksuitbreidingsbeamptes Kursusse en Konferensie gehou te Grootfontein, Middelburg, K.P.” (May 1929), 37.

<sup>83</sup> “Die kultuurpeil van ‘n volk kan gemeet word in terme van die ontwikkelingstrap wat so ‘n volk bereik het op die gebied van die landbou. Om sy volkekundige betekenis verstaan ‘n mens onder die term “kultuur” die mate van ontwikkeling wat ‘n volk bereik het daar die gebruikmaking van die natuur. As daar van die natuur geen gebruik maak word nie, maar die mense net afhanklik is van produkte soos die natuur dit in sy oorspronklike vorm aanbied, dan kan daar ook nie sprake wees van ‘n kultuur nie.”

C. Potgieter, “Die Aard en Betekenis van Landbou,” *LW* (19 February 1930): 2577.

veld... the soil erosion ailment and the disease of inferior veld are closely related.”<sup>84</sup>

The adage that a “man can let two helms of grass grow where one has grown before is greater than all the famous politicians in the world together,”<sup>85</sup> was the main motivation behind the increasing engagement on official level with soil erosion. Although the Minister of Agriculture at the time, General J.C.G Kemp would be better remembered for his handling of the gold standard crisis and cattle improvement schemes,<sup>86</sup> erosion was seen as enough of a threat that he convened a Soil Erosion Conference. The conference was held in Pretoria under the auspices of the Department of Agriculture and Forestry. It was attended by 52 delegates from different government departments – one of the main motivations behind the conference being to encourage interdepartmental co-operation in what was up until then rather disjointed.<sup>87</sup> At the conference, the task of combating soil erosion was given to the Division of Agricultural Education and Extension under Du Toit,<sup>88</sup> intensifying the approach of educating farmers in ‘scientific farming’. The most significant outcomes of the conference were the establishment of a Soil Erosion Council that functioned from 1930 until 1933, the approval of financial aid schemes for veld betterment and the formation of regional soil erosion committees.<sup>89</sup> It was also decided that the responsibility for drawing up a code of conduct with regards to soil erosion lay with the Minister of Agriculture<sup>90</sup> – in essence making soil erosion a mainly rural problem. However, the Department of Agriculture’s yearly reports did continue to mention efforts by other divisions such as the Orange Free State

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<sup>84</sup> SANA A 34/6: (Pretoria, J.C.G Kemp Collection), Speeches and Bills, Anon. South African Agricultural Union Congress October 1928, Chief Items for discussion, 9.

<sup>85</sup> The original quote of course comes from Johnathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726, 1735), spoken by the king of Brobdingnag, in the land of the giants. It became frequently used in matters of agricultural production, like Bosman in a speech on veld conservation. SANA A 34/6: G.J. Bosman “Veldbeskerming,” (c. 14 August 1928), 2.

<sup>86</sup> SANA A 38/3: (N.C. Havenga Collection, Pretoria) President of the Transvaal Agricultural Union to General Kemp, 22 February 1935; S.W. Pienaar (Secretary, Central Agricultural Union) to General Kemp, 18 January 1935; P.M van der Linde to General Kemp, 28 January 1935, Chairman Western Districts Farmer’s Association to General Kemp 25 January 1935; S.D. Naude (Secretary Richmond Farmer’s Association) to General Kemp 22 January 1935; Secretary of the South African Agricultural Union to General Kemp, 15 January 1935.

<sup>87</sup> SANA A 38/15: J.C. Ross, Chief of the Division of Soil and Veld Conservation “The State and Soil Conservation” (Address to Associated Scientific and Technical Societies of South Africa, Johannesburg), 20 June 1945, 6.

<sup>88</sup> (n/a) “Deur Pers en Draadloos: Bestryding van Gronderosie,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (May 1930): 68.

<sup>89</sup> Cooper, “Soil Conservation Policy in South Africa,” 86; Daneel, “’n Kritiese Oorsig,” 12.

<sup>90</sup> (n/a) “Die Stryd teen Gronderosie,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (September 1930): 256.

Provincial Government's effort to prevent erosion along main routes in the Free State.<sup>91</sup>

## **2.4 The Great Depression and its aftermath, c. 1929 – 1941.**

The tone for agriculture in the Union from 1929 up until 1941, when the first legislation directly intervening with agricultural land use vis-à-vis soil protection has been promulgated, was set by the Great Depression (c. 1929 -1933) and the Gold Standard Crisis, that was compounded by a prolonged drought during the 1932/33 season. It was a period characterised by the promulgation of various forms of legislative and financial assistance to keep the agricultural sector from faltering – not least because of the political clout of Afrikaner farmers. In the decade that followed, soil conservation did not completely disappear from the official agenda, but was rather accorded a secondary place as either a symptom or a cause of the main natural ailment – drought. The first part of this section will seek to address this particular *zeitgeist* and in the second part, an overview of the Veld and Forest Conservation Act and the official thinking behind it will be given.

The Great Depression became evident in South Africa in 1929, following the collapse of American commodities markets, the stock-market crash in New York, the collapse of many major European banks and, of greater significance to the agricultural sector, the saturation of the world food markets.<sup>92</sup> Even though the agricultural market in South Africa was largely orientated towards the local market, the Depression still had a destabilising impact on the sector and its people.<sup>93</sup> The market in South Africa that was particularly hard-hit was the market for wool,<sup>94</sup> of which South Africa was a net-exporter. The South African economy was kept afloat by its mineral sector and because of the sharp rise in the gold price in 1933 and coped with the aftermath more easily than would have otherwise been the case.<sup>95</sup> Farmers, an important political

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<sup>91</sup> P.R. Viljoen, "Oorsig van die Unie se Landboubedryf. Werksaamhede van die Departement van Landbou: Jaarverslag vir die Jaar geëindig op 30 Junie 1934," *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (December 1934): 495.

<sup>92</sup> K. Breckenridge, " 'Money with dignity': Migrants, Minelords and the Cultural Politics of the South African Gold Standard Crisis, 1920-33," *The Journal of African History* 36 (1995): 273.

<sup>93</sup> Klugist, *Grundlagen und Entwicklungsrichtung*, 85.

<sup>94</sup> C.S Richards, "Economic Revival in South Africa," *The Economic Journal* 44 (December 1934):624

<sup>95</sup> Giliomee and Mbenga, *New History of South Africa*, 283.

constituency for all the major political players, were also supported through various protective legislative means such as Export Subsidies Act No 49 of 1931, which held agriculture afloat.<sup>96</sup> For various reasons, the South African Union almost obsessively refused to step off the gold standard after the British suspension of the convertibility of the sterling on 19 September 1931 – which caused the international gold exchange system to collapse.<sup>97</sup> The farmers, whose products received much less on overseas markets as a consequence, were frustrated by this and in the end political pressure, prevailed and the government of General J.B.M. Hertzog abandoned the gold standard and devalued the currency.<sup>98</sup> All of these events took precedence over issues that are decidedly more long term in nature, such as soil conservation. Indeed, one of the reasons given at the time for farmer's reluctance to engage in soil conservation is that, from his capital, he has to look after himself, his church and his dependants first.<sup>99</sup>

During the early part of the Depression the government urged (white) farmers to merely increase efficiency. Mechanisation played a major role in bringing more fields under production and increasing the risk for erosion when cultivating marginal soils as well as increasing the possibility of a big surplus – which can be either positive or negative depending on the market. In the saturated market of the Great Depression a surplus was more of a curse than a blessing. The number of tractors used for ploughing increased from 1302 in 1926 to 3648 in 1930 to 6019 by 1937.<sup>100</sup> There are, however, more than mere mechanisation at play here – and not everyone believed it to be fast or efficient enough. Some international commentators of the time thought that the availability of cheap black labour inhibited progressive, scientific farming as well as mechanisation. For many farmers, it was observed, labour was cheaper on the short term than mechanisation, and furthermore they relied on blacks doing 'black work' so persistently, that there was little incentive for change.<sup>101</sup> In the following decade, this same trend was noticed in the *Report of the Committee on the Reconstruction of Agriculture*,<sup>102</sup> as well as by some progressive farmers towards their

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<sup>96</sup> Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture," 40.

<sup>97</sup> Breckenridge, "Money with dignity," 277. Reasons included for example, *initial* pressure by the Mining Industry, Hertzog's wish to emphasise South Africa's independence from Britain.

<sup>98</sup> Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture," 188.

<sup>99</sup> (n/a) "Gereguleerde Beweiding en Grond-erosie," (February 1931): 534.

<sup>100</sup> Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture," 35.

<sup>101</sup> A.R. Callaghan, *Impressions of Some Rural Enterprises in South Africa*, Department of Agriculture in South Australia 342 (Adelaide: Frank Trigg North Terrace Government Printer 1939).

<sup>102</sup> [G.P.-S – 1943-4], 27.

neighbours. One letter-writer to the *Landbouweekblad* noted that farmers found the building of a decent set of contour ridges (one of the measures against soil erosion) as unpractical, because “there is always ploughing to do and not enough Kaffirs and oxen.”<sup>103</sup>

Some hoped that the Depression might just be the wake-up call needed to lift the Union from its “chronic bucolic complex.”<sup>104</sup> On the one hand, for instance, a 1931 editorial in *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* hoped that the circumstances of the Depression would serve as an incentive towards ‘scientific farming’, that take the marginality of the soil and the nature of the South African climate into account, especially when it comes to refraining from mono-cropping.<sup>105</sup> On the other hand, analysts hoped that it would deter continuous government interference with agriculture, as this was detrimental to the economy and perceived as a waste of time, skills and resources. The suggestion was that the government should rather concentrate on creating a basis for ‘permanent agriculture’ (roughly what would today be called ‘sustainable agriculture’) through legislative means to combat wasteful practices, especially with regards to soil erosion.<sup>106</sup> Although the government did push conservation measures in subsequent years, it also increased its regulation of the agricultural industry, most notably with the Marketing Act of 1937, which provided for single channel marketing and fixed prices, which helped stabilise farming, at least economically and politically, during this period.<sup>107</sup> The argument behind this concern with agriculture was that “agriculture provides inherent stability to the state.”<sup>108</sup>

The main concern during the Depression that is directly related to soil erosion was the overgrazing of veld, especially when farmers were forced to trek with their stock (mainly sheep) during the prolonged drought of 1932 to 1933.<sup>109</sup> However, soil-erosion during the Great Depression was seen less as an issue on its own, but one that

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<sup>103</sup> “Behoorlike stelsel van onderbreekte countour-walle word as onprakties beskou. Daar is altyd ploeyry aan die gang en nie genoeg Kaffers en osse nie.” Note how black farm workers are mentioned in the same breath as beasts of burden, an indication of their utilitarian value to white farmers in this context. H.J. Nel, “Menings van ons Lesers: Is die Boer self ook Skuldig?” *LW* (22 January 1941): 26.

<sup>104</sup> Richards, “Economic Revival,” 624.

<sup>105</sup> W.J. Lamont, “Rigting in Verband met Boerderyprobleme en –moontlikhede: Boerderystelsels en die Depressie,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (June 1932): 83-84.

<sup>106</sup> C.S. Richards, “Economic Revival in South Africa,” 624.

<sup>107</sup> Giliomee and Mbenga, *New History of South Africa*, 285.

<sup>108</sup> C. Potgieter, “Die Aard en Betekenis van Landbou” *LW* (19 February 1930): 2577.

<sup>109</sup> Minnaar, “South African White Agriculture,” 161.

worsened other socio-economic issues in the *platteland*. One of the direst consequences of soil erosion, according to the government publication *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika*, was the exacerbation of that “feared illness of the volk – poor whiteism.”<sup>110</sup> One of the state incentives for constructing soil conservation works was large subsidies for employing jobless whites (and here, poor white men were understood) thus turning it into one of many schemes for white betterment.<sup>111</sup>

According to Showers, schemes were deemed necessary because, due to the effects of the Depression, “farmers had no money for anti-erosion works.”<sup>112</sup> (Black farmers, as with most laws that governed blacks, had very little say or choice in the matter. Soil conservation measures, often detrimental, were enforced upon them early on.)<sup>113</sup> Schemes continued even in the absence of a formal soil erosion council,<sup>114</sup> who held their last official meeting in 1933. These schemes were not tremendously effective though. A tour through the Union by the Soil Erosion Committee in 1939 found that a mere 1377 projects were finished and their durability and efficiency were questioned. According to the committee, the two biggest factors that hampered soil erosion were still ignorance and indifference.<sup>115</sup> White farmers used them mainly to built dams – by 31 August 1940, 16,286 dams at a worth of £363,000 were built, whereas the value of soil erosion works only amounted to £203,000.<sup>116</sup> A review of 1933 schemes in 1941 showed that less than 10 per cent applied for subsidies and less than half of them actually erected soil conservation works.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> “...bevorder ook ’n gevreesde volksiekte, n.l. die armlankedom.”

J.L. Serfontein, “Die Gevolge van Grond-erosie in Suid-Afrika,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (May 1930): 66.

<sup>111</sup> P.R. Viljoen, “Oorsig van die Unie se Landboubedryf. Werksaamhede van die Departement van Landbou: Jaarverslag vir die Jaar geëindig op 30 Junie 1933,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika*, (December 1933): 462; (n/a) “Staatsmaatreëls tot Redding van die Landboubedryf: Tydelike en Permanente Skemas,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (January 1934): 9; P.R. Viljoen, “Oorsig van die Unie se Landboubedryf, Werksaamhede van die Departement van Landbou: Jaarverslag vir die Jaar geëindig op 30 Junie 1934,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (December 1934): 494.

<sup>112</sup> K.B. Showers, “Early Experiences of Soil Conservation in Southern Africa: Segregated Programs and Rural Resistance,” Working Papers In African Studies No 184, (Boston University: African Studies Center, 1994), 12.

<sup>113</sup> Showers, “Early Experiences of Soil Conservation,” 12.

<sup>114</sup> (n/a) “Skemas vir Gronderosie-bestryding en Waterbewaring,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (July 1936): 299.

<sup>115</sup> Agricola. “Waarkuwende Stemme,” *LW* (26 January 1944): 13.

<sup>116</sup> (n/a) “Gronderosiebestryding,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (December 1940): 467.

<sup>117</sup> Showers, “Early Experiences of Soil Conservation,” 12.



It was only much later in the late 1930s that official engagement with soil erosion picked up speed again, with the foundation of Division: Soil and Veld Conservation. It was an amalgamation of the Soil Erosion Service, the Weed Eradication Service and the Division for Veld and Pasture Research in 1939,<sup>118</sup> with J.C. Ross as its head.<sup>119</sup> His approach towards farming and nature was, according to him, based on the premise that in ‘Nature’ (as undisturbed by man), there exists a state of equilibrium, and that farming disturbs this equilibrium – farming then, must try to “harmonise” with nature.<sup>120</sup> War, however, intervened and soil conservation remained a non-priority when all schemes were suspended in July 1940.<sup>121</sup> When it resumed after the war, it became a very visible part of the national agenda.

## **2.5 The Veld and Forest Conservation Act of 1941.**

The next significant event in the history of white soil conservation in South Africa was the Veld and Forest Conservation Act of 1941, which was laid before parliament in November 1939.<sup>122</sup> The Act, which focussed far more on the forestry aspect, was nonetheless another effort to coordinate conservation efforts concerning natural resources with an economic value. Two provisions were of significance – showing that the state was willing to take more drastic measures in order to improve the viability of agriculture in South Africa. The first provision was section four, which awarded the Governor-General the right to expropriate land required for the prevention of sand-drift, soil erosion, or for reclamation, protection of catchment areas or conservation of water resources. The second provision of significance was section 5 that provided for the declaration of additional land, considered to be under threat of degradation, to be proclaimed at the discretion of the State, a conservation area. By end of 1946, the five Conservation Areas proclaimed comprised a total of 1404 612 hectares.<sup>123</sup> The most important ones were located in the Drakensberg Catchment Area and at Vlekpoort, in the Herschel district. The Act in general was,

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<sup>118</sup> J.C Ross, “Bewaring van die Landbou-hulpbronne van die Land. Jaarverslag van die Afdeling Grond-en Veldbewing,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (December 1940): 497.

<sup>119</sup> (n/a) “Nuwe Afdelingshoofde,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (March 1940): 84.

<sup>120</sup> J.C Ross, “Bewaring van die Landbou-hulpbronne,” 497; J. C. Ross, *Soil Conservation in South Africa: A Review of the Problem and Development to Date* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1963), 29.

<sup>121</sup> (n/a) “Gronderosiebestryding,” 466.

<sup>122</sup> J.D. Keet, “Verduideliking van die Wetsontwerp op Bos-en Veldbewing,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (January 1940): 30.

<sup>123</sup> Cooper, “Soil Conservation Policy in South Africa,” 91.

however, geared towards reclamation rather than prevention, although there was a steadily increasing realisation at the time that reclamation alone would not address the soil erosion problem in South Africa.

## **2.6 Reconstruction and the war against soil erosion: c. 1941- c. 1950.**

The 1941 Act failed to live up to its promises, with farmers reluctant to take measures or built soil erosion works due to shortages of labour, machinery, state subsidies and economic incentives.<sup>124</sup> J.D. de Wet, a senior specialist in the Department of Agriculture, remarked that only 10 per cent of farmers made use of soil erosion, lairage and silo schemes of the previous decade, something he attributed to a failure of government propaganda on soil erosion.<sup>125</sup> The Act was replaced five years later by the comprehensive Soil Conservation Act of 1946. The latter marked the peak of what was considered one of the main agricultural issues of the 1940s, certainly an issue that generated an unprecedented amount of press on the topic, namely soil conservation. The 1940s were also, however, a period characterised by post-war reconstruction, with the significant report on agricultural reconstruction being published in 1943. That same year, a pressure group for soil conservation, the National Veldtrust, was founded. The Trust, that will be discussed, played a formative role in erecting the scaffolding on which the legislation and campaigns were built. And as Dodson has convincingly shown, soil conservation proved not to be “above politics”, but was indeed in some cases used by politicians. More importantly, political strategies often had an impact on soil conservation.<sup>126</sup> Furthermore, the distinction between official thinking as in the expert opinion and state thinking becomes more distinct.

The blueprint for agricultural reconstruction, the *Report of the Reconstruction Committee of the Department of Agriculture and Forestry*, will be looked at first before moving on to the founding and influence of the National Veldtrust. One of their main contributions to the field – the Soil Conservation Bill, will subsequently be discussed.

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<sup>124</sup> C.F. Hugo, “Grondverspoeling,” *LW* (1 November 1944): 21;(n/a) “Middellandse Boere Ondersteun Grondbewaring,” *LW* (20 June 1945): 31.

<sup>125</sup> (n/a) “Tyd vir Twyfel Aangaande Erosiebestryding is Verby,” *LW* (10 July 1946): 39.

<sup>126</sup> B. Dodson, “Above Politics? Soil Conservation in 1940s South Africa.” Workshop on South Africa in the 1940s: (Southern African Research Centre, Kingston), September 2003.  
<<http://www.queensu.ca/sarc/Conferences/1940s/Dodson.htm>.> (Accessed 3 September 2007).

### 2.6.1 The Reconstruction Committee, 1943.

The report of the Reconstruction Committee was issued at the end of 1943, and focussed on the reconstruction of agriculture when the effects of war began to wear off, as well as the general re-assessment of the state and role of agriculture in the Union, politically as well as economically. What is most striking about the report is the way in which human commercial activity is portrayed as disruptive of what would otherwise be a harmonious –and stable ‘natural state’:

“The natural resources upon which the farming industry rests consists of soil, veld and water supplies. In Nature they are in a condition of more or less stable equilibrium with one another under any given climate... [Farming] has ceased to be ‘in harmony with nature.’”<sup>127</sup>

The report, which was reprinted at least twice, amounting to 13 000 copies,<sup>128</sup> blamed the commercialisation of agriculture for this ‘unbalancing’:

“The activities of the farming community have been guided largely by market demands and not soil demands, with the result that wide areas of land has been greatly exhausted by [detrimental] farming practices... these conditions can be traced to exploitative methods of land utilisation which is not in harmony with natural controls of soil, vegetation, and climate.”<sup>129</sup>

It could perhaps be that the increasing emphasis on working towards equilibrium with nature was in part influenced by the destruction wrought in the Second World War. However, even with the calls for farming in harmony with nature, it was explicitly for the sake of increasing productivity, very roughly painted over with strokes of ‘land ethic.’ The ultimate goal of soil erosion works, according to the report, was to be:

“...an important means of arresting the progress of erosion on thousands of farms, that they have improved the productive capacity of many farms, and that they have been a bulwark against the forces making for the desiccation, exhaustion and deterioration of the Union’s agricultural land.”<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> [G.P.-S – 1943-4], 14.

<sup>128</sup> [G.P.-S – 1943-4] and [G.P.- S 1944-5].

<sup>129</sup> [G.P.-S – 1943-4], 6.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

In this, there is also a noteworthy shift of attention to needs and wants of the consumer,<sup>131</sup> and the influence of especially the urban consumer on the nature (and ‘Nature’) of farming. P.J. du Plessis, the Headmaster of Glen Agricultural College outside Bloemfontein in the Free State, said in 1943 that, through the call for cheap agricultural produce, especially food, farmers are forced to take everything out of the soil, and give less and less back to the soil:

“The last grain of fertility is taken from the soil to provide in the frenzied cry for more and cheaper food – and then food is even exported overseas. It is not the farmer’s fault that the soil is dying. The urbanite carries more guilt and can help the farmer through demanding better quality, rather than cheapness and quantity.”<sup>132</sup>

As for the officials who had to lay the ground work in educating farmers – who were the intermediaries between the policy makers and the farmer’s themselves, they often felt caught in an interstitial space, between what they saw as the ‘red tape’ of the government and the conservative approach of farmers towards agriculture. It is perhaps described best by the following poem written by one amongst their ranks. The poem is based on “If”, a poem by that colonial hero, Rudyard Kipling who also penned the “White Man’s Burden.” (“If” was ironically enough written in honour of Leander Starr Jameson, who led the failed Jameson Raid of 1896 but was portrayed as a hero in Britain. Whether or not the writer of this parody was aware of this would be pure speculation, as its muse only became known a few years earlier). The poem, printed on the front page of a “Summarised Report on the work accomplished during the year 1942/43: Anti-Soil Erosion and Grassland Improvement Grant for Research: Department of Agriculture and Forestry, Union Government,” went as follows:

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<sup>131</sup> [G.P.-S – 1943-4], 27-32.

<sup>132</sup> “Die laaste greintjie vrugbaarheid word vandag uit die aarde gehaal om te voorsien in die dolle kreet van meer en goedkoper kos – en dan word die kos selfs na die buiteland uitgevoer. Dit is nie die boer se skuld dat die bodem aan die doodgaan is nie. Die stadsbewoner dra meer skuld en kan die boer help deur aan te dring op beter gehalte in die plek van meer en goedkoper landbouprodukte.”  
Korrespondent, “Kernoorsaak van Grondverspoeling: Kaaplanners bespreek Landbousake,” *LW* (8 September 1943): 20. The theme of urbanisation surfacing in this quote, will be discussed later in more detail.

IF

“If you can watch the good earth go rushing seaward  
As pundits and politicians sit arguing by,  
If you can see the donga daily growing  
That farmers rarely see, and don’t ask “why”?”

If you can tend the veld while all around you  
Starving stock trample and graze all they can see,  
If you can plan and tire not of planning  
Farming systems and rural policies as they should be;

If you can press your point in film and story  
And get that point blessed at H.Q.<sup>133</sup>  
Without a spate of ‘phones and memoranda  
That prove your efforts all have gone askew;

If you can slog the dozen daylight hours  
At all the tasks of sometimes doubtful worth,  
And in what remain demonstrate and lecture  
But withal research, contact, correspondence never shirk;

If you can do this and still be hopeful  
And solve Nature’s problems each and every one,  
My boy, you’ll surely be a marvel,  
And what is more, you’ll help save our Land, my son!”<sup>134</sup>  
- J.P.

The poem is obviously meant as a self-reflexive tongue-in-the-cheek summary of the official’s task. It nevertheless portrayed officials who were passionate about their work, and about saving the Land through “solving Nature’s problems” (arguably through scientific research), but were hampered in this task on the one hand by the perceived ignorance and lack of critical engagement of farmers, and the workings of the modern state on the other.

### **2.6.2 The National Veld Trust.**

The National Veld Trust took on the character of a propaganda arm for the Department of Agriculture, yet they were not dependent on them. Many of its

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<sup>133</sup> Head Quarters.

<sup>134</sup> SANA A38/15: Annual Report 1942-1943: A Summarised Report on the work accomplished during the year 1942/43: Anti-Soil Erosion and Grassland Improvement Grant for Research: Department of Agriculture and Forestry, Union Government, front page (not numbered)

founding members were influential politicians – like N.C Havenga who would become Minister of Finance in Malan’s government,<sup>135</sup> Louis Esselen, an advisor to General Smuts and the advocate Charles te Water. Financed in part by Department of Agricultural Technical Services,<sup>136</sup> the goal of the Veld Trust was to assist in the education of farmers and cultivation of public opinion.<sup>137</sup> They saw erosion as a threat because; as they put it “it is from the good Earth that man derives his health, his quality, his moral, his power of survival. Good health cannot be obtained without good food and good food cannot be grown on sick soil.”<sup>138</sup> They did not erect soil conservation works themselves nor paid for it. The Trust’s primary goal was the dissemination of knowledge and raising public awareness around soil conservation through means of film, pamphlets, demonstration and other paraphernalia of similar associations like stamp drives, working to raise the awareness of the *platteland* as well as the city.<sup>139</sup>

Sometimes they were involved in lawsuits. The Veld Trust was also active in Lesotho (then Basutoland),<sup>140</sup> and sometimes used what they perceived as a more active government in Lesotho as a foil against which to measure progress with regards to soil conservation in South Africa.<sup>141</sup>

Initially, there were tension in relationship between Veld Trust and the National Anti-Waste Soil Erosion (NAWE) sub-committee of the Department of Public Works (the latter focussed more on the urban sphere), especially with regards to propaganda films, training and so forth.<sup>142</sup> Esselen felt that working too closely together will not

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<sup>135</sup> SANA A38/15: N.C. Havenga to Charles te Water, 16 June 1948 and Charles te Water, Chairman to N.C. Havenga, 23 June 1948.

<sup>136</sup> Daneel, “’n Kritiese Oorsig,” 15.

<sup>137</sup> “Gronderosie, sy Agtergrond en sy Gevaar,” in *Veldtrustnuus* 1 (1 September 1944): 3.

<sup>138</sup> SANA A 38/15: National Veld Trust: Blue Print for Fund-raising and Publicity Drive, c. November 1946, 3.

<sup>139</sup> (n/a) “Nuwe Steun vir Aanslag teen Erosie,” *LW* (20 June 1945): 31.

<sup>140</sup> *Veldtrustnuus* 1 (January 1945): 3.

It was decidedly paternalistic, the same report states how the “natives sat quietly whilst scenes of devastation were shown but jumped for joy when they saw fat oxen on goodveld” (“Die natuurlike wat tjoepstil gesit het toe die verwoestingstonele op die doek gegooi is, het gejubel toe hulle vet osse op goeie veld sien.”)

<sup>141</sup> T. Driver, “Anti-erosion Policies in the Mountain Areas of Lesotho: the South African Connection,” *Environment and History* 5 (1999): 9.

<sup>142</sup> SANA A 38/15 Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Trustees of the National Veld Trust ,5 October 1944 and Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Trustees of the National Veld Trust, 9 November 1944.

be favourable at the time due to the fact that the NAWE was associated in public opinion with the war-effort, which was unpopular with many farmers and therefore too political.<sup>143</sup> The Veld Trust had more influence in the long run as it was not only associated with the unpopular war effort of the Union government,<sup>144</sup> or even government *per se*. It remained however, an association that drew mostly progressive, well-educated farmers,<sup>145</sup> and the Veld Trust struggled to improve their funds and their membership rates on grassroots' level.<sup>146</sup>

The Veld Trust was, however, visible throughout the press, being aware of the appeal of using the popular media.<sup>147</sup> They sought, for instance, to gain more members by turning the newsletter into a magazine to reach a far larger portion of the reading public,<sup>148</sup> and widely distributed "Suid-Afrika in Gevaar" (South Africa in Danger), a film about soil erosion that was also the first 16mm film with sound in South Africa.<sup>149</sup> Apparently "thousands" attended.<sup>150</sup>

The farmers who have shown most interest in the Veld Trust and conservation hailed from the Cape and the Orange Free State, where their headquarters were based.<sup>151</sup> The major influence of the Veld Trust in the first few years was their proposal of a soil conservation bill.

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<sup>143</sup> SANA A 38/15 Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Trustees of the National Veld Trust ,5 October 1944 and Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Trustees of the National Veld Trust, 9 November 1944.

<sup>144</sup> The War was not unpopular with everyone of course, but at least with a considerable part of white, Afrikaans farmers north of the Orange River.

<sup>145</sup> They frequently worked together with Rotary-clubs, for instance.

SANA A 38/15: Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Trustees of the National Veld Trust , 5 October 1944, 1.

<sup>146</sup> SANA A38/15: Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Trustees of the National Veld Trust, 9 November 1944, 3; SANA A 38/15 Secretary's report 27 September 1945 and Minutes of the Meeting of the Trustees of the National Veldtrust 22 May 1946.

<sup>147</sup> SANA A 38/15: Report on the discussions with Mr W.M. Bedford regarding the Veld Trust News, 8 January 1947.

<sup>148</sup> SANA A38/15: Report on the discussions with Mr W.M. Bedford regarding the Veld Trust News, 8 January 1947.

<sup>149</sup> (Caption), "Propaganda-Veldtog van die Afdeling Grondbewaring en Voorligting," *LW* (24 December 1947): 45.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.* Although their attendance might have more to do with the technology behind the film rather than its content, this does not take away from the exposure the film gave to the Veld Trust and the issue of soil erosion.

<sup>151</sup> SANA A38/15: Notule van die Vergadering van die Trustees van die Nasionale Veldtrust 18 November 1943, 3.

Much of the Veld Trust rhetoric echoed that of the Reconstruction Report (see 2.6.1), also calling on farmers to try and work with nature, rather than trying to conquer nature through the mechanistic means that was more often than not attributed to white men:

“But what few of them [the SA public] ever understood was that they could conquer human enemies, space and distance and sickness, and many of the problems that face men, but they could not conquer grass and streams and mountain and force them to do the things they wanted. They cannot bully nature but have to make friends with her, and this is a lesson they had not learned. Today we are learning it. Nature ‘plans’ wisely. The earth, the grass that grows upon it, the trees and the flowers, all fit into one big pattern; in some way they all depend on one another and when they are untroubled by men they get along, on the whole, very well indeed. So it was in South Africa until white men began to come in numbers and upset the balance between all these living things.”<sup>152</sup>

The way that this “upsetting of the balance of living things” in South Africa by white men raises interesting questions about their view of a hierarchy between themselves, ‘non-white’ people and nature. That white men were perceived to have the ability to interfere with nature as opposed to a more ‘balanced’ state before their arrival implies that the Africans before them were more in tune with nature, in a ‘noble savage’ kind of way. They were seen as less civilised and therefore also more part of nature as something to be presided over. In this sense, the indigenous land-use systems were seen as ‘pure’ and ‘natural,’ an assertion that would return in a different guise, at the end of the twentieth century as environmentalism became entrenched in the popular media. It can, on the other hand, be read as an acknowledgement of the damage that white men indeed perpetrated on an arguable much larger scale than many others. This view, however, was not held by everyone at the time. The nuances to this perception will be further discussed in 2.7.1.

The Veld Trust was not without its battles with the public it sought to convert to its environmental cause. One reader of the *Landbouweekblad* called the soil erosion policies proposed by the Trust Machiavellian, that it will cause people who are less feared and more loved to be insulted for spoiling their soil, but people who are feared

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<sup>152</sup> SANA A 38/15: Speech on founding of Veld Trust, 1944? p. 2.



will get away Scot-free<sup>153</sup> (an underlying strategy to Veld Trust proposed policies was peer pressure). The same reader also believes that the Veld Trust is preaching to the choir, saying that: “[s]ome farmers might be their own enemies when it comes to the soil, but most farmers will look after their livelihood- for themselves and their children.”<sup>154</sup> He goes on to say that the real culprit is the ‘armchair bureaucracy’, that the most serious erosion caused by some government departments, especially railways and roads, and calls Mr Esselen either too scared or too oblivious of the fact to engage with them.<sup>155</sup> Another letter-writer also asked whether the only use of the Veld Trust stamps is to plaster the government-built road on his farm that is causing erosion.<sup>156</sup> Others had more mundane complaints, such as wanting to join the Trust but finding information on how to join not readily available.<sup>157</sup>

## 2.7 The Soil Conservation Act of 1946

The first Act to focus exclusively on Soil Conservation in the Union was only promulgated in 1946,<sup>158</sup> after at least three decades of dire warnings about the evil of soil erosion. The education of farmers, it would seem, was no longer enough and the state needed a stronger mandate than financial subsidies. As a correspondent wrote at the end of 1945 to the *Landbouweekblad*, only legislation will provide a solution, even if individual freedoms were temporarily suspended.<sup>159</sup>

One of the reasons why the Act was pressed, it would seem, was that the long term financial impact of soil erosion became clearer. In 1945, the Head of the Division for Veld and Pasture Research J.C. Ross told delegates of the associated scientific and technical societies that

“...agriculture, our food-production industry, is the real foundation of every form of human activity and enterprise in this country, and... a stabilised

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<sup>153</sup> David Copperfield, “Menings van Ons Lesers: Grondverspoeling en Plaasarbeiders,” *LW* (1 March 1944): 21-22.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> J.C.M., “Menings van ons Lesers: Erosie en Padverlegging,” *LW* (4 December 1946), 35.

<sup>157</sup> H.J. Bergh, “Die Veldtrust,” *LW* (4 July 1945): 25.

<sup>158</sup> SANA JUS 1638: 1/86/46 Soil Conservation Bill 4 July 1946.

<sup>159</sup> J. Swanepoel, “Menings van ons Lesers: Wetgewing is al wat die Resultaat sal oplewer,” *LW* (14 November 1945): 29.

agriculture, which implies conservation of our soil resources, is the only possible basis of a stable national economy.”<sup>160</sup>

In his address to the house of assembly, Minister Strauss gave a less nuanced version, stating that:

“In cash, erosion annually costs our country a colossal amount... both directly and indirectly... amounting to millions of pounds annually. But it is not just an issue of cash loss. It is said that if the soil gives way, man goes away and when the soil gives in, life gives in.”<sup>161</sup>

Belinda Dodson also proposed that political motivations might possibly be the reason why it took the government so long to pass the Bill. They often displayed ‘hypersensitivity’ towards the (white) *platteland* and therefore were reluctant to enforce certain conservation measures, amongst other reasons.<sup>162</sup>

Nevertheless, the first draft of the Act was drawn up by the Veld Trust, who in the form and content closely modelled it on similar legislation from the United States (see chapter 3). Their draft was rewritten before being submitted to the House of Assembly, with some of the following, telling, changes made:

Table 2.1<sup>163</sup>

| <b>Soil Conservation Draft Bill, drawn up by the Veld Trust</b>                           | <b>Draft bill submitted before the House of Assembly</b>                                     |
|---|--|
| Creation of an autonomous statutory body responsible directly to minister of Agriculture. | “Soil Conservation Board” advisory, Secretary for Agriculture <i>ex officio</i> chairperson. |
| Division of the entire Union into soil conservation districts.                            | Districts to be proposed by farmers themselves.  |
| Election of district committee with powers to carry out measures.                         | Enforcement left mostly to peer pressure.  |

<sup>160</sup> SANA A 38/15: J.C Ross (Chief of the Division of Soil and Veld Conservation) “The State and Soil Conservation” Address to Associated Scientific and Technical Societies of South Africa, Johannesburg on 20 June 1945, 1.

<sup>161</sup> “In klinkende munt kos erosie ons land jaarliks ‘n kolossale bedrag...ook op die koste van regstreekse en onregstreekse skade...in terme van miljoene ponde jaarliks. Maar dit bly nie slegs by kontantverlies nie. Daar is gesê dat “wanneer die grond padgee, die mens padgee, en wanneer die grond ingee, die lewe ophou.” HANSARD, (23 May 1946): 8461.

<sup>162</sup>B. Dodson, “Above Politics? Soil Conservation in 1940s South Africa,” *South African Historical Journal* 50 (May 2004): 58.

<sup>163</sup> Modelled after Dodson, “Above Politics?” 58.

As can be seen, the bill was already watered down by the time it was presented before the House of Assembly, with many of the executive powers and the punitive measures lightened, yet it was heavily criticised for its alleged authoritarian measures. The representative of Smithfield even called one of the clauses worthy of Hitler.<sup>164</sup> Though not everyone was as extreme in their comparisons, there was still widespread criticism of the “benevolent compulsion” aspect of the Soil Conservation Act.<sup>165</sup> The Act, called the “Act to make better provision for the combating and prevention of soil erosion, and for the conservation, protection and improvement of the veld, the soil, the surface of the land, the vegetation and the sources and resources of the water supplies in South Africa,”<sup>166</sup> was eventually passed, and the first soil conservation district to be declared was Ficksburg in the Eastern Free State. The ineffectiveness of the Act, however, soon became clear. Two years after becoming the first soil conservation district, little progress has been made due to the amount of bureaucratic problems as well as perpetual under-funding and under-staffing.<sup>167</sup> Other districts, such as Clocolan that applied for a Soil Conservation officer, were declined due to a shortage of staff.<sup>168</sup> In 1948, two years after the Act was first passed, the Department of Agriculture still had a major problem with recruiting and keeping enough qualified men in the department. 130 vacancies were reported, and only between 50 and 60 people were in the field. The main reason was probably uncompetitive salaries.<sup>169</sup> On top of that the financial regulations encompassed in the Act were not approved until 1948; a preliminary draft was published in the *Landbouweekblad* in December 1947.<sup>170</sup> Further time elapsed before the initial reluctance of many farmers to accept the new regime could be overcome.<sup>171</sup>

The statement made by Pagiola, that the question most probably asked by farmers when faced with such a policy is “do the long term benefits of reduced degradation

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<sup>164</sup> HANSARD (23 May 1946): 8522.

<sup>165</sup> SANA 38 29/4 Memorandum on National Soil Conservation Act, Bloemfontein, 14 January 1946, 2.

<sup>166</sup> J.C. Ross, *Soil Conservation in South Africa: A Review of the Problem and Development to Date* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1963) 21.

<sup>167</sup> D.la H de Villiers, “Ficksburg se Grondbewaringskomitee doen verslag,” *LW* (25 Augustus 1948): 49-50.

<sup>168</sup> VAB MCL 2/2 Glen to Secretary of the Municipality, 28 Augustus 1946.

<sup>169</sup> L. Landman, “Grootste Erosie in die Departement Self,” *LW* (11 August 1948):55. (Editorial), “Erosie in die Landboudepartement,” *LW* (27 October 1948), front page (not numbered).

<sup>170</sup> (n/a) “Finansiële Regulasies insake die Grondbewaringswet,” *LW* (24 December 1947): 67.

<sup>171</sup> Ross, *Soil Conservation in South Africa*, 68.

make these costs worth bearing?”<sup>172</sup> is to a certain extent also applicable to the farmer’s reception of the Soil Conservation Act. Economic concerns were indeed the most written about in the press, but it was not the only concern raised. Other issues raised included the amount of bureaucracy, who will bear the brunt of the responsibilities, and also, the effects of the Act on farmer’s independence.

Farming was likened to the idiomatic goose that lays the golden eggs – a goose that must be well taken care of in order to lay more golden eggs – and that is the motivation behind conservation farming.<sup>173</sup> The measures to care for the goose, were, however, costly. A *Landbouweekblad* editorial of November 1947 said that farmers were under the impression that soil conservation was a business contract: binding farmers to irrevocable obligations before knowing what kind of financial help they will receive.<sup>174</sup> ‘Boertjie,’ a frequent letter-writer to the *Landbouweekblad*, said that the Soil Conservation Act is merely a government scheme like all others, promising that the country will be a Canaan if all the farmers cooperate, but in the end the scheme is a waste of money. This was, he argued, because the subsidy paid by the government was also sourced from the farmers in the form of tax – and the urbanite, carrying more political and economic power, will not want their tax money used for the betterment of ‘spoon-fed’ farmers. Moreover, he says, much erosion is also caused by government constructs such as roads and railways.<sup>175</sup> A similar statement was made by ‘Beginner’ when it became known that the Act was on the cards. He argued that the driving forces behind erosion are the ‘rich people’ and the capitalists: “it is time to write less about soil erosion and pay more attention to the undermining of the small farmers and landless by rich people and capitalists.”<sup>176</sup> On the question of responsibility, the point was made at a Free State Congress that too few officials are

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<sup>172</sup> S. Pagiola, “Economic Analysis of Incentives for Soil Conservation,” D. W. Sanders, P.C. Huszar, S. Sombatpanit, and T. Enters, eds. *Incentives in Soil Conservation: From Theory to Practice* (USA: Science Publishers, Inc, 1999), 41.

<sup>173</sup> (Editorial), “Bewaringsboerdery is Betalend,” *LW* (25 September 1946), front page (not numbered).

<sup>174</sup> (Editorial), “Grondbewaring is geen Besigheidstransaksie nie,” *LW* (26 November 1947), front page (not numbered).

<sup>175</sup> Boertjie, “Briewe van ons Lesers: Bewaringswet,” *LW* (17 September 1947): 58-59.

<sup>176</sup> “Dit het tyd geword om minder te praat en te skryf oor gronderosie en meer van ons aandag te bepaal by die ondermyning van ons nie-grondeienaars en kleinboere deur die rykes en die kapitaliste” Beginner. “Ondermyning van die Kleinboer,” *LW* (14 November 1945): 29.

available and that the cooperation of roads and railways is needed in combating erosion they themselves cause and in helping farmers combat theirs.<sup>177</sup>

Not everyone agreed that the lack of subsidy has been the root cause of the reluctance of farmers to actively partake in soil erosion schemes made possible by the Act. At a meeting of the soil conservation committee of Ficksburg, C. Macaskill, the winner of the soil conservation competition of the Witwatersrand, told members that subsidies might even be itself the cause of a lack of participation, because it “spoon feeds” farmers.<sup>178</sup> Soil conservation was touted as a national task, one that should not have been the responsibility of the farmers alone, but of every citizen of the nation. Farmers were therefore disgruntled with the slow pace with which applications for soil conservation schemes were handled, and whilst some have started without waiting for the government, they wanted to be assured that they will be compensated for work done.<sup>179</sup>

The amount of paper-work involved also put a damper on farmer’s enthusiasm for the Act. Farmers complained of the lack of reaction from the Department of Agriculture when applications for soil erosion works are made.<sup>180</sup> One farmer wrote that the bureaucratic red tape became too much for him. He wrote that “it seems as if a farmer must first qualify to have his soil individually proclaimed a conservation area – thus I withdraw my application.”<sup>181</sup> Another farmer suggested that the whole Union must be proclaimed a soil conservation area in order to ensure food security by lessening the ‘red tape’ required to proclaim a district, and so that everyone can benefit from government subsidy.<sup>182</sup> In Ficksburg alone, a whole year was spent just drawing up plans and processing them (June 1947 – June 1948). By then no actual soil erosion works were in place,<sup>183</sup> and by November 1950, most farmers in Ficksburg soil

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<sup>177</sup> (n/a) “Vrystaatse Boere hou Kongres,” *LW* (25 August 1948): 65, 59.

<sup>178</sup> (n/a) “Subsidiestelsel Grondoorzaak van Gebrek aan Vordering met Grondbewaring: Stelsel Waarvolgens Boere met die Lepel Gevoer word,” *LW* (20 September 1950): 58-59.

<sup>179</sup> (n/a) “Misnoeë Oor Vertraging i.v.m Grondbewaring,” *LW* (27 August 1947): 55.

<sup>180</sup> P.H. Coetzee, “Briewe van ons Lesers: Erosiesak is vir my Duister,” *LW* (17 April 1946): 33; (n/a) “Briewe van ons Lesers: Grondbewaring,” *LW* (5 May 1951): 51.

<sup>181</sup> M.J. Swart, “Briewe van ons Lesers: Grondbewaringswet,” *LW* (3 March 1948): 47.

<sup>182</sup> N.J. van der Merwe, “Uitgebreider Grondbewaring,” *LW* (6 July 1949): 47.

<sup>183</sup> D.la H de Villiers, “Ficksburg se Grondbewaringskomitee doen Verslag,” *LW* (25 August 1948): 49-50.

conservation district still have not done anything yet to implement the soil conservation plan.<sup>184</sup>

Another common concern, touched upon in 2.7.1, was that the Act would take away from the farmer's individual rights, as the correspondent for the *Landbouweekblad* on the Act put it: "the farmer and his soil is synonymous; separated, their exact meaning is unthinkable."<sup>185</sup> Wide powers were conferred to the Soil Conservation Board, they could advise the Minister to expropriate soil if deemed necessary.<sup>186</sup> Proponents of the Act were aware of this. For example, the *Landbouweekblad* published a series of articles explaining the Ficksburg Soil Conservation plan in detail.<sup>187</sup> The chairman of the commission wrote to thank the *Landbouweekblad* for their trouble, but specifically objected to the phrasing of some of the explanations. For instance, he said, they wrote about "orders," and those farmers who do not comply can be "punished"; that the extension officers are "agricultural inspectors" and so on. According to him it denies the cooperative nature of the Act, subsequently scaring farmers off. He says that farmers stay the masters of their own soil, "baas op eie plaas."<sup>188</sup>

### **2.8.1 Afrikaner nationalism, identity and soil erosion, c. 1930 – 1950.**

*"Erosion is the biggest problem confronting the country, bigger than any politics."*<sup>189</sup>

- *Attributed to Jan Smuts*

The histories of human engagement with nature – and their impact on nature – are more often than not also histories of a zeitgeist and human's relationships with one another as well as their relationship with nature. More than a descriptive narrative of

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<sup>184</sup> (n/a) "Die Meeste het nog Niks gedoen nie," *LW* (8 November 1950): 21.

<sup>185</sup> Balie. "Jongste Wetgewing en die Boer: Grondbewaringswet se Bepalings," *LW* (11 September 1946): 26.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> (n/a) "Grondbewaringsplan vir Ficksburg: Maatreëls Waaraan Grondbewoners Sal Moet Voldoen," *LW* (3 December 1947): 60, 67; (n/a) "Verduideliking van Ficksburg se Grondbewaringsplan," *LW* (10 December 1947): 49-53.

<sup>188</sup> D.laH. de Villiers, "Briewe van ons Lesers: 'n Versekering aan Boere in Ficksburg," *LW* (24 December 1947): 55.

<sup>189</sup> F. Osborn, *Our Plundered Planet*, (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1937); K.B Mickey, *Man and the Soil: A Brief Introduction to the Study of Soil Conservation* ((Chicago: International Harvester Company 1945), 39.

the phenomenon in itself, in this case soil erosion, can be written. In the case of soil erosion, it became an issue that was overtly couched in terms of nationalism. Whether or not it was deliberately and consciously hijacked as a political propaganda tool, or reflected the political and cultural concerns of whites at the time, it was visibly a strong driving force behind the language(s) used by state, expert and farmer.

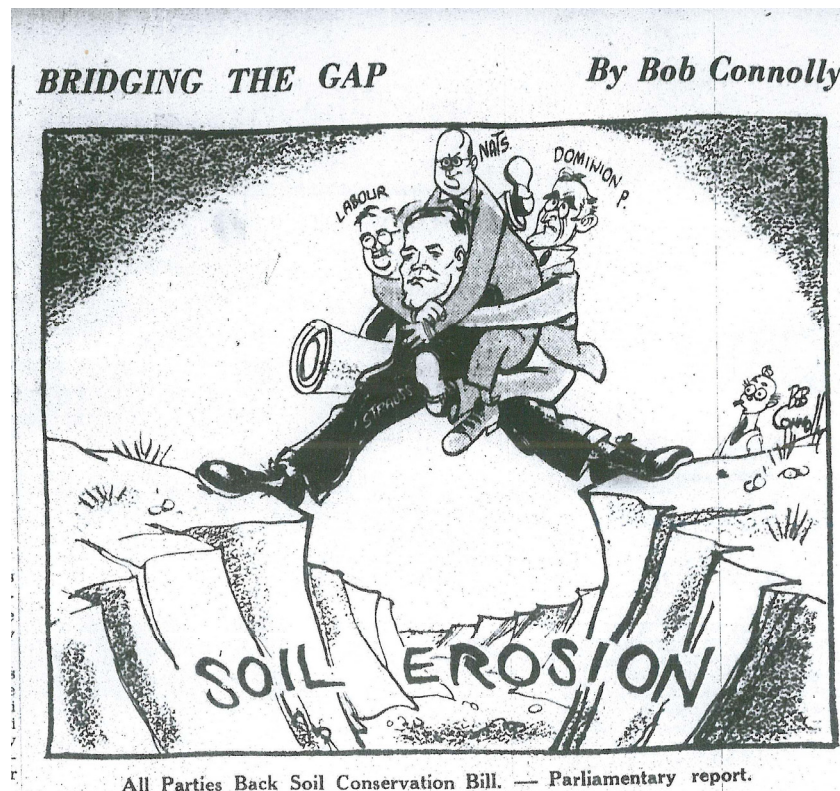


Figure 2.2: This cartoon captured how soil erosion was portrayed as being ‘above politics.’  
Source: Rand Daily Mail (17 May 1946).

Increased production may have been the end-goal of ‘conservation farming’, but the content was often coupled with an appeal to a sense of national belonging and hence national responsibility. This became more noticeable in the 1930s. In 1933, when South Africa was just beginning to emerge from the Great Depression, *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* noted that, unlike weed eradication where a farmer could be fined if certain weeds were found on his farm, the government called on nothing but “patriotism to conserve the safeguard of our *volk*’s existence –our soil – for our progeny...”<sup>190</sup> The destiny of the *volk* the article suggests, might well follow the destiny of “our skeleton-like farms.”<sup>191</sup>

<sup>190</sup> “Slegs die beroep op sy vaderlandsliefde om die onderpand van ons volksbestaan – ons grond – te bewaar vir ons nageslag...”

In his presidential address in 1934 to the South African Association for the Advancement of Science, the Cambridge trained scientist from the Free State, T.D. Hall, who was usually not prone to emotive language, asked of the congress: “Let us save South Africa’s soil and veld, her greatest potential wealth and national heritage, rather than the individualist’s stock.”<sup>192</sup> The welfare of the nation then, is more important than the wealth of the individual. Another, related theme used in government propaganda is the carrying over of heritage and wealth to descendants:

“In South Africa we have a rich and fertile country, and it is certainly not too much to expect of every inhabitant that he does his utmost to insure that the next generation can enjoy equally good conditions. If soil erosion is not checked, the inheritance for our descendants will be very poor.”<sup>193</sup>

This argument was intensified in subsequent years, for example in C.T. te Water, founding member of the National Veldtrust’s foreword to Edward Roux’s *The Veld and the Future*:

“In the Union of South Africa a national catastrophe due to soil erosion is more imminent than in any other country of the World. Surely the People of our Country are awake at last to this most ominous of all the Challenges to our environment! Are they not aware that, like locusts, ten millions of people swarm upon our good earth and are eating it bare, so that its bones are uncovered and its soil washing to sea? We of today cannot plead the innocence of our Ancestors. Their careless ignorance has been replaced by our conscious understanding of the soil. Our generation, with its knowledge and its wealth, must stand condemned before Posterity, should it fail to take action now.”<sup>194</sup>

The first part of the above paragraph is an allusion to the very influential and provocatively named work by G.V. Jacks, and R.O. Whyte, *The Rape of the Earth: A World Survey of Soil Erosion*, in which they also accord first place to Africa for soil

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(n/a) “Bestryding van Gronderosie,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (April 1933):134.

<sup>191</sup> “Of gee die geraamte van ons uitgespoelde plase nog nie genoeg verskrikking nie; sien ons nie reeds ons eie lot daarin nie?”

(n/a) “Bestryding van Gronderosie,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (April 1933): 134.

<sup>192</sup> T.D.Hall, “South African Pastures: Retrospective and Prospective: Presidential Address to Section C, delivered 3 July 1934,” *South African Journal of Science* XXXI (November 1934): 92.

<sup>193</sup> R.S. Adamson, *Soil Erosion* (Cape Town: Cape Times, 1934), 10.

<sup>194</sup> E. Roux, *The Veld and the Future* (Cape Town: The African Bookman, 1946), Foreword.



erosion.<sup>195</sup> The technocratic background is thinly veiled however – the science available, he argues, makes the excuse of ignorance unjustifiable.

The argument that soil conservation was an essential task in providing for one's descendants was also relayed in the popular Afrikaans press. The point was made that soil fertility was in fact depletable, and that farmers have an almost holy task in conserving, or even improving the soil:

“The land is the heritage of the nation, and it is the duty of every farmer to try and leave his soil in a more fertile state for his progeny. Our descendants will never forgive us if they have to one day sit and perish in a barren desert, where once was fertile earth.”<sup>196</sup>

The rhetoric of a patriarchal duty towards the nation and the children of the nation were also used in a more intimate appeal in an article on the relationship between land or soil and man,<sup>197</sup> published in the *Landbouweekblad* in June 1941:

“Look 40 years into the future and think about what the circumstance on your own farm will be, and with what heritage for your son you are keeping yourself busy with on that farm. Or will it merely be a geographical position he is left with?”<sup>198</sup>

The above quote is also significant in its connection with the farm as something that must stay in the family, as something that is more than ‘a geographical position’ but indeed part of identity. This connection of the landscape as part of identity, and soil erosion as affecting that identity, is also made by a reader of the *Landbouweekblad*, specifically about the Free State:

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<sup>195</sup> G.V. Jacks, and R.O. Whyte, *The Rape of the Earth: A World Survey of Soil Erosion*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), 61, 264.

The book is also quoted by Minister of Agriculture J.G.N Strauss at the presentation of the Soil Conservation Bill, for instance.

HANSARD (23 May 1946): 8462.

<sup>196</sup> “Die grond is die erfenis van die nasie, en dis die plig van elke boer om te probeer om sy grond in ‘n vrugbaarder toestand vir sy nageslag agter te laat. Ons nageslagte sal ons nooit vergewe as hulle eendag op ‘n dorre woestyn, wat vroeër vrugbare aarde was, sit om te vergaan nie.”

(n/a) “Gronderosie-Bestryding in die Unie” *LW* (13 March 1940): 16.

<sup>197</sup> In Afrikaans, the word ‘grond’ is usually used both in the context of soil as an element of nature, as well as “land” as in something that is owned.

<sup>198</sup> “Kyk 40 jaar in die toekoms en dink na oor die toestande dan op u eie plaas sal wees en watter erfenis u besig is om vir u seun op daardie plaas, of sal dit maar net ‘n geografiese posisie wees wat u aan hom nalaat.” (Sentence construction in the original).

Fischer. “Grond en die Mens,” *LW* (4 June 1941):45.

“Our beloved Free State and our whole country is busy turning into a desert, and we alone are responsible... Do you not yourself feel a stranger when you see how naked our Free State plains, our home is?”<sup>199</sup>

Soil conservation was however, not only spoken of in terms of the need to provide for the future, but also in the more short-term, daily, (financial) need of the farmer. One of the reasons given for the abnormally high prices of food in the early 1940s, apart from the circumstances of War, was the more insipid threat of soil erosion:

“Soil erosion is slowly but surely destroying our farmers financially. It is a robber that is silently stalking us and annually makes off with his part of the capital that was put into the land. Water erosion is the eating away of valuable fertile earth, that part in which the individual farmer invested his capital; that part of which not only the individual farmer is dependent, but on which the survival of the nation rests, our only national wealth. Save your land and you will save the only real wealth of the nation, its soil.”<sup>200</sup>

Saving the wealth of a nation is one thing, saving the nation is quite another, and in line with the prevailing discourse of the time, the danger of soil erosion was held up as a danger to Afrikaner self preservation or ‘*selfbehoud*.’

One of the ways in which this conclusion was reached was through warning how other civilisations suffered, or fell, under soil erosion. Sometimes, this was cloaked in similes that was compatible with the myth of Afrikaners as a chosen people, with erosion in countries such as Palestine held up as an example of what could happen:

“...a country such as Palestine, once ‘overflowing with honey’, now almost turned into a desert, how mighty cultures such as the Assyrians and Babylonians disappeared from the earth and the countries where they were settled turn into

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<sup>199</sup> “Ons geliefde Vrystaat en die hele; en is besig om in ‘n woestyn te verander en ons alleen is verantwoordelik daarvoor... Voel u nie self ontuis as u sien hoe kaal ons Vrystaatse vlaktes, ons tuiste is nie?” (Sentence construction in the original).

W. Kruger, “Menings van ons Lesers: Ons Pleeg Moord,” *LW* (16 Desember 1942): 17.

<sup>200</sup> “Gronderosie is besig om ons boere stadig maar seker finansiële uit te roei. Dis ‘n dief wat ons in die stilte bekruip en jaarliks met sy deel van die kapitaal wat ons in die grond belê het, heengaan... Grondverspoeling is die wegvreet van kosbare teelaarde, daardie deel waarin die individuele grondeienaar sy kapitaal belê het; daardie deel waarvan nie alleen die individuele eienaar afhanklik is nie maar waarop die voortbestaan van ‘n nasie rus, ons enigste nasionale rykdom... Red u grond en daardeur die voortbestaan van die enigste werklike rykdom van enige volk – sy grond.”

J.J. Gertenbach, “Grondverspoeling Die Dief in die Nag” *LW* (15 Januarie 1941): 17.

sandy deserts [we realise that] before South Africa ever grows into a mighty Babylon, it would have turned into a desert.”<sup>201</sup>

Mentioning several civilisations that suffered, or even fell, due to soil erosion, another writer put it that, if the soil is depleted, so “the veneer of civilisation and all, [will be] sent to the grave.”<sup>202</sup>

More important even that the veneer of civilisation was securing the vitality and of the nation (and here again an exclusively white nation was understood), in essence, ensuring the survival of the *volk*<sup>203</sup> in South Africa. Agricultural stability, it was said, was national stability – soil erosion is *volks*erosion.”<sup>204</sup> Quoting Daniel Webster, the antebellum hero, one official warned that “the country that lost its predilection for agriculture has an uncertain future. If there is one lesson in history that cannot be doubted, it is that national power is closely related to the soil.”<sup>205</sup> Major Elliot, then chairperson of the South African Agricultural Union, said at the 1941 conference that it was the War that brought him to the realisation of the relationship between national strength and soil:

“Two things emerged crystal clear from the confusion of war that is that the soil/land and the people are after all the two ground factors of enduring worth for any people (*volk*). Seen from a national viewpoint, the only good business is taking care of our soil and the development of a healthy people on a healthy soil.”<sup>206</sup>

One of his successors, G.J Rossouw, reiterated the statement in 1947:

“A healthy soil is the only stable foundation upon which a strong, healthy and industrious populace can be built... Health depends on how we eat, and how we

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<sup>201</sup> W. Lutjeharms, “Die Lewende Grond,” *LW* (15 September 1943):13, 15.

<sup>202</sup> Calman, “Reeds Sedert 1774 Smeek Ons Bodem: Red My!” *LW* (28 March 1945): 17.

<sup>203</sup> Here, the Afrikaners are referred to. An enlightening fact that is of cognisance to the wider context, though not directly related to the point being made here, is that black farm workers were (and still are in many rural areas) patronisingly also called the “plaasvolk” or “volk”, meaning the ‘people who are different from us’, the farm hands..

<sup>204</sup> Calman, “Reeds Sedert 1774 Smeek Ons Bodem: Red My!” *LW* (28 March 1945), 17.

<sup>205</sup> “Die land waar sy voorliefde vir Landbou verloor het, het ‘n onsekere toekoms. As daar een les in die geskiedenis is waaromtrent daar geen twyfel bestaan nie, is dit dat die nasionale krag baie nou aan die grond verbonde is.”

J. Gardner, “Eksplorasie van Plase in Suid-Afrika,” *LW* (5 February 1941): 24.

<sup>206</sup> “Twee dinge, het hy o.m. gesê, kom glashelder uit die warboel van hierdie oorlog te voorskyn, en dit is dat die grond en die mense op slot van sake die twee grondfaktore van blywende waarde vir enige volk is. Uit nasionale oogpunt beskou, is die enigste goeie besigheid, die versorging van ons grond en dan die opbou van ‘n gesonde volk op die produkte van ‘n gesonde grond...”  
(Editorial) *LW* (12 November 1941): 15.

eat depends on the soil and health is important for the development of a vigorous people.<sup>207</sup>

The soil as important for feeding the people in a healthy way, so that they can be vigorous members of the nation, was also seen as imperative in the survival of a specifically *white* Afrikaner civilisation in South Africa:

“It is obvious that if an individual’s or community’s veld and soil produces well, that the foundation of their existence is healthy and safe. However, if the soil and the veld produce poorly, the dependents will live poorly. Similarly, if the production ability of the soil and veld decreases, then the quality of life of the community that has to make a living of it also decreases. Therefore it is important that all individuals, whether urban or rural, must accept responsibility for the two corner stones of our white civilisation, the veld and the soil. *A badly fed white will inevitably be superseded and engulfed by the coloured.*<sup>208</sup> [My emphasis]

Soil as a fundamental part of Afrikaner civilisation, was painted more intimately and aggressively by the *Landsdiens*, a youth organisation officially founded in 1944, aiming at the education of young girls and boys to love and care for the land through work, with strokes that resembled the policy of separate development:

“In South Africa, which is after all our fatherland, we are beginning to become worried about sustaining our fertile soil. But should we not be more worried about maintaining our character, our European blood. We must therefore, in the interest of our culture and civilisation, see to it that those things that weigh the heaviest in the lives of other civilised people, also weigh the heaviest under us and that character and soil for us, as for the different races in our country, attains fundamental meaning.”<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> (n/a) “‘n Gesonde Grondbodem is ‘n Vereiste vir ‘n Gesonde Bevolking,” *LW* (29 October 1947): 55.

<sup>208</sup> “Dit spreek dus vanself dat as ‘n individu of gemeenskap se veld en grond hoog produseer, daardie individu se bestaansfondament gesond en veilig is. As die grond en veld daarteen swak produseer, sal die afhanklikes ook swak lewe. Net so waar is dit dan dat as die grond en veld se produksievermoë agteruitgaan, dan daal die lewenspeil van die gemeenskap wat daarop ‘n bestaan moet maak ook. Daarom is dit van belang dat alle individue, hetsy plattelander of stedeling, elkeen verantwoordelikheid aanvaar vir die instandhouding van daardie twee hoekstene, veld en grond, van ons blanke beskawing. ‘n Swak gevoede blanke word noodwendig deur die gekleurde verdring en verswelg.”

J.P. van der Merwe, “Ons lesers aan die Woord: Ons Bodem,” *LW* (4 August 1943): 20.

<sup>209</sup> “Ons begin in Suid-Afrika, wat tog ons vaderland is, om besorgd te word oor die handhawing van ons vrugbare grond; maar moet ons nie meer besorgd wees oor die handhawing van ons karakter, van

A month later the organiser of the *Landsdiens*, Dr. C.F. Visser, reinforced in the same publication the facet of character and soil through simultaneously using ‘Calvinist’ as well as German National Socialist *Blut und Boden*<sup>210</sup> imagery:

“But it does not pay to only cherish hopes and ideals, because history, also the history of our blood and our soil, does not stand still. And then we know, or are supposed to know, that God helps those that help themselves. As one of our church leaders warned: ‘Let us not wait upon the good hand of God’ to which we want to add, *let us depend on the might of the symbol, that mighty carrier of a mighty ideal...* Here we are not merely busy with the farmer’s (*boere*) work, and we cannot run to the country’s government with all the work, the work of the *volk* that is needed, because the reparation work needed by South Africa’s soil is more than government work, it is the plight of the *volk*, the work of the whole *volk*.”<sup>211</sup>

The anxiety about the survival of the Afrikaners as a civilised group, about their ‘*bestaansbeveiliging*’<sup>212</sup> probably had much to do with anxieties about urbanisation and the poor white question. There was the fear that bad soil was driving Afrikaners to towns,<sup>213</sup> that the Afrikaners are losing their identity because of the flight from the *platteland*. One viewer of the film made by C.J.J. van Rensburg, *Suid-Afrika in Gevaar*, asked what will happen to the character of the Afrikaner people, who are a rural people, when the young farmers are fleeing to the city in greater numbers,

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ons Europese bloed nie? Ons moet tog in die belang van ons kultuur en beskawing toesien dat die dinge, wat in die lewe van ander beskaafde volkere die swaarste weeg, hier onder ons ook die swaarste weeg, dat *karakter en grond* vir ons en vir die verskillende rasse in ons land ook die fundamentele betekenis kry...” (n/a) “Karakter en Grond: ‘n Navolgenswaardige Ideaal,” *LW* (19 January 1944):12.

<sup>210</sup> “Blood and soil.” Note that the German word “Boden” has its linguistic equal in Afrikaans, “bodem,” a word not readily translatable in English.

<sup>211</sup> The symbol referred to is the *Landsdiens* itself. “Maar dit betaal nie om net goeie hoop en goeie verwagtings te koester nie, want die geskiedenis, ook die geskiedenis van ons bloed en van ons grond staan nie stil nie. En dan weet ons, of behoort te weet, dat God diegene help wat hulleself ook help, of soos een van ons kerkleiers ons gewaarsku het: ‘Laat ons op die goeie hand van God nie wag nie’ waarby ons ook sou wil byvoeg, *laat ons ook staat maak op die mag van die simbool, daardie magtige draer van ‘n magtige ideaal...* Ons het hier ook nie meer met bloot boerewerk te doen nie en ons kan ook nie met al die werk, die volkswerk, wat hier nodig is, na die landsregering hardloop nie, want die herstelwerk wat die bodem van Suid-Afrika nodig het, is meer as regeringswerk, dis die werk van die gehele volk.” (Italics in the original). C.F. Visser, “Is die Ideaal Sterk,” *LW* (16 February 1944): 17.

<sup>212</sup> “securing of survival” It was a term often used by the Veldtrust, e.g (n/a) “Menings van ons Lesers: Veldtrust Gaan ‘Rowers’ Beveg,” *LW* (27 October 1943):15.

<sup>213</sup> Bodemgesond, “Planmatige Gebruik van die Bodem: Nasionale Grondbenuttingskema Voorgestaan” *LW* (29 March 1950): 41.

because they do not want to inherit “scarred farms.”<sup>214</sup> If something was not going to be done to combat soil erosion, it was felt, the effects of soil erosion could lead to national suicide.<sup>215</sup>

Religious undertones were also employed – appealing to a perceived sense of religiosity amongst Afrikaans farmers, linking land abuse to sin in otherwise secular books on the science of farming, like the one by W.R Thompson:

“The natural vegetation has been abused, mismanaged and destroyed in a ruthless way through burning, overstocking and general unsympathetic treatment. The council given by a Hebrew Prophet, ‘Cease to do evil; learn to do well,’ may be appropriately applied to the situation.”<sup>216</sup>

Talbot’s book on land utilisation is even clearer:

“A pious folk have seen erosion spread across their farms yet have failed to recognize it as testimony of the wrath of God upon those who, through ignorance, incompetence, or greed for profit, abuse the land that He has given them, and therefore they have failed, as yet, to amend their ways!”<sup>217</sup>

Then there were also the call on a Christian ideology of the stewardship of man of nature, for example the message of the film *Suid-Afrika in Gevaar* as recounted by a certain P. Jacobs, sounding like the Pentateuch:

“You must, as trusty steward, inherit the kingdom of the earth and treasure his fertility and resources from generation to generation. You must protect your fields against erosion, your bubbling fountains against drying-up, your woods against neglect and your hills against overgrazing by your flock, so that your progeny may forever live in prosperity. If you are not true to your duty as steward of the soil, then your fertile lands will change into meagre, stony soil

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<sup>214</sup> (n/a) “Vlekpoorte van Suid-Afrika: Sommige Vlekke deur die lens van die Rolfilm-kamera gesien,” *LW* (23 February 1944): 17. Also see J. Gardner, “Eksplorasie van Plase in Suid-Afrika” *LW* (5 February 1941): 17.

<sup>215</sup> C.Foord, “Middels wat Aangewend Behoort te Word tot die Oplossing van die Droogtevragestuk,” *LW* (1 January 1941): 41.

<sup>216</sup> Thompson, *Moisture and Farming*, 127.

<sup>217</sup> W.J. Talbot, *Swartland and Sandveld: A survey of land utilization and soil erosion in the western lowland of the Cape province*. Prepared for the Social and Economic Planning Council 1944-5 (Cape Town, 1945), 50.

and gulleys, and your descendants will become less and live in wretchedness and will be wiped of the face of the earth.”<sup>218</sup>

Gendered notions of paternal care or abuse of a supposedly more vulnerable female nature are also verbalised in some propaganda, and not just in international titles such as *The Rape of the Earth*. The most striking example of this is in the foreword to *The Abuse of the Soil* where (masculine) ability to abuse a (feminine) nurturer is strikingly portrayed:

“The real and effective remedy is a national crusade bringing the truth home so vividly and so personally to every South African that his whole strength will be bent to save earth, the eternal mother, from this continued neglect and injury. Her face is already scarred, her strength sapped, but there is still time to heal and restore, lest we are finally brought to mourn in Milton’s words: ‘Earth felt the wound; and Nature from her seat/ Sighing in all her works, gave sign of woe/ That all was lost.’”<sup>219</sup>

In a letter introducing the Veldtrust to the readers of the *Landbouweekblad*, a more patronising statement is made about ‘Mother Earth’: “Poor Mother Earth is not treated as a mother, but as an enemy.”<sup>220</sup> Yet, she does not, like a good mother, give up her task: “Despite the fact that Mother Earth is abused and wrecked, she still gives so much to the ignorant person so that he does not suffer want.”<sup>221</sup> Although this kind of underlying discourse can be found in more than one text by different authors, it is not necessarily an ungraded, homogenous discourse that everyone adhered to. A quotation by C. Alma Baker, author of *Labouring Earth* (1940), was for example used by a certain ‘Calman’ in an article on the cry of the soil to be saved:

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<sup>218</sup> “Jy moet as troue rentmeester die aardryk beërwe en sy vrugbaarheid en hulpbronne bewaar van geslag tot geslag. Jy moet jou saailande beskerm teen grondverspoeling, jou borrelende fonteine teen opdroging, jou woude teen verwaarlosing en jou heuwels teen oorbeweiding deur jou kuddes, sodat jou nageslagte vir altyd in oorvloed mag lewe. As jy nie aan jou verpligtinge as rentmeester van die grond getrou is nie, sal jou vrugbare saailande verander in skraal en klipperige grond en slote en jou nasate sal minder word en in ellende voortlewe en van die aardbodem af uitgedelg word.” P. Jacobs “Suid-Afrika in Gevaar: Indrukke van die Rolprentvertoning,” *LW* (29 November 1944): 15, 17.

<sup>219</sup> South African Interest Group “Preface,” J.C. Fick, *The Abuse of the Soil, Veld and Water Resources of South Africa* (A South African Interests Group Publication, 1944).

<sup>220</sup> “Arme Moeder Aarde word nie soos ‘n moeder behandel nie, maar soos ‘n vyand.”

(n/a) “Menings van ons Lesers: Veldtrust Gaan “Rowers” Beveg” *LW*(27 October 1943):15.

<sup>221</sup> “Ten spyte van die feit dat moederaarde mishandel en verniel word, skenk sy tog nog soveel aan die onkundige persoon dat hy nie gebrek ly nie.” Agricola, “Waarkuwende Stemme,” *LW* (26 January 1944): 13.

“We, the children of Mother Earth, have disregarded the preconditions under which she does her work, and through this the difficulties overcame us. We find that in the eternal truth – the difficulties in an insane world are indeed the consequence of our indifference with regards to the law of nature.”<sup>222</sup>

The ‘femininity’ of Mother Earth was, as far as could be assessed from the *Landbouweekblad* and *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika*, itself never critically or consciously looked at. The characteristics attributed to the ‘Mother Earth’ concept had considerable variety, and it was mostly used in a much more superficial way than metaphors pertaining to ideologies of nationalism. Sometimes, however the gendered approach was also collapsed into nationalism, like in the words of General Kemp, a former minister of agriculture and at the time Minister of Lands, who also farmed at Wolmaransstad in the Highveld, to Minister Strauss, the then Minister of Agriculture :

“I hope that the Minister will heed the suggestions I made in the right spirit, a spirit of love for the *Boer* nation, a spirit of love for our descendants. The inheritance of the fathers must be preserved. Where the inheritance of the fathers is destroyed by nature and unwieldiness, we want to preserve that inheritance, and therefore we will do everything to further this cause, so that the inheritance is kept for our progeny.”<sup>223</sup>

### **2.8.2 Soil erosion as War c. 1939-1950.**

Under the clouds of War in Europe, from the late 1930’s onwards, the language of war was frequently utilised by government officials and pressure groups to spread the message of soil conservation, portraying soil conservation as the enemy and farming as a struggle against nature.

The National Anti-Waste Soil Erosion Sub-Committee was very closely linked to the war effort in the early 1940s, and the war rhetoric was used throughout. An example of this is found in one of their annual reports in which it is declared that:

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<sup>222</sup> Calman, “Reeds Sedert 1774 Smeek Ons Bodem: Red My!” *LW* (28 March 1945): 17.

<sup>223</sup> “Ek wil hoop dat die Minister die wenke wat ek gegee het, in die regte gees sal opneem, ’n gees van liefde vir die boerenasie, en ’n gees van liefde vir die bestaan van die nageslag. Die erwe van die vaders moet bewaar word. Waar die erwe van die vaders deur die natuur en deur onhandigheid verwoes word, wil ons daardie erwe bewaar, en daarom wil ons alles doen om die saak te bevorder, sodat daardie erwe vir die nageslag sal behou word.” HANSARD (23 May 1946): 8475.



“[W]e must employ in a wise manner men and women who have served their country during the War, and because social security is based upon adequate resources of soil, water, and vegetation and surely one of the great causes for which this War is being waged that of soundly based social security.”<sup>224</sup>

Even after the War ended, when the Soil Conservation Bill was debated by the House of Assembly on 23 May 1946, military language was used throughout and by different actors. In his speech to introduce the Bill, J.G.N. Strauss posited soil conservation as an issue of national security, saying that “there is no life security without soil security.”<sup>225</sup> General J.C.G Kemp used the war metaphor very directly. He said that the previous government’s attention was focussed on the war in Europe, and therefore soil erosion was neglected, but,

“...now that that spirit of war has passed, we can mobilise the people for the war in our own country. Where we could find £ 500,000,000 for the War, I hope that we can find hundreds of millions to wage war in our own country to stop erosion as far as possible.”<sup>226</sup>

Another counsellor, who later also served as a Minister of Agriculture (1951), S.P le Roux from Oudtshoorn, called the bill “a declaration of war” for which the “machinery of war” must be “mobilised.”<sup>227</sup> It was not only in parliament that the war metaphor was used. Before the Bill was first drafted the *Landbouweekblad* called for a war-effort – and war-funding for combating soil erosion: “The home front war against erosion is a necessity, and must be continued with until we overcame the danger that threatens us, if not, the insidious danger will, in the end, devour us.”<sup>228</sup>

Exactly who or what “the enemy,” – against which this “machinery of war” must be mobilised – is, surprisingly, unclear. One would assume that the “enemy” is soil erosion as a reified occurrence, yet along the lines “man”, “the economy”, “ignorance” or even “Nature” as a vaguely designated separate “thing” is called into

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<sup>224</sup> SANA A38/15 Annual Report 1942-1943: A Summarised Report on the work accomplished during the year 1942/42: Anti-Soil Erosion and Grassland Improvement Grant for Research: Department of Agriculture and Forestry, Union Government, n.p.

<sup>225</sup> HANSARD (23 May 1946): 8461.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.* (23 May 1946): 8478.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 8487, 8489.

<sup>228</sup> “Die tuisfront-oorlog teen grondverspoeling is ‘n noodsaaklikheid, en moet voortgesit word tot ons die gevaar wat ons bedreig oorwin het anders sal die sluipende gevaar ons uiteindelik verteer.” (Editorial), *LW* (21 April 1943): 11.

account together with the “evil of soil erosion.” Strauss quotes the Wisconsinite F.H. King’s influential *Farmers of Forty Centuries; or Permanent Agriculture in Japan, China and Korea* (first published in 1911) which calls humans:

“...the greatest wastrel[s] that the world ever had to endure ... his destructive mutilation has descended upon every living thing within his grasp, not excluding himself; and his means of destruction in the obstreperous hands of a generation has send soil fertility to the sea that can only be brought together by ages of life...”<sup>229</sup>

Then again, Kemp describes the Bill as “war in our own country against Nature,” and the Minister as the biggest “sinner” when it comes to erosion, pushing farmers for more production.<sup>230</sup> J.M. Conradie, counsellor for Rustenburg, is more specific in what he sees as the enemy, stating that the “evil of erosion” justifies martial law, curtailing individual rights for the greater national good.<sup>231</sup>



Figure 2.3: Soil erosion (especially leeching) was often portrayed in advertisements for fertiliser such as this as an enemy with criminal intent. The advertisement on the left read "ban the robber" and the one on the right "do not rob your soil."

Source: *Landbouweekblad* (20 September 1944):22 and (28 March 1945).

<sup>229</sup> “Die mens is die kwaaieste versneller van verkwisting wat die wêreld ooit te verduur gehad het. Sy vernietigende skending het neergedaal op elke lewende ding binne sy bereik met homself nie uitgesluit nie; en sy vernietigingsmiddel in die onbeheerde hande van ’n geslag het grondvrugbaarheid na die see gestuur wat slegs eeue van lewe kan byeenbring.” The book was written before the wide-spread use of the internal combustion engine on farms and before the invention of synthetic nitrogen fertilizer, which makes it all the more dooming.

HANSARD, (23 May 1946): 8460.

<sup>230</sup> HANSARD (23 May 1946): 8476-7, 8484.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 8485.

### 2.8.3 Farming with Nature – not against Nature.

**Kontoer  
die Hange ...**



**..en red u grond**

Gedurende die reënseisoen kry baie hange die wanderlust. Aangemoedig deur swaar reëns, speel biljoene gronddeeltjies af na modderige dongas — verlaat die plaas vir goed!

Gelukkig kan boere hierdie massa-uittoeg van bogrond, misstowwe en organiese stowwe beveg deur hul grond op die kontoer te bewerk.

**JOHN DEERE**  
PLAASBOERDERY  
VAN GEBALTE

Kontoer-boerdery kan egter nie alleen gronderose heeltemal verhoed nie. Dit werk hand aan hand met die maak van terrasse, strookbewerking, wisselbou, plant van gras in dongas, en setsoense dekkingsoeste.

John Deere-plaasmasjinerie maak kontoerboerdery maklik. Opvul van sote, maak van terrasse en ander gespesialiseerde grondreddingswerk kan gedoen word met gewone John Deere-trekkerwerktuie.

U plaaslike landboueskundiges van die Regering het die wetenskaplike kennis van grondbewaring wat nodig is om hierdie werk te kan verrig. Deur saam te werk kan u ander boere in u distrik help om hul hange tuis te hou, en winste te vermeerder deur op die kontoer te boer.

**HOOF-  
VERSPREIDERS**



van John Deere-plaasmasjinerie van gehalte, in die Unie en Suidwes-Afrika (behalwe die Westelike Kaapprovinse), verkoop en in stand gehou deur ons landbouorganisasie van Verkoop- en Dienshandelaars.

**DUNELL, EBDEN EN KIE.**  
(EDMS.) BPK.  
Posbus 1106 Port Elizabeth  
Posbus 5227 Johannesburg  
Posbus 30 Pietermaritzburg  
EN OF KROONSTAD

Figure 2.4: “Contour your ridges and save your soil” Advertisers were usually much more prone to focus on saving the soil as making good business sense.  
Source: *Landbouweekblad* (13 December 1950):2

Vestiges of the idea of Man’s ‘invasion’ of Nature – a concept possible because of the view of Nature as a reified, separate object from humans – was found in the frequent referral to the anthropogenic destabilisation of nature. This often, although not always,<sup>232</sup> fitted in with the myth of South Africa as a pristine, untouched and open space before European settlement, for example in a speech on the founding of the Veldtrust:

“But what few of them [the SA public] ever understood was that they could conquer human enemies, space and distance and sickness, and many of the problems that face men, but they could not conquer grass and streams and mountain and force them to do the things they wanted. They cannot bully nature but have to make friends with her, and this is a lesson they had not learned. Today we are learning it. Nature ‘plans’ wisely. The earth, the grass that grows upon it, the trees and the flowers, all fit into one big pattern; in some way they all depend on one another and when they are untroubled by men they get along, on the whole, very well indeed. So it was in South Africa *until white men began to come in numbers* and upset the balance between all these living things.”<sup>233</sup> [my emphasis]

Much is made of the ‘pristine’ and balanced state of nature before human intervention, and soil erosion is portrayed,

quite literally, as Nature’s revenge on farmers:

“If we leave Nature unto itself, then it will gauge for itself a state of equilibrium between the different factors that have an impact on erosion. But seeing that

<sup>232</sup> At least one article acknowledging that black people impacted on the environment before the coming of European settlers was found. It was however, in the vast minority. W. Lutjeharms, “Die Lewende Grond,” *LW* (15 September 1943): 13, 15.

<sup>233</sup> SANA A 38/15: Speech on founding of Veld Trust, 1944, p 2. Also see Fischer “Grond en die Mens,” *LW* (4 June 1941): 44.

humans, as a subverting factor, are working against Nature in this regard, the equilibrium is disturbed and erosion is therefore the form in which Nature revenges wrong systems of farming.”<sup>234</sup>



Figure 2.5: This advertisement equates soil exploitation to poverty, through using mining images.  
Source: *Landbouweekblad* (1 November 1944):24.

Some commentators were careful to emphasise that the wrong system of farming that brought on the punishment of ‘Mother Nature’ was not to be blamed on farmers alone.<sup>235</sup> To live in ‘harmony with Nature’ too, was sometimes varnished in religious terms of stewardship, stating that the Creator has put certain laws in place that humans, through their scientific ability must learn to respect and follow.<sup>236</sup> There were also some accounts that acknowledged that it became an impossible task to strictly adhere to Nature’s rules of harmony. They were more of the opinion of A.J. Taylor, acting principal of Cedara Agricultural School,

who felt that it was inevitable that human activity disturbed the balance of nature, and therefore the methods of nature must be followed again as far as possible. However, Taylor said, because humans have to live and therefore cannot completely live by the laws of nature, they have to artificially emulate them.<sup>237</sup>

The artificial emulation of the laws of nature in order to extract a living from the land became the basis of a lively debate in the *Landbouweekblad* on the work of Edward E.

<sup>234</sup> A similar statement is made by J.C. Fick, “Die Waterkringloop in die Natuur en Grondverspoeling,” *LW* (27 October 1943):13. “As ons die Natuur aan sigself oorlaat dan peil dit self ‘n ewewigtoestand tussen die verskillende faktore wat invloed het op grondverspoeling. Maar aangesien die mens as ‘n steurende faktor in die Natuur in hierdie opsig werk, word die ewewig omvergegooi en grondverspoeling is derhalwe die vorm waarin die Natuur wraak neem teen die verkeerde stelsels van boerdery van die mens.”

D.C Swart, “Grondverspoeling se Vernielingswerk: Hoe die Vrugbare Aarde Verwyder Word,” *LW* (1 Desember 1921): 1929.

<sup>235</sup> (n/a) “Vlekpoorte van Suid-Afrika,” *LW* (16 February 1944): 16 -17.

<sup>236</sup> Boland Editor, “Ons Besef nou Eers!” *LW* (6 November 1946): 22.

<sup>237</sup> A.J Taylor, “Gras vir Goeie Weiding ‘n Belangrike Skakel in Langtermyn-wisselboustelsel: Opbouing van Grondvrugbaarheid met Natuur as Bondgenoot,” *LW* (22 May 1946):18.

Faulkner, *A Plowman's Folly* (1943). Faulkner argued that the mouldboard plough, used through “all of the civilized world”<sup>238</sup> is detrimental to the soil, and that stubble cultivation (stoppelboerdery)<sup>239</sup> is indeed not a new phenomenon, but one tried and tested (in ancient Egypt, where there was apparently more produce per acre than in modern England). Where nature alone is the farmer, he argued, there is no problems with soil erosion and soil leeching. Stubble cultivation, it is emphasised, is not a passing fad, but based “on strictly scientific principles.” The advantages to this, according to him, was that it saved labour, saved soil moisture, conserved the soil, conserved soil nutrients and combated weeds.<sup>240</sup> Much was written about his work in the *Landbouweekblad*, including criticism by South African experts who felt that there was scientific reason for ploughing (Faulkner denied this) and that Faulkner’s way could be even more detrimental to the soil. The cultivation and ploughing of soil was a necessary evil, it was felt, and erosion will be countered the best when there is more money to construct the works and agriculture is more stable.<sup>241</sup> “Most dongas,” one well-known South African professor in Agriculture, J.J Theron said, “are dug by farm mortgages and poverty.”<sup>242</sup> The argument that soil erosion was exacerbated, if not caused, by external economic factors is the last part of the discourse to be explored.

#### **2.8.4 Saving the Soil or Staying Solvent: the farmer’s dilemma.**

The insistence that the Union must have a strong agricultural sector was often stressed by those who represented the interest of farmers. Mining, it was argued, was fleeting, being based on a non-renewable resource. Agriculture however, was seen as permanent. Or as one commentator put it: “no gold or diamonds in the world are worth more to man than the food they eat and the soil beneath their feet.”<sup>243</sup> The State

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<sup>238</sup> (n/a) “Stoppelbewerking in die Praktyk: Die Onderneming van Twee Boere van Clocolan,” *LW* (24 December 1947): 42.

<sup>239</sup> Cultivation technique with minimum or no ploughing after the harvest has been reaped – leaving the grain stubble on the field.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid*, 42.

<sup>241</sup> J.J. Theron, “Faulkner- Bawerings Geweeg en Verwerp: Grond Goed Ploeg of Loskrap?” *LW* (24 May 1944): 15.

<sup>242</sup> J.J. Theron, “Slaan jou Hand aan die Ploeg: ‘n Waarskuwing teen Nuwerwetse Idees van Grondbewerking,” *LW* (29 March 1944): 19.

<sup>243</sup> SANA A38/15 Speech on founding of Veld Trust, 1944, 6.



left farmers under the impression that they were competing on the world markets – which was detrimental to the soil and to the agricultural economy.<sup>244</sup>

DIE LANDBOUWEEKBLAD 7 Desember 1949

*Doeltreffende Uitrusting vir Grond- en Waterbewaring!*

DAMME BOU — WALLE GOOI — UITGRAWINGS — GELYKMAAK — OPVUL



**HENRY-TWEEWIEL-DRA-SKROPPE**  
Kapasiteit van 1½ en 2 Kubieke Jaarts.  
Vervoer en Aflaai. Hidrouliese beheer vanaf die Sitplek van Enige Plaas-trekker van 24 of Meer Perdekrag.  
Vervoer Vinnig en Maklik op Lugbande.

VERRIG ALLE KONSTRUKSIEWERK  
VINNIG TEEN LAE KOSTE  
met  
MODERNE DRA-SKROPPE  
op LUGBANDE  
BETROUBARE,  
HIDROULIESE BEHEER  
vanaf die  
TREKKER-SITPLEK  
Besonderhede met Plesier!





**MURRAY-VIERWIEL-DRA-SKROPPE**  
Kapasiteit van 3, 4½ en 6½ Kubieke Jaarts.  
Ligte Gewig, Groot Vrag, Baie Stewige  
Konstruksie. Moetevrye Hidrouliese  
Beheerstelsels om Enige Trekker Te Pas.

TAKKANTOOR:  
Bus 2008,  
PORT ELIZABETH.

HOOFKANTOOR:  
Bus 1449,  
KAAPSTAD.

TAKKANTOOR:  
Bus 209,  
OOS-LONDEN.

DIREKTEURE: Die Wol-Groeiers-Afslaaers Bpk., J. H. Moolman, Gerard Bekker, L.V., Prof. C. G. W. Schumann, C. H. Visser.

Figure 2.6: This advertisement promises efficient machines for Soil and Water Conservation, ‘at low cost.’  
Source: Landbouweekblad (7 December 1949):62.

The Veld Trust blamed ‘economic policies’ for the farmers’ exploitation of soil, and for the fact that the “warnings of the past 30 years often fell on deaf ears.”<sup>245</sup> Economic policy was to carry the blame for cultivation of marginal soils and for the lack of enthusiasm when it came to the construction of soil conservation works on farms.<sup>246</sup> Farming was a

business, and it was felt that on the one hand too few farmers realised this,<sup>247</sup> but on the other, it turned some farmers into “soil-miners.”<sup>248</sup> The realisation that the farmer’s first goal was to make his farm profitable was probably realised best by advertisers – who are often the best at capturing a *zeitgeist*. The advertisement shown in Figure 2.5, on the one hand, made the link between the riches of gold mining and the language of soil mining in order to tell farmers that farmers who use their fertiliser will have a large harvest. Ferguson’s advertisement also used the call for soil conservation to market their implements, stating that farmers will farm faster, and better, with their product. Others again concentrated on the fact that farmers did not have the extra capital to invest in soil erosion works, thus marketing their products cheaply and efficiently (Figure 2.6).

<sup>244</sup> (n/a) “Landbou stuur op ‘n Afgrond af,” *LW* (21 March 1945):19.

<sup>245</sup> (n/a) “Nuwe Steun vir Aanslag teen Erosie,” *LW* (20 June 1945): 31.

<sup>246</sup> F.R Tomlinson, “Ekonomiese Aspekte van ‘n Gesonde Landboubeleid vir Suid-Afrika,” *LW* (24 May 1944):17; (n/a) “Vlekpoorte van Suid-Afrika: Waarom die Lig steeds Dowwer en Dowwer word,” *LW* (1 March 1944):16-17.

<sup>247</sup> (n/a) “Boerdery is ‘n Besigheid,” *LW* (16 April 1947): 27.

<sup>248</sup> J.C. de Klerk, “Hoe om die Veld te Beskerm,” *LW* (Januarie 1930): 2186, also see H.J. Nel, “Menings van ons Lesers: Is die Boer self ook Skuldige?” *LW* (22 January 1941): 26.

From 1948 onwards, the only rhetoric continued with on the same scale as before 1948, was that of soil erosion being the main symptom of man's disruption of the 'equilibrium' of nature that supposedly existed before the arrival of (mainly white) man and more frequently, that soil conservation is an economically salient option. It is remarkable how suddenly, from 1948 onwards, the overt connotations made between combating soil erosion as a national task, a military exercise to secure the future of the *volk*, dwindled in the Afrikaans popular press, as if, with the nationalist victory, that drum could not be beaten anymore.

The nationalist coating did not completely disappear, however, but was later mostly put on during Afrikaner national festivities, such as the Day of the Covenant on 16 December,<sup>249</sup> but the articles were becoming more austere scientific in tone, concentrating on the more day-to-day reasons for soil conservation, such as the financial implications for the farmer. There were an increasing number of statements to the effect that soil conservation was more economically sustainable – and one will not necessarily have to wait long for the reward.<sup>250</sup>

## 2.9 Conclusion.

The intent of this chapter was to explore soil erosion as a socio-environmental issue. It traced the change over time of official engagement with soil conservation and how this reached farmers, by means of education on the one hand and legislation on the other. It also illustrates how the relationships between humans themselves and humans and nature were refracted through the prism of soil conservation, a prism cut by the Afrikaner community in the Union.

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<sup>249</sup> For example H. Steytler "Die Groot Erfenis" *LW* (13 December 1950), page number illegible.

<sup>250</sup> See for example: (n/a) "Grondstabiliteit begin by Veldbeheer," *LW* (2 March 1949): 43; (n/a) "Bewaringsboerdery of Demonstrasieplaas," *LW* (16 March 1949): 32-33; Ekonoom, "Grondgebruikstelsel moet Hersien word," *LW* (18 May 1949): 47-48; C.E. Kellogg, "Begrippe in Verband met Grondvrugbaarheid," *LW* (15 June 1949): 35-36; (n/a) "Belangrikheid van Water in Grondbewaring: Konferensie van Suid-Vrystaatse Komitees," *LW* (22 June 1949): 59; (n/a) "Watter Metode van Grondbewerking?" *LW* (19 October 1949): 28-29; A.J. Taylor, "Treffende Teenstelling," *LW* (2 November 1949): 29; Ekonoom, "Ekonomiese Aspekte oor die Meganisering van Landbou," *LW* (31 August 1949): 37-38 (especially page 38); Tegnikus, "Organiese Materiaal en die Behoud van Gronde en Grondvrugbaarheid," *LW* (28 September 1949): 33; (n/a) "Grondagteruitgang: Eenheidskema vir die hele Land," *LW* (1 February 1950): 41, 43; (n/a) "Beskerming van Landerye teen Verspoeling: 300 Miljoen Ton Grond Spoel Jaarliks Weg," *LW* (22 March 1950): 61, 65; Bodemvas, "Behou die Grond en Bou dit Op," *LW* (26 April 1950): 28-29.

The discourse of a variety of sources traced throughout this chapter, shows how soil erosion was ranked high on the public agenda in the Union of South Africa. It was not, however, restricted to the establishment, not even to the (economic) sector at which it ostensibly aimed namely, farming. It was a recurrent issue in the agricultural media. The Afrikaans Free State daily press reported on the Soil Conservation Bill of 1946, and gave it much editorial space. Hugh Hammond Bennett's visit, discussed in chapter three, caused a tremendous amount of media activity, similar to that one expect to surround a visiting Hollywood star. The *Landbouweekblad* was widely read and distributed amongst farmers and other people in rural communities (see chapter 1). Soil erosion was not, however, was the only or even the foremost issue amongst Afrikaners at the time. The Soil Conservation Bill was, for instance, not nearly as well-covered or controversial as the Indian question in the Orange Free State, and agricultural issues such as the Marketing Act has been generating more polemic, which if anything, explains why such dramatic language was used to make the farmers aware that soil erosion was such an issue.

In order to understand the realities dealt with, the chapter started with an introduction into soil erosion as a geographical and agricultural phenomenon. Three overlapping, but arguably distinguishable 'periods' of soil conservation in the Union of South Africa in the first half of the twentieth century were then outlined, showing how the government went from wanting to 'educate' the farmer to encourage 'progressive' and 'scientific' farming to wanting to impose a stricter mandate. After this, the discourse of the establishment and how they sought to carry the message to the people were examined. Soil erosion was enveloped in prevailing discourses, what became clear was this human engagement with 'natural' phenomena also reflected, or consciously formed part of human interactions with one another, especially relationships of power. More than just economic or political powers were at stake for the Afrikaners, but also at stake was the power of cultural and racial identity.

Soil erosion became a central pivot, surrounded by themes reaching beyond simply the mere combat of soil erosion. It brought to the surface the relationship between farmer and the state as mediated through legislation. Soil erosion was also underpinned by the conflicting notions of tradition and progress, in the face of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation. There was no passive acquiescence with the



government plans – there were some evidence for dissent. Nor did Afrikaner farmers accept ‘expert opinion’ without proposing and using their own schemes to improve soil fertility and the availability of water. The most extreme example is probably the *Landgenoot* debate, in which it was suggested that the Drakensberg Mountains should be blown up in order to create marshes – or that water should be dammed using dead sheep when sandbags were not available.<sup>251</sup>

Soil erosion became like an axis point in agriculture, around which relationships between farmers, the state and ‘nature’ revolved. This exposed perceptions of authority over nature, and the place Afrikaners accorded themselves in a perceived hierarchy within nature.

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<sup>251</sup> Landgenoot’ “Daar sal gese word: Die Ou Mense het nie van beter geweet nie” *LW*, (3 January 1945): 21; H. de Bruin “Menings van Ons Lesers: Kontoerwalle Ons Enigste Redding” *LW* (24 January 1945): 19; (n/a) “Menings van Ons Lesers: ‘Laat ons maar by kontoerwalle bly’” *LW*, 24 January 1945, p 19; Landgenoot’ “Menings van Ons Lesers: Gronderosie” *LW* (21 February 1945): 19, 21; (n/a) “Pak die Kwaad by die Oorsprong” *LW* (14 March 1945): 23, 27; \_ “Menings van Ons Lesers: Die Ideale Versperring en Onderaardsewater-Bewaring” *LW* (11 April 1945): 19; H.J Nel “ ‘Landgenoot’ te Lyf Gegaan” *LW* (6 June 1945): 27; ‘Landgenoot’ “Menings van Ons Lesers: Versperring van Slote om Erosie te Bestry” *LW* (24 October 1945): 27.

## Chapter 3

### “We have much to learn from America”: Influences of America on white South African Agriculture, c. 1920-1950<sup>1</sup>

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#### 3.1 Introduction.

During the first two-and-a-half centuries of white settlement on southern African soil science – including the science of agriculture – drew heavily from the imperial metropole, especially after Britain took over the Cape and Natal.<sup>2</sup> This also filtered through to the Boer Republics. Not only have some of the settlers only recently arrived from Europe, bringing with them their experiences and *weltanschauung* from north-western Europe, but most of the knowledge-brokers, (the scientists, writers and policy-makers) spent time at European universities. A striking aspect of the relationship between the state, farmers and perceptions of nature in the Union of South Africa during the first half of the twentieth century, was the changing point of reference in this global exchange of knowledge, from Europe towards the United States of America.

Some aspects of South African and American histories have already been taken up in comparative studies.<sup>3</sup> The historian David Anderson is probably the first to include

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper was presented at the Biennial Conference of the Southern African Historical Society, 2007 at University of Johannesburg as “Taming the soil: Early twentieth century discourse on semi-arid frontier agronomy in South Africa and the American West.”

The quote is from P. Bydendyk, “Gronduitputting en Erosie,” *LW* (10 July 1940): 21.

<sup>2</sup> This statement needs some qualification – whilst imperial science and knowledge networks had predominance in the literate, white establishment, it was probably more watered down when it came to ordinary white farmers. Nor did all the knowledge stem from the European part of empire, and there was also active engagement and exchange with localised, indigenous knowledge. For recent scholarship on the topic of science, knowledge and empire, see for example W. Beinart and L. Hughes, *Environment and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); R. Drayton, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the 'Improvement' of the World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000); S. Dubow, *A Commonwealth of Knowledge: Science, Sensibility and White South Africa 1820 – 2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) and J.M. Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert: Agrarian Doctrines of Development and the Legacies of British Colonialism*. Series in Ecology and History: (Ohio University Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> See for example G.M. Fredrickson, *White Supremacy: A comparative study in American and South African History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) and L. Thompson and H. Lamar, ed, *The Frontier in History – North America and South Africa compared* (Yale University Press, 1981). Examples of comparative studies that include agriculture and the environment include W. Beinart, and P. Coates, *Environment and History: The taming of nature in the USA and South Africa*. (London: Routledge, 1995) and I. Ochiltree, “Mastering the Sharecroppers: Land, Labour and the Search for Independence in the US South and South Africa,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30 ( March

the influence of the knowledge created by the Dust Bowl and imagery thereof on other governments, particularly in East African environments.<sup>4</sup> He relied on a paper presented by William Beinart at an Oxford conference in 1983, a paper that was subsequently reworked into an article in which Beinart drew several parallels between conservationism with regards to soil erosion in South Africa and the USA.<sup>5</sup> Beinart did not, however, venture into detail and supplied little empirical evidence for his claims. The idea that American influences permeated South African conservation ideologies was also taken up in a book by Beinart, which was written in collaboration with fellow historian Peter Coates, called *Environment and History: The taming of nature in the USA and South Africa* (1995)<sup>6</sup>. Although it has been a valuable contribution to the field of *comparative* history, the discipline in which they also positioned their book, the book provided little insight into the effects of the exchange of knowledge between the countries and drew heavily on secondary materials. Beinart's contention in the 1983 paper, that South African conservationism in general, and soil conservation in particular, heavily drew on American prototypes, found its way into other works on the topic as a secondary reference. This, for instance, is the case with an article by Sarah Phillips, in which she proposed that systems of agricultural knowledge exchange along new, global routes existed before the 1930s.<sup>7</sup> The only historian who referred to archival sources in this regard is Belinda Dodson. Her articles, however, focused more on why it has been futile to adopt American expertise in the field of soil conservation to South Africa, especially with regard to the politics of race.<sup>8</sup>

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2004): 41-61; W.H. Harbaugh, "Twentieth-Century Tenancy and Soil Conservation: Some Comparisons and Questions," *Agricultural History* 66 (Spring 1992): 95-119.

<sup>4</sup> D. Anderson, "Depression, Dust Bowl, Demography and Drought: The Colonial State and Soil Conservation in East Africa during the 1930s." *African Affairs*, 83 (July 1984): 326 – 328. It was not part of the main gist of his argument.

<sup>5</sup> W. Beinart, "Soil Erosion, Conservationism and Ideas about Development: A Southern African Exploration, 1900-1960," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 11 (October 1984): 56, 59-60.

<sup>6</sup> W. Beinart and P. Coates, *Environment and History: The taming of nature in the USA and South Africa* (London: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> S.T. Phillips, "Dryland Agriculture and Soil Erosion in the United States and South Africa 1900-1950," *Environmental History* (April 1999).

<sup>8</sup> B. Dodson, "Above Politics? Soil Conservation in 1940s South Africa," Workshop on South Africa in the 1940s: Southern African Research Centre, Kingston, September 2003.

<<http://www.queensu.ca/sarc/Conferences/1940s/Dodson.htm>> (Accessed 3 September 2007) and B. Dodson, "A Soil Conservation Safari: Hugh Bennett's 1944 Visit to South Africa," *Environment and History* 11 (February 2005):35-54.

The American influence as such, then, still remains to be explored; especially in as far as it has not been a one-way, monolithic process of South African officials blindly following the American example. It is also an important part of this history, as it throws into relief a part of the process which shaped twentieth century American dominance over the western world, also in areas as 'primerial' as agriculture.

To what extent though were scientists and officials influenced by ideas that were specifically sourced from the United States and how did they splice it together with the Union? Was it merely a case of using the information at hand or were more than mere facts transferred? Can one speak of an Americanised discourse of (soil) conservation in South Africa?

There are several ways in which to conceptualise a comparative history of South Africa and the United States of America. One approach would be to juxtapose the two countries within the parameters of a chosen theme – be it race relations, slavery or, in this case, early twentieth century agriculture. One would then disaggregate whatever generalisations can be drawn from the similarities and differences between the United States and South Africa as separate entities. This would illuminate certain aspects of each country's history, and could serve as a counter to excessive parochialism and exceptionalism.<sup>9</sup>

Another possibility would be to look at how such comparisons feature in the histories of the countries. This would involve looking at how comparative possibilities between the countries infiltrated or were indeed consciously deployed by various institutions such as the state or intelligentsia. It is also possible that the comparative possibilities filtered through these structures to the less tangible realm of the imagination of the peoples themselves – in this case the white farming communities.

With either approach it is important to take cognisance of the fact that both the similarities as well as the distinctiveness of both societies feature in the flow of information and ideas. The comparative relationship of South Africa and the United States must also be seen within its world historical context. America's role in world

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<sup>9</sup> This is one of the main motives behind key comparative works such as G.M. Fredrickson, *White Supremacy* and L. Thompson and H. Lamar, ed, *The Frontier in History*.

politics increasingly gained influence throughout the nineteenth century, by 1902 British journalist W.T. Stead's *The Americanization of the World, or the Trend of the Twentieth Century* was published.<sup>10</sup> After the First World War, Americanisation gained tremendous momentum, not only with the physical presence of American military in Europe, but also through the spread of mass-culture.<sup>11</sup> Where the American presence was not necessarily as direct, it was nevertheless relayed to other outposts of the British Empire, such as South Africa and Kenya. By the end of the Second World War, American cultural as well as political and economic hegemony, through the interplay of various factors, was firmly established throughout the western world.<sup>12</sup>

This chapter will look at how comparative possibilities between the United States and South Africa were echoed in and utilised through the agricultural sphere. The first part of this chapter will gauge how contemporaries in South Africa saw the United States' agricultural similarities and dissimilarities. In the second part, the different spheres of influence will be explored – how comparative possibilities were translated in agriculture and the environment. Firstly, the effect of the Dust Bowl and how it fore-fronted soil erosion as an international issue, will be discussed. Secondly, the modelling of the Soil Conservation Act of 1946 on American prototypes will be examined. Thirdly, Americanised ideologies of progress, underlying education, science and mechanisation in agriculture, are considered. Lastly, the active involvement of America in the process of transposing cultural and scientific knowledge will be explored.

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<sup>10</sup> M. Dunne, "US Foreign Relations in the Twentieth Century: from World Power to Global Hegemony," *International Affairs* 76 (2000): 25.

<sup>11</sup> R. Kroes, "America, Americanization, and Anti-Americanism," *Encyclopedia of European Social History* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001). Reproduced in *History Resource Center* Farmington Hills: Gale. Document Number BT2341201041 (<http://galenet.com.ez.sun.ac.za/servlet/History>) (Accessed 30 July 2008).

<sup>12</sup> It was, of course, not a process of merely cloaking all western content in American form, and different attitudes towards the Americanization of the world existed. The point is that the United States was, as Kroes puts it "a counterpoint, a yardstick that other nations might either hope to emulate or reject." Kroes, "America, Americanization, and Anti-Americanism," n.p (digital document).

### 3.2 Environmental and agricultural comparison: USA and South Africa.

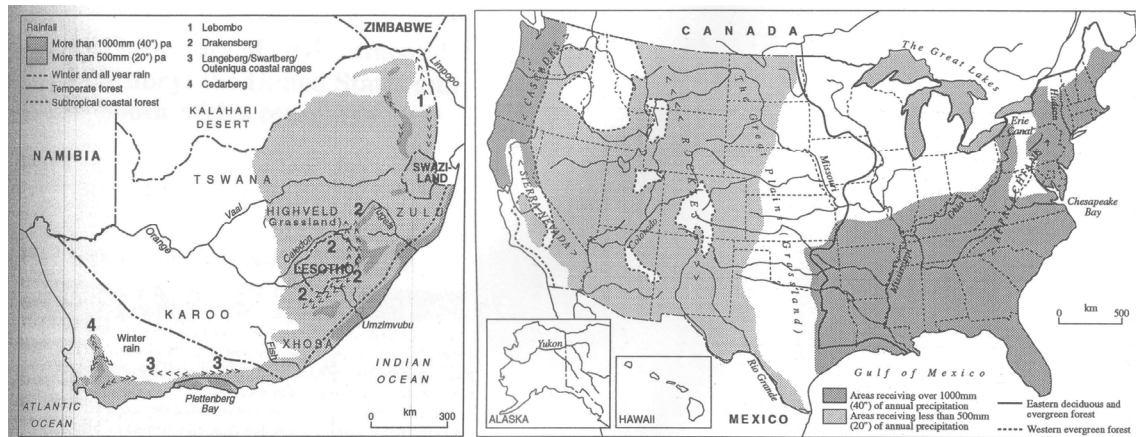


Figure 3.1: Maps of South Africa and the United States, showing major isohyets.

Source: W. Beinart and P. Coates, *Environment and History: The taming of nature in the USA and South Africa*. (London: Routledge, 1995).

Some American states were considered to be ecologically similar to South Africa, especially the south-western states such as New-Mexico, Arizona and Texas in the ‘American West’.<sup>13</sup> The major reason for this is that both South Africa and America beyond 100° eastern longitude are predominantly semi-arid and subjected to recurring periods of drought.<sup>14</sup> The concepts of aridity and drought are easy to understand in a general sense, but difficult to define in precise terms. Water is obviously the key in defining aridity, but simply measuring aridity according to absolute amounts of precipitation in isolation of other factors, is senseless.<sup>15</sup> Though rainfall in the United States declines from east to west and South Africa has a similar pronounced rainfall gradient from east to west, the regional rates of evaporation in South Africa are considerably higher than evaporation rates in the United States. This means that the rainfall in South Africa is less effective than that occurring within similar isohyets in America. Areas in South Africa that receive between 500 to 760 mm of rainfall, such as districts in the eastern Orange Free State, for example, rather parallels that of US land west of the 500 mm isohyets.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> (n/a) “Grondherwinningswerk in Suid-Afrika: Indrukke van Landbou-Verteenwoordiger van die Verenigde State” *LW* ((8 February 1948): 43, 45. Other states frequently drawn upon included Tennessee, Ohio and Illinois.

<sup>14</sup> Recent measuring standards define South Africa as “predominantly arid” and the United States of America as “semi-arid,” this demarcation encompass the whole of the United States of America. See P. Beaumont, *Drylands. Environmental Management and Development* (Routledge: 1989), 84-85.

<sup>15</sup> Beaumont, *Drylands*, 3; R.J. van Reenen, *Resisting Drought* (Government Printer, Pretoria, 1935), 45.

<sup>16</sup> S. Phillips, “Lessons from the Dust Bowl,” n.p. (digital document)

These ecological similarities were referred to by several officials and scientists in the beginning of the twentieth century. Although similarities were sometimes picked up by Americans visiting South Africa,<sup>17</sup> most of the references between the ecological similarities were made by South African based scientists. W.R. Thompson, for instance, put the similarities forward in order to argue that “these figures [of soil loss in the States] will serve to show the significance of water and soil loss under conditions similar in many respects to those prevailing in South Africa.”<sup>18</sup> Other scholars also remarked on the ecological similarities as well as wider institutional similarities between South Africa and America. In 1928, for instance, H.D. Leppan, an agronomy professor in the Transvaal, observed that:

“In the case of South Africa the majority of agricultural experts introduced immediately after the Boer War came from North America; the departments of agriculture founded in the new colonies were largely modelled on American line, as was the Union Department of Agriculture at a later date; and young South Africans to be trained as technical agriculturalists were sent chiefly to the United States to study methods practised there. Moreover, when added to this, *the comparable physical conditions, and a similar phase in the evolution of farming in South Africa* are taken into consideration, it is not surprising that American, rather than European, methods have predominated in the Union.”<sup>19</sup>  
[my emphasis]

It is not just the sweeping statement that this extract suggests; Leppan continued to point out the differences, such as the much bigger land area and a larger economy as well as the much larger proportion used for crop cultivation.<sup>20</sup> As is also seen in the emphasised part of the above quote, in some ways South Africa was seen as a ‘younger’ version of the USA. This view was not restricted to Leppan alone. In his 1925 address to the South African Association for the Advancement of Science, E. Parish, then principal of the Glen Agricultural College, close to Bloemfontein, made the following comment:

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<sup>17</sup> For example by the American agricultural attaché to South Africa, J.L. Dougherty (n/a) “Grondherwinningwerk in Suid-Afrika: Indrukke van Landbou-Verteenwoordiger van die Verenigde State,” *LW* (8 February 1948): 43, 45.

<sup>18</sup> Thompson, *Moisture and Farming*, 131.

<sup>19</sup> H.D. Leppan, *The Agricultural Development of arid and semi-arid regions with special reference to South Africa* (South Africa: Central News Agency, 1928), 197.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 198-199.

“Unfortunately, just as in the earlier history in the United States and other countries with much virgin land, continuous cropping on a single crop system is common, and, just as in the United States, this system was one of depletion of the soil, of exploitation, or spoliation, resulting in the abandoning of farms for other virgin areas.”<sup>21</sup>

C.R. Swart, an advocate from Winburg in the Orange Free State, who would later become the first president of the South African Republic, remarked in a series of articles on agriculture in America based upon his tour of the United States:

“The history of the farmer in the United States during the last couple of years is almost the same as the history of our farmers here in South Africa. Today, the farmer there feels the pinch just as ours do.”<sup>22</sup>

Another view on South Africa as somehow younger, but comparable to the United States was taken by Reenen J. van Reenen, who spent some time working in Nebraska. In 1935, during his term as Chairman of the Irrigation Commission of the Union of South Africa, he published a booklet containing some of the conclusions of the *Drought Commission Report of 1922/3* (on which he sat) as well as some added information. This he did with the goal of making the findings accessible to laymen and ordinary farmers. He stressed the experiences of farmers in the USA in the early 1930s with regards to soil erosion to warn farmers in South Africa to follow ‘scientific’ conservation methods when irrigating:

“It is a matter of history that, as a result of irrigation, much land has already become so *brak* as to be useless for the growth of ordinary crops. In America the damage due to this cause has been placed at over 12 million pounds sterling, and it is there maintained that, had the necessary precautions been taken, these losses could have been prevented. We are still a young country, as far as irrigation is concerned, and it would seem that we are well on the road to

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<sup>21</sup> E. Parish, “Problems in Agriculture in South Africa,” Presidential Address to Section C, 7 July 1925 in *Report of the Twenty-third Annual Meeting of the South African Association for the Advancement of Science Being Volume XXII of the South African Journal of Science* (Johannesburg, 1925), 53.

<sup>22</sup> “Die geskiedenis van die boer in die Verenigde State gedurende die laaste paar jare is ook maar byna net dieselfde as die geskiedenis van ons boere hier in Suidafrika. (sic.) Vandag knyp die boer se skoen maar kwaai sowel daar as hier by ons.”  
C.R. Swart, “Landboutoestande in Amerika,” *LW* (26 July 1922): 200.



making the same mistakes as irrigators in other countries have done, for on all sides are to be seen the evidence of damage done or threatening.”<sup>23</sup>

Another dimension to the idea that the United States and South Africa have similar historical trajectories, especially in as far as they brought agriculture to what was perceived as untamed, virgin land, is in the comparisons between the great migration of settlers to the West in America, and the myths surrounding the Great Trek in South Africa. A certain C. Potgieter referred to the “Voortrekkers of Illinois” an example of how it is in the nature of ‘civilised’ agriculture to cultivate previously uncultivated lands.<sup>24</sup> It was not only the prosperity of the white population in America, but also the perceived threat posed by poor whites to the sophistication of civilisation that was taken up in the white imagination of the well-read South African official. The poor white situation in American West is for instance referred to by H.S. du Toit in articles on the progress of the *Drought Commission Report*, a report that, in the end, described more of the social than the meteorological aspects of drought.<sup>25</sup>

Both countries had a strong historical leaning towards the ‘frontier’ as central theme in the making of identity. The frontier as historical element is much contested terrain, but for the purposes of this chapter, the definition given by Lamar and Thompson will be used, namely the frontier as a territory or a zone of interpenetration between two previously distinct societies.<sup>26</sup> Importantly, when the frontier was still open, land was perceived as a commodity that can be easily discarded when worn out. The frontier hypothesis was first brought forth by American historian Frederick Jackson Turner in an 1893 paper entitled “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.”<sup>27</sup> In the words of Bill Cronon, the thesis ran thus:

“...the West was a place where easterners and Europeans experienced a return to a time before civilization when the energies of race were young. Once the descent to the primitive was complete, frontier communities underwent an

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<sup>23</sup> R.J. van Reenen, *Resisting Drought* (Government Printer: Pretoria, 1935), 166.

<sup>24</sup> C.Potgieter, “Die Aard en Betekenis van Landbou,” *LW* (12 February 1930): n.p.

<sup>25</sup> H.S. du Toit, “Die Bevegting van Droogtes: Arme Blanke,” *LW* (19 October 1921):n.p.

<sup>26</sup> Thompson and Lamar, *The Frontier in History*. Note that this paragraph relates to the frontier and frontier debates as they occurred in the early twentieth century, up until the end of the Second World War, and not as the debate featured in South African history during the 1970s. For more on this debate, see e.g. M. Legassick, “The frontier in South African historiography,” S. Marks and A. Atmore *Economy and Society in pre-industrial South Africa*. (1980), 45-79.

<sup>27</sup> F.J.Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1893* (Washington: Publisher Unknown, 1894): 199-227.

evolution which recapitulated the development of civilization tracing the path from hunter to trader to farmer to town. In that process of descent and revolution – as the frontier successively emerged and vanished – a special American character was forged, marked by fierce individualism, pragmatism and egalitarianism.”<sup>28</sup>

The Turner thesis, although it was supposed to emphasise American exceptionalism, was also taken up in the narratives of identity in other settler cultures, like Jan Broek pointed out in 1941:

“the Great Plains and the prairies of North America, the Pampas of South America, the Siberian and Australian Steppes, and the African Veld were all drawn into the sphere of western culture in the nineteenth century. One does not have to be a geographic determinist to believe that a comparative study of the settlement of these grasslands would greatly enhance our perspective.”<sup>29</sup>

In both countries, ‘frontier expansion’ was within grasp of living memory at the time of rapid industrialisation and rising ideas about conservation, though it has been deemed ‘closed’ during the last decades of the nineteenth century. The idea of the frontier was nonetheless a powerful narrative theme in the early twentieth century, influencing notions of the land, nature and identity.

Although cognisance was clearly taken of the ecological and historical similarities between South Africa and the United States, South Africa did not necessarily only focus on the USA. There was for instance an article in the *Landbouweekblad* on the agricultural policies of *different* countries, including the USA and Canada, because it was deemed “important for the farmer to know what is being done in other agricultural countries to try and solve the farmer’s price and income problems.”<sup>30</sup> References were also made to agriculture in countries as diverse as China, Denmark and Argentina.<sup>31</sup> Basutoland (now Lesotho) too, was under discussion.<sup>32</sup> The soil

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<sup>28</sup> W. Cronon, “Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier: The Legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 18 (April 1987):157. For a short bibliography on arguments around the topic, see the above-mentioned article, footnote 3.

<sup>29</sup> J.O.M. Broek, “The Relations Between History and Geography,” *Pacific Historical Review* 10 (September 1941): 324. Quoted in M.W. Mikesell, “Comparative Studies in Frontier History,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 50 (March 1960) 63.

<sup>30</sup> Navorser, “Landboubeleid in Drie Verskillende Lande,” *LW* (21 June 1950): 31.

<sup>31</sup> For example in H.J Steyn, “Wat is ‘n Ko-operasie?” *LW* (23 April 1924):1457; (n/a) “Droë vrugte bedryf in Australië,” *LW* (7 December 1932):5; (n/a) “Die Wêreldkonferensie Spekulasie,” *LW* (7 December 1932):10; (n/a) “Nog volop ruimte vir die uitbreiding van ons vrugtebedryf – wat

conservation efforts in Basutoland were regarded with ambivalence in South Africa, sometimes praised and sometimes criticised.<sup>33</sup> The context for Basutoland was fundamentally different, however, as soil erosion in the Mountain Kingdom could directly affect agricultural production in bordering areas of the Orange Free State and the Eastern Cape. On the level of ideology and technology, the United States of America remained the predominant reference point.

### 3.3 Dust Bowl and South Africa, c. 1930 – 1950.

In 1932, following a series of prolonged droughts, weather bureaus on the Great Plains States<sup>34</sup> in the United States of America reported small dust storms throughout the plains. These storms gradually increased in number and intensified in scope. On 9 May 1934, a spectacular dust storm started in Montana and Wyoming, covering everything in its eastward path in dust and on 13 May ships as far as 300 miles off the coast in the Atlantic still reported layers of dust on their decks.<sup>35</sup> The ‘Dust Bowl’ of the “Dirty Thirties” made international news, and is still favourite ground for American historians of the Midwest. Though the drought and the wind was not of the farmer’s making, it was often said, the disaster was. The greatest cause of this disaster was attributed to the “sod-busting” of the “southern soil miner.”<sup>36</sup> As the title of a well-known US government sponsored film told the farmers: it was the plough that broke the plains.<sup>37</sup> This was also the view held by many South African officials and

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afsetmoontlikhede in Skandinawië ons leer,” *LW* (14 December 1932): 5; L. Krug, “Die plaas in Argentinië,” *LW* (29 March 1933):27.

<sup>32</sup> SANA 38/15 Remarks by N.C Havenga at General Meeting on twentieth June 1945;

<sup>33</sup> T. Driver, “Anti-erosion Policies in the Mountain Areas of Lesotho: the South African Connection” in *Environment and History* 5, (1999): especially 5-10.

<sup>34</sup> The Great Plains refer to a central part of North America on bordering on the 100<sup>th</sup> meridian. A useful definition is that of the International Institute for Sustainable Development: “The Great Plains of North America is a roughly triangular area covering 1.4 million square miles that extends for about 2,400 miles (3,870 km) from Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba southward through Texas into Mexico and approximately 1,000 miles (1,612 km) from foothills of the Rocky Mountains eastward to Indiana.”

<http://www.iisd.org/agri/> (Accessed 5 February 2009)

<sup>35</sup> D. Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* ( New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 13.

<sup>36</sup> C. Earle, “The Myth of the Southern Soil Miner: Macrohistory, Agricultural Innovation, and Environmental Change,” in D. Worstered. *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988):176; Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 4 and R.S. Beeman and J.A. Pritchard, *A Green and Permanent Land: Ecology and Agriculture in the Twentieth Century* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 11.

<sup>37</sup> Beeman and Pritchard, *A Green and Permanent Land*, 17.

policymakers, who, in some regards, drew heavily on American examples for their ideas.<sup>38</sup>

In the years to come, the Aeolian, or wind, erosion of the “Dust Bowl” served as the example which governments and conservationists used in trying to convince farmers to use what they saw as better farming techniques. The idea was that more progressive farming methods would counter erosion and behind that lied the motivation that soil erosion was evidently detrimental to the economy. Aesthetics played a lesser role. The influence of the Dust Bowl was not limited to countries with commensurable semi-arid or grassland landscapes. Alwin Seifert, *Reichslandschaftsanwalt* (Reich Landscape Advocate) of Hitler’s Germany, for instance, used the Dust Bowl as cautionary example.<sup>39</sup> In some African colonies, protectorates and states, however, the influence of America was more overt.<sup>40</sup>

By 1930 already, the work of H.H. Bennett, the famous soil conservationist from the United States whose role is discussed in more detail in 3.6, was quoted in the *Landbouweekblad*, and the American appellations of ‘soil robber’ or ‘soil-miner’ were made relevant for South Africa. American statistics were then also used as a warning of what could happen.<sup>41</sup> Dust Bowl America then, became the portentous narrative told to farmers in South Africa to warn against the misuse of soil, and the environmental disasters that threaten when the soil is mined for the sake of profit, regardless of the impact on nature: “America is a typical example of land that has been ploughed, that never should have been ploughed,” one writer warned readers of the *Landbouweekblad*.<sup>42</sup> Another writer also pointed towards the American Dust Bowl as a cautionary example:

“In this regard we have much to learn from America, where unbalanced cultivation lead to the destruction of thousands of farmers, who made their

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<sup>38</sup> (n/a) “Gronderosie, sy Agtergrond en sy Gevaar,” *Veldtrustnews* 1 (September 1944):1.

<sup>39</sup> T. Zeller, “Moulding the Landscape of Nazi Environmentalism: Alwin Seifert and the Third Reich,” F. Brüggemeier, M. Cioc and T. Zeller, eds, *How Green Were the Nazis? Nature, Environment and Nation in the Third Reich* (Series in Ecology and History, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005):155.

<sup>40</sup> The first scholars to touch upon the American influence in agricultural policy making, albeit in a more generalised sense, were William Beinart and David Anderson, albeit in a much more generalised way. See Anderson, “Depression, Dust Bowl, Demography and Drought,” 321-343 and Beinart “Soil Erosion, Conservationism and Ideas about Development,” 52-83.

<sup>41</sup> J.C de Klerk, “Hoe om Veld te Beskerm,” *LW* (January 1930): 2185 – 2187.

<sup>42</sup> Ekonoom, “Grondgebruikstelsel moet Hersien word,” *LW* (18 May 1949): 47.

previously fertile grazing fields into deserts. It will take many generations to get the soil ready again for cultivation, and millions of pounds.”<sup>43</sup>

In September 1944, the first edition of the *Veldtrust-News*, reported on the “gigantic dust-storm [that] raged over Johannesburg. The air was dark – dark with dust.”<sup>44</sup>

Americans, it was concluded, would have had been able to say what these things mean. During December/January 1949/1950 there were several sandstorms in the western Free State and warnings of an impending “dust bowl” abounded, especially after a certain Dr. Lowdermilk of America advised that the situation could deteriorate as such.<sup>45</sup> The Dust Bowl was, however, not only sketched as an example of an ecological disaster caused by greedy and ignorant farmers. It was also upheld as a model of how state intervention and the intervention of science spliced together with a ‘return to nature’ (and a few million dollars) could save a ‘civilisation’ from being destroyed themselves.<sup>46</sup>

### **3.4. The influence of American legislation, c. 1933 – 1946.**

The first policy to have been brought about by ‘Dust Bowl’ scares was probably a resolution on water conservation, adopted in 1934 by the House of Assembly. J.C. Ross would later write about it:

“this resolution, coming shortly after the great drought of 1933 and at a time too when the tragedy of America’s Dust Bowl was much in the news, was more fruitful of good and lasting results than any other single development of the past in this particular field.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> “In hierdie opsig kan ons van Amerika leer, waar ongebalanseerde saaiboerdery gelei het tot die ondergang van duisende boere, wat hul eertydse vrugbare weigrone tot woestyne gemaak het. Dit sal baie geslagte neem om daardie gronde weer reg te maak vir verbouing, afgesien nog van die miljoene ponde wat daaraan spandeer sal moet word.”

P. Bydendyk, “Gronduitputting en Erosie,” *LW* (10 July 1940): 21.

<sup>44</sup> “’n Tyd gelede het ’n reuse-stofstorm oor Johannesburg gewoed. Daarvan was die lug donker – donker van die stof.”

(n/a) “Gronderosie – Sy Agtergrond en sy Gevaar,” *Veldtrust-Nuus* (September 1944): 1.

<sup>45</sup> I.D. Steyn, “Uit ons Briewebus: Meer Waterbewaring Is Nodig,” *LW* (4 January 1950): 41.

<sup>46</sup> For an example of agricultural planning with regards to soil conservation in America used as an example of a system that should be implemented in SA see: (n/a) “Grondagteruitgang ’n komplekse studie,” *LW* (1 February 1950), 43. Also see: (Editorial), “Hoe Ander Mense ons Sien,” *LW* (22 February 1950); Navorser, “Die Rooi Lig uit die Weste,” *LW* (22 February 1950): 27 and G.P. van der Walt, “Handhawing van Grondvrugbaarheid in die ‘Rooilig’-Streek,” *LW* (10 May 1950): 31.

<sup>47</sup> Ross, *Soil Conservation in South Africa*, 17.

Nonetheless, the most lasting effect of American ideas on soil conservation in the Union was most likely through the Soil Conservation Act of 1946 in which the National Veld Trust had a large hand.<sup>48</sup>

The Veld Trust had contacts with institutions in the USA early on. In August 1944, at a meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Veld Trust it was decided that C. te Water must try to negotiate a liaison between the Veld Trust and the US Soil Conservation service, as he was already in correspondence with them.<sup>49</sup> It is not clear whether the liaison itself was achieved before the promulgation of the law, but there is clear evidence that the Trust was in contact with the US Soil Conservation at a rather high level. The following month, Te Water advocated a soil conservation scheme similar to the one in the USA, which he regarded as “profound.”<sup>50</sup>

The basic tenet of the American schemes that attracted Te Water was, according to the minutes, the centralised authority with financial and coordinative power. Apart from these pragmatic motivations, little else is mentioned on why America in particular is a good example.<sup>51</sup> N.C. Havenga, an important figure in South African politics at the time and a prosperous Orange Free State farmer, felt that a degree of compulsion would be necessary in the Union.<sup>52</sup> This meant that in order to effectively disseminate soil conservation works the government, in particular the Department of Agriculture had to intervene with legislation. Education alone would not suffice. A motion was subsequently made by the Trust president of the time, Louis Esselen, that when the details of the “American scheme” were available, a draft bill drawn up by the Trust, based on the American scheme must be submitted to the Department of Agriculture.<sup>53</sup> The motion was accepted. It is not clear what exactly was meant with “American Scheme”, but in January 1926 it was reported in the board meeting that the Trust received the Soil Conservation Laws of six American states.<sup>54</sup> Four of the five pages of the memorandum accompanying the Bill to be laid before the Department of

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<sup>48</sup> HANSARD (20 May – 19 June 1946):18471, Minister of Agriculture to House of Assembly.

<sup>49</sup> SANA A38/15 Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Trustees of the National Veld Trust 10 August 1944, 1.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> SANA A38/15 Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Trustees of the National Veld Trust held in Mr Louis Esselen’s office, Cape Town, 26 January 1945, 1.

Agriculture, were dedicated to expounding upon the American background of the bill, starting with the obligatory warning: “the USA, by similar process of Soil abuse had arrived at the edge of the abyss. In 1934 the calamity of the Great Dust Storm startled the public conscience of that country... into action.”<sup>55</sup> The applicability of the US example is again couched in terms of supposed historical and ecological similarity, with an interesting addition of universality, confirming the idea that soil erosion was seen as one of the first global environmental issues:

“The soil of a country is a universal phenomenon of Nature, and its conservation presents an issue in its relationship to the individual which is not peculiar to any country. The human characteristics, constitutional similarities, and natural and climatic conditions of the United States of America so approximate to those of the Union of South Africa, as to form a reasonable basis of experience on which the latter may reasonably and profitably build.”<sup>56</sup>

The moulding of legislation on an American example was not, however, unanimously and unquestioningly accepted by everyone. In debating the Bill, General Kemp criticised the Department of Agriculture for resorting to overseas experts, stating that the Drought Commission Report of the “boerseun en Afrikaner,”<sup>57</sup> H.S. du Toit, as enough proof.<sup>58</sup> He does not mention Du Toit’s enthusiasm for America though. Other delegates also debated the question of using foreign expertise, especially from the USA, saying that no one can handle the problem better than “our own people.”<sup>59</sup> Kemp’s argument, like that of his fellow delegates, had more to do with proclaiming the quality of South African, in particular Afrikaner, science than with disagreeing with the Americanised content. The Director of Irrigation was however direct on why he deemed the American example inappropriate:

“The Bill has been taken over from America in a hybrid form and while appreciating the excellent conservation work done in that country; it is very

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<sup>55</sup> SANA A38/29/4 Explanatory Memorandum to “The National Soil Conservation Act” sent by W.R. Vermaak to N.C Havenga, 3 October 1945 , 2.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>57</sup> Directly translated: Farm boy, the connotation in Afrikaans is however a rather ‘nobler’ one of ‘son of land’ than is associated with the English term.

<sup>58</sup> HANSARD (20 May 1946): 8476-7.

<sup>59</sup> “Ons eie mense.” It is an expression used in Afrikaans that has an emotive connotation towards one’s own community. HANSARD (23 May 1946): 8518.

doubtful whether it can be unreservedly applied to South Africa with its own peculiar political set up, legislation and climatic conditions.’<sup>60</sup>

Nevertheless, the USA was increasingly the foil against which successful statehood, and successful agriculture, was measured. This became clear in the way the “successful” laws and measures regarding soil conservation in the USA were frequently referred to. They might have failed at first – but policies put into place in the wake of the ravages of the Dust Bowl were often seen as exemplary.

### **3.5 The influence of an American ideology of “progress.”**

There are some indications that the link between successful agriculture and the USA remained strong in South Africa, even in the aftermath of the ‘Dust Bowl.’ Clocolan, one of the ‘conquered territories’ in the Orange Free State, was for instance advertised as “the California of South Africa, with a richness of products that makes the heart sing with joy.”<sup>61</sup> The water supply scheme (also a famous feature of Californian agriculture)<sup>62</sup> and “rich nursing soil” are also peddled as characteristics of ‘South Africa’s California.’<sup>63</sup> The USA became increasingly associated with a measure of prosperity or success, especially around the time of their entering the Second World War. Even when the Dust Bowl served as a scare tactic in state and other propaganda, the United States as an institution, was rarely criticised for letting such a disaster happen. The blame was mostly put on the ignorant zeal of the pioneers, and the tone of the warnings were more ‘if it can happen to them, it can happen to us.’ With this the United States, and by association South Africa, were put amongst the echelons of ‘civilisations’ that can fall. The Veld Trust Newsletter of September 1944 is a good example of this subtlety to the discourse:

“The United States suddenly realised that something is the matter with their land. The soil was sick. Pioneers, followed by ten thousands of settlers, trekked across the land, until they disturbed the relationship between the soil and the

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<sup>60</sup> SANA Department of Agriculture (LDB) 3253/R4250/21, Director of Irrigation to Secretary of Agriculture, 15 April 1946. Quoted in Dodson “Above Politics?”

<sup>61</sup> “Dit is die Kalifornië van Suid-Afrika – ‘n rykdom van produkte wat die hart laat jubel en tril van louter genot, is hier voorhande.” Free State Archival Repository, Bloemfontein (VAB) MCL 2/2 (26/2/46) Advertisement in *Volksblad, Centenary Edition*. c. 1938.

<sup>62</sup> For more on the ‘hydraulic empire’ of the USA, see D. Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

<sup>63</sup> “ryke teelaarde.” VAB MCL 2/2 (26/2/46): Advertisement in *Volksblad, Centenary Edition*. c. 1938.



vegetation to such an extent that it started to move with the wind. This is how the great “dust bowls” of the United States came into being. *It is part a story of erosion and the role thereof in the rise and fall of civilizations throughout the world.*”<sup>64</sup> [My emphasis]

To be part of, and keep its place amongst the supposed ‘civilisations’, policy-makers and scientists in agriculture in South Africa absorbed the discourse of white ‘progress’ in agriculture as moulded on an American cast. With ‘American cast’, more is meant than the nation state boundaries from which the information itself came, but also what America outwardly represented: prosperity, democracy and power.

Three of the main spheres in which American prototypes prevailed, were education, of the youth as well as the experts; the science of farming, especially crop cultivation and lastly the mechanisation of agriculture – a move towards technicism within American parameters.

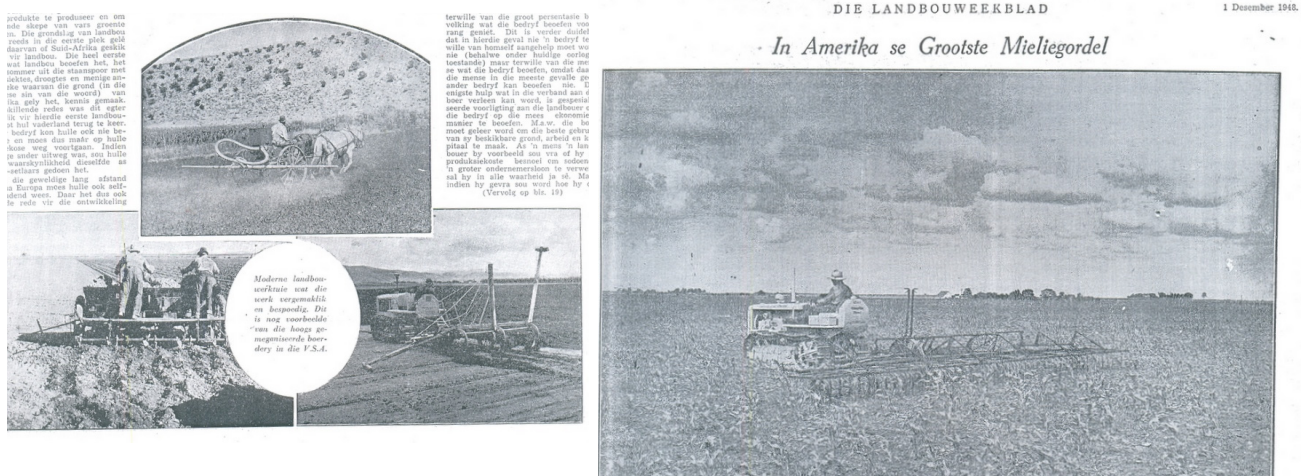


Figure 3.2 Two examples of mechanisation in America coupled with images of progress, both from the *Landbouweekblad*. The image on the left gave “more examples of highly mechanised agriculture in America” and the one on the right pictured America’s largest maize-belt.

Source: *Landbouweekblad* (1December 1948):64 and (21 March 1945).

<sup>64</sup>“Die Verenigde State (het) skielik beseft dat daar iets met hul land skeel. Die bodem was krank. Pioniers, gevolg deur tienduizende nedersetters, het oor die land getrek, totdat hulle die verhouding tussen die grond en beskermende planteblad so verstoort het, dat iets met die grond begin gebeur het – dit het saam die wind begin skuif. Dit was hoe die groot “stof-komme” van die Verenigde State ontstaan het. Dit is gedeeltelik ’n verhaal van erosie en sy rol in die opkoms en ondergang van beskawings dwarsdeur die wereld.”

(n/a) “Gronderosie, sy Agtergrond en sy Gevaar,” *Veldtrustnews* 1 (1 September 1944), 1.

### 3.6 The American influence on education.

The education of farmers was one of the major concerns in early twentieth century agricultural circles in the Union of South Africa. It was also an area that was noticeably influenced by examples from and comparisons to America. In the first decade of the twentieth century, General Botha, who later served as prime minister of the Union as well as a Minister of Agriculture, sent a group of Transvalers to the States for study and research. This group of students included influential men such as G.J. Bosman, a maize specialist and J.C. Faure, an entomologist.<sup>65</sup> Agricultural experts and students alike continued to spend time in the United States throughout the first half of the twentieth century, and were often reported on in human interest stories.<sup>66</sup> Until the South African Union had a generation of (American-taught) experts of their own, they frequently recruited experts abroad, such as the first State entomologist, C.P. Lounsbury. In 1919, the four agricultural unions of South Africa suggested that, when the current Secretary of Agriculture retired, it was best to look for the most competent person overseas, preferably America.<sup>67</sup>

The experiences of these men probably explain the prevalence of the United States as an educational reference point specifically in agriculture, as their ideas filtered through to students in South Africa. It is not surprising, however, that the ostensibly American tradition of educating farmers, associated with the agricultural prosperity of that country, were mostly propagated by South African students and officials who actually studied in or visited the United States. Writing from America, a South African farmer by the surname of Neb, argued that South African farming was far below the American standard, especially with regards to intensive farming and the better education of farmers. According to him, South Africa was not 'behind' due to natural agricultural conditions but due to cultural attitudes, in particular an attitude of farming like the forefathers did, an attitude of: "My great-grandfather, my grandfather and my father farmed like that, and they were rich, why can't I farm like that and

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<sup>65</sup> (n/a) "Ons Landboudeskundiges: Gideon J. Bosman," *LW* (3 December 1924): n.p.

<sup>66</sup> See for example S.J Meiring, "Landbou in Amerika," *LW* (31 March 1920):1531; (n/a) "S.A.Studente in Amerika" *LW* (4 April 1923):1176; (n/a) "Grondherwinningwerk in Suid-Afrika: Indrukke van Landbou-Verteenwoordiger van die Verenigde State," *LW* (8 February 1948): 43, 45; Z. Deenik, "Grondkometers uit Plantaardige Materiaal: Stoppelbewerking in Amerika," *LW* (20 October 1948): 43.

<sup>67</sup> (n/a) "Die koeie uit die sloot, Dit was 1919: Versoeke van Boere," *LW* (22 February 1950):n.p.

become rich?” He then goes on to specifically say that the Americans do not have more brains than the South Africans do.<sup>68</sup> A similar argument is made by F.E. Geldenhuys, the first editor of the *Landbouweekblad* and an alumnus of Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. In an editorial, Geldenhuys wrote:

“America, who is progressive and who is at the forefront in the area of agriculture provides education on all the issues that are so important. In South Africa we are too clever to need education on these issues. We will go on to hover on the brink of bankruptcy and not look for a safer way.”<sup>69</sup>

Geldenhuys, in particular, actively promoted a similar approach towards bringing agriculture into the education system as had been done in America, including articles in the magazine on the education system itself, as well as on the training of teachers.<sup>70</sup> He also published a series of articles on agricultural education at middle school level – asking specifically that readers must think about what the implications of an American report on agricultural education in middle-school were for South African schools.<sup>71</sup>

Geldenhuys was not, however, the only proponent of American experiences in education. Because of the perceived ecological and social similarities between the countries, American educational material was often recommended as a basis from which South African programmes could be drawn up. In 1945, at a time when soil conservation received considerably media and state attention, there was for instance a proposal at Rhodes University College for a course in Soil Conservation – modelled

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<sup>68</sup>“Mij grootjie; mij oupa, mij pa het so geboer en hulle was rijk, waarom sal ek ni ook so boer en rijk word nie?”

T. Neb, “Landbou en Landbouopvoeding: Suid-Afrika en Amerika,” *LW* (11 February 1920):1201, 1203.

<sup>69</sup> “Amerika wat vooruitstrewend is en wat ook voorstaan op die gebied van landbou verskaf onderwys oor al die kwessies wat so belangryk (sic) is. In Suidafrika is ons te slim om onderwys nodig te hê oor die sake. Ons sal maar voortgaan om op die rant van bankrotskap te ry en sal nie soek na ‘n veiliger pad.” F.E. Geldenhuys, “Landhuiskundige Onderwys in Amerika,” *LW* (2 November 1921): page number illegible.

<sup>70</sup> J.C. Faure, “Landbou in ons Leerplan,” *LW* (28 April 1920):1689; (n/a) “Opleiding van Landbouonderwysers in Amerikaanse Normaalskole,” *LW* (30 April 1924):1503; (n/a) “Landbou in die Amerikaanse Skoolstelsel” *LW* (19 December 1923): 819.

<sup>71</sup> (n/a) “Landbouonderwys in Middelbare Skole: Rapport en Aanbevelings van Amerikaanse Kommissie: Wat van Suid- Afrika?” *LW* (3 January 1923): 822.

on American courses, with American examples and textbooks by influential American soil scientists, most significantly Hugh Bennett.<sup>72</sup>

America was not only looked upon as a model for including agriculture in the education system, but also bringing educational opportunities in the form of information to the rural areas. In 1923, before the publication of *Farming in South Africa* began in 1926, one writer complained about the lack of communication and *accessible* information from the government, saying that the Department of Agriculture in South Africa can learn from America in as far as communication with farmers via a readable and accessible annual is concerned.<sup>73</sup> At the height of the Depression and the poor white crisis of the early 1930s, lack of education was shown to be a major cause of indigence. One way in which to address this was to make the access to educational material easier. The American example given was the services of agricultural libraries that catered for rural areas. It specifically stated that, because rural areas in the United States are in many cases similar to those of South Africa, it will be one of the best things for the development of education in the *platteland*.<sup>74</sup> Other instances where education, in a broader sense, were based on an American prototype included boys and girls 'agricultural clubs'<sup>75</sup> and the concept of teamwork in American schools.<sup>76</sup>

Although the so-called 'gumption'<sup>77</sup> as a value inherent in the American education was praised throughout in a publication such as the *Landbouweekblad* as well as in some memoranda, it was not necessarily seen as laudable in all circles.<sup>78</sup> Even if one cannot conclude that officials and policy-makers scrambled for a wholesale

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<sup>72</sup> SANA A 38/15: Memorandum Drawn up for the Consideration of the Senates of Constituent Colleges on a proposed course on "Soil and Water Conservation." Drawn up by Prof W.F. Barker of R.U.C. 27 March 1945, 2.

<sup>73</sup> A.P. van der Post, "Die Landbou-Joernaal," *LW* (25 April 1923): 1209.

<sup>74</sup> S.J. Kritzing, "Die Amerikaners en hul Biblioteke," *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (October 1932):272.

<sup>75</sup> SANA A34/3: Speech held at Witwatersrand Central Juvenile Affairs Board by General Kemp "Farming as a career for S.A. Boys" c. 1929, 1.

<sup>76</sup> "Verstaan moet word dat ons nie bedoel dat die Amerikaanse stelsel onveranderd moet oorgeneem word nie. Maar ons kan altyd die Amerikaanse stelsel so wysig dat dit by Suidafrikaanse toestande inpas." (n/a) "Spanwerk in Amerika," *LW* (11 March 1925): 2158.

<sup>77</sup> (n/a) "Hoe Amerika sy Seuns in die Boerdery Oplei" *LW* (24 April 1940): 42.

<sup>78</sup> In a criticism of Geldenhuys in the *Cape Times*, they apparently referred to the American degree in a sarcastic tone. (n/a) "Waarom dan: 'n Onbetaamlike Aanval," *LW* (April 1925), n.p.

implementation of the American system,<sup>79</sup> there was a certain need to be on the same level. Explaining a scheme of farm labour for boys from the urban areas in which the Boy Scouts of America took part, one reader wrote to the *Landbouweekblad* that, even though the conditions in South Africa were not exactly the same as in America, there was no reason for the Voortrekkers, an Afrikaans equivalent to the Boy Scouts, to lag behind the Americans.<sup>80</sup> There is some indication that South African youth institutions were compared to similar institutions in other countries, seeking validation through the association with other ‘modern, civilised countries.’ The Landsdiens, a youth organisation that focussed on the agricultural and conservation sectors, were compared in an editorial to “Civil Conservation Corps” of America, the “Labour Service” of England and the German “Arbeitsdienst.”<sup>81</sup> The *Landbouweekblad* even went as far as to publish a letter that was originally written to the *Volksblad*, in which South African youth is quoted as an example for Americans.<sup>82</sup> The popularity of Afrikaans students in America and the quality work they bring with them from South Africa were also conspicuously mentioned.<sup>83</sup>

When it came to the dissemination of knowledge, whether through propaganda<sup>84</sup> or otherwise, American standards were often held in high esteem. It was considered a matter of validation that C.J.J. van Rensburg, who made the film *South Africa in Danger* (1936) and other soil conservation propaganda films, was praised by Hugh Hammond Bennett as “without equal” in the United States.<sup>85</sup> Van Rensburg also went to the States to exchange information on propaganda for soil conservation.<sup>86</sup> Use was also made of American propaganda films for soil conservation, such as *Valley of the*

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<sup>79</sup> The author who praised teamwork in American schools, for instance, also added “that we must understand that the American system cannot just be taken over without change. But we can always adapt the American system so that it fits in with our system.”

“Verstaan moet word dat ons nie bedoel dat die Amerikaanse stelsel onveranderd moet oorgeneem word nie. Maar ons kan altyd die Amerikaanse stelsel so wysig dat dit by Suidafrikaanse toestande inpas.” (n/a) “Spanwerk in Amerika,” *LW* (11 March 1925): 2158.

<sup>80</sup> “Die Boy Scouts in Amerika het ook nou by die duisende aan hierdie skema begin deelneem en ons Voortrekkers sal tog seker nie vir hulle agteruit staan nie!”

Sonder Arbeid, “Dorpseuns vir Plaaswerk,” *LW* (2 June 1943): 14.

<sup>81</sup> Editorial “Landsdiens” *LW* (17 July 1946): n.p. (front page)

<sup>82</sup> (n/a) “Suid-Afrika se jeug: Voorbeeld vir Amerika,” *LW* (13 April 1927): 3081.

<sup>83</sup> (n/a) “Landboustudente in Amerika,” *LW* (September 1921): 373.

<sup>84</sup> The word propaganda was still frequently used for any media campaign and did not necessarily carry negative connotations.

<sup>85</sup> SANA A38/15: Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Trustees of the National Veld Trust, 9 November 1944, 2.

<sup>86</sup> HANSARD, (23 May 1946): 8512.

*Tennessee*.<sup>87</sup> The films were shown around the *platteland* on the personal initiative of people like Van Rensburg<sup>88</sup> by organisations such as the Veld Trust.<sup>89</sup> Other American ways of ‘doing things,’ especially with regards to the spreading of information, that were praised, included demonstration farms where “seeing is believing”<sup>90</sup> and state interference with agricultural programmes in American universities.<sup>91</sup>

### 3.7 American influence in agronomic science.

Education was neither the only field of knowledge in which the major reference point shifted to the United States nor necessarily the most meaningful. In the early twentieth century in the Union, science in agriculture, especially agronomy and veld management<sup>92</sup> was also influenced by the United States.

On a quantitative, factual level, the prevalence of the USA in soil conservation discourse in this era is probably due to the fact that, “more of necessity was being done in North America than elsewhere... there were no ‘experts’, only those who were doing something.”<sup>93</sup> Contemporaries did not necessarily sense it as such. Some of them merely saw the Americans as pioneers of Soil Conservation. One South African scientist wrote:

“Credit for the first large-scale development of soil conservation must go to the United States of America. Therefore a recent visit to the States by the author, during which six months were spent at the Soil Conservation Service, was so valuable and interesting.”<sup>94</sup>

Indeed, the USA definitely published the most texts on the subject of soil, and as early as 1929, before the advent of the Dust Bowl, the first technical communication of the newly created British Bureau of Soil Science contained a list of references to 202

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<sup>87</sup> SANA A 38/15 H.S. Read to Mr la Page, 3 August 1945.

<sup>88</sup> HANSARD, (23 May 1924): 8513.

<sup>89</sup> *Veldtrustnuus* 1 (January 1945): 3.

<sup>90</sup> SANA A 38/15 J.C. Ross (Chief of the Division of Soil and Veld Conservation) “The State and Soil Conservation” Address to Associated Scientific and Technical Societies of South Africa, Johannesburg on 20 June 1945, 16.

<sup>91</sup> SANA A38/15 Notule van die Vergadering van die Trustees van die Nasionale Veldtrust 18 November 1943, 5.

<sup>92</sup> Similar to ranch management in the USA.

<sup>93</sup> Anderson, “Depression, Dust Bowl, Demography and Drought,” 340.

<sup>94</sup> Z. Deenik, “Metodes van Grondbewaring en die Beperkings,” (Publisher Unknown, 1951).

popular and technical publications of which 59, 3 per cent came from the United States.<sup>95</sup>

The well-travelled agronomist H.S. du Toit was one of the first scientists to actively channel American agricultural schemes to the South African Union. Building on a process started by the agronomist William McDonald,<sup>96</sup> he was especially pre-occupied with the idea of dryland farming.<sup>97</sup> Dryland farming was developed in western states such as Nebraska, Utah and Kansas in the 1890's and 1910's.<sup>98</sup> Basically it entailed the preparation of marginal lands for crop cultivation through using the soil as its own reservoir.<sup>99</sup> In addition to his tract on the subject, a series on this was published in the *Landbouweekblad* in 1920.<sup>100</sup>

Du Toit was not an exception because he had travelled to the US. Many officials as well as scientists drew extensively on American literature in their own works. The reasons most frequently cited by scientists in the period from 1920 to 1950 on why they use America as a comparative example were not only the impression of historical and ecological similarities, but also the argument that if America could prosper using the methods, so can (white) South Africa. The 1943 Report on the Reconstruction of Agriculture specifically used American success as an example of what can be done:

“American experience over the past few years has demonstrated beyond all doubt that *conservation farming*, implying proper systems and methods of land use supported by the necessary soil and water conservation measures, pays very handsome dividends on the cash investment...”<sup>101</sup>

In an article supposed to convince farmers of the need for ensilage of fodder, it is pointed out that in a certain American state, with the same amount of corn produce than the whole of South Africa, there are 90 000 silos, whereas in South Africa there are just 500 – and that these silos are important in overcoming drought and increasing

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<sup>95</sup> Thompson and Hall (1992) and Imperial Bureau of Soil Science (1929) quoted by K. Showers, *Imperial Gullies: Soil Erosion and Conservation in Lesotho* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005), 237.

<sup>96</sup> Beinart, “Soil Erosion, Conservationism and Ideas about Development,” 243.

<sup>97</sup> H.S. du Toit, *Drooglandbou* (Cape Town: Cape Times Beperkt, 1919).

<sup>98</sup> Beinart. *The Rise of Conservation in South Africa*, 241.

<sup>99</sup> Du Toit, *Drooglandbou*.

<sup>100</sup> H.S. du Toit, “Drooglandbou,” *LW* (14 January 1920).

<sup>101</sup> (n/a) Department of Agriculture and Forestry, *Reconstruction of Agriculture, Report of the Reconstruction Committee of the Department of Agriculture and Forestry*, [G.P.-S – 1943-4], 21.

output.<sup>102</sup> Another American example to illustrate the logic of the better the use of the soil, the higher the living standard, was Wisconsin.<sup>103</sup>

The American standards in science were paramount. To be seen as part of that establishment, in conjunction with the imperial establishment, was generally seen as a compliment:

“[R]ational soil use... is an understanding that is well developed in the United States of America, and that is receiving the serious attention of men such as Pentz and Scott in Natal, Penzhorn in the Free State, Rowland in Transvaal, Robb in Ciskei, Trapnell in Northern Rhodesia, Hornby and Van Rensburg in Tanganyika and Mahr in Kenya.”<sup>104</sup>

The fact that three colonial scientists could be mentioned along their American colleagues seemed important. The influence was therefore not restricted only to the knowledge itself, but also the meaning or worth attached to the facts.

There is a wealth of evidence of American models being used in South African scientific books aimed at the public such as E. Roux’s *The Veld and the Future* (1946) and J.C. Ross’ influential *Land Utilisation and Soil Conservation* (1949). These books both saw second editions in 1963. Van Reenen also included an appendix on grazing in the Western States of America in order to introduce South African farmers to possible measures that were then later used to counter the devastation of the 1930s in America.<sup>105</sup> American examples were also used in Booyesen and Hofmeyr’s evocatively named *Save our Soil* (1952).<sup>106</sup> In a lengthy promotional article that was published in the *Natal Mercury*, the importance of using scientific progress, explicitly linked to America, to extract subterranean water resources, is emphasised:

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<sup>102</sup> (n/a) “’n Versekering teen Droogte,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (September 1927): 227.

<sup>103</sup> Bodemgesond, “Planmatige Gebruik van die Bodem: Nasionale Grondbenuttingskema Voortgestaan,” *LW* (29 March 1950): 39, 41. For more examples see (n/a) “Onoordeelkundige Gebruik van Gronde is Verkwistend,” *LW* (28 June 1944): 24 and (n/a) “Is ons Landboupraktyke verouderd?” *LW* (3 December 1947): 33, 35.

<sup>104</sup> (n/a) “Toekoms van Grondbewaring in die Unie,” *LW* (8 December 1948): 33.

<sup>105</sup> Van Reenen, *Resisting Drought*, 210-213. The appendix is based on A.W Sampson, *Range and Pasture Management* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1923/4).

<sup>106</sup> E. Roux, *The Veld and the Future* (Cape Town: The African Bookman, 1946) (Second edition E. Roux, *The Veld and the Future* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press)); J.C. Ross, *Land Utilisation and Soil Conservation* (Government Printer, Pretoria, 1949). (Second edition: J.C. Ross, *Soil Conservation in South Africa: A Review of the Problem and Development to Date*. (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1963)); and C.R. Booyesen and S.J.G. Hofmeyr, *Save the Soil* (Cape Town: Juta, 1952).



“The success attained by investigation emphasises strongly the possibility of basing important future underground development in South Africa upon a foundation as rational and reliable as that obtained in America.”<sup>107</sup>

It is however not the case with all the books and articles written on the topic. Dr J.C. Fick’s book *The Abuse of the Soil: Veld and Water Resources of South Africa* (1944), for instance, does not in any significant way refer to the USA or knowledge stemming from there.<sup>108</sup>

It is significant to note, however, that simply originating from the USA was not sufficient to propel a model to widespread South African practice. It did however, often receive much publicity. A good example is *Plowman’s Folly* (1945) by Edward H. Faulkner,<sup>109</sup> in which he promotes a form of no-tillage farming, and makes rather vindictive judgements towards those using the plough, calling the mouldboard plough “the villain of the world’s agricultural drama.”<sup>110</sup> The book generated considerable debate in the pages of the *Landbouweekblad*. This interest ranged from photo-articles on South African farms where the Faulkner method was tried, to articles by South African and American experts, both those for, and against the method.<sup>111</sup>

It is clear that the ideological and intellectual space existed for authors to verbalise and publish knowledge based on American knowledge, knowledge that was associated with particular values. Therefore, at least in this regard, one can speak of an Americanised discourse. The significance of the works themselves in influencing the formation of ideas, especially beyond the boundaries of the text in itself, is more difficult to assess. In other words, just because the books were published, does not mean they were read, and just because they were read, does not necessarily imply that they significantly or meaningfully changed the paradigms the reader operates from.

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<sup>107</sup> VAB MFI 2/2: S.F. Stowe “Solution of Drought Problem.” *Natal Mercury* (26 September 1931).

<sup>108</sup> J.C. Fick, *The Abuse of the Soil, Veld and Water Resources of South Africa* (A South African Interests Group Publication, 1944).

<sup>109</sup> E.H. Faulkner, *The Plowman’s Folly* (London: Micheal Joseph, 1945).

<sup>110</sup> H.L.R. “Review: Ploughman’s Folly,” *The Geographical Journal* 105 (1945): 75. Interestingly enough, Faulkner used Chinese farmers as an example of good conservation farming. This highlights the fact that soil-conservation in particular, was seen as an universal phenomenon.

<sup>111</sup> (n/a) “Dr. Hugh H. Bennett oor Stoppelboerdery,” *LW* (7 January 1948): 30; (n/a) “Stoppelbewerking in Nuwe Gedaante: Spesiale Amerikaanse Ploeg sal binnekort in Unie wees,” *LW* (22 September 1948): 53; (n/a) “Grondkometers uit Plantaardige Materiaal: Stoppelbewerking in Amerika,” *LW* (20 October 1948): 43-44; (n/a) “Watter Metode van Grondbewerking?” *LW* (19 October 1949): 28-29; (n/a) “Die Waarde van Diep Ploeg,” *LW* (2 November 1949): 56, 64; J.J. Theron, “Hedendaagse opvattinge oor Grondvrugbaarheid,” *LW* (8 December 1948) :45.

There is however ways in which we can start to see whether or not the information filtered through beyond a few educated officials to the ‘ordinary farmers’, which were their target market. One would be to look at whether or not the books were distributed or sold in significant numbers. That two of the works, namely that of Roux and Ross, saw a second edition is perhaps the best indication of their probable impact. Moreover, the National Veld Trust bought 500 copies in each language (Afrikaans and English) of Fick’s work to distribute.<sup>112</sup> Reenen J van Reenen’s book was also actively promoted and endorsed by government<sup>113</sup> and many of the South African books on soil erosion written in the 1920s to 1950s are found in university libraries,<sup>114</sup> which mean that they were read by at least some students of agriculture.

### **3.8 The American influence in the mechanisation of agriculture.**

American technology in the form of the mechanisation of agriculture also provided a blueprint for the mechanisation of South African agriculture to a larger extent than the impact of other countries such as England. Both John Deere and Harry Ferguson had consumer bases in South Africa, as well as Massey Harris from Canada. Apart from influence on the level of industry, American experience often provided the blueprint for the mechanisation of agriculture, with articles on the matter often referring to the American experience and American scientific bulletins.<sup>115</sup> The pace of mechanisation during the inter-war years in South Africa, though increasing, was still comparatively slow. In 1936, there were only about 6000 farm tractors in South Africa. In 1946, after the War, there were an estimated 20 000 tractors in South Africa.<sup>116</sup> Reasons for the slow rate of mechanisation in South Africa are numerous, but the major two were the availability of cheap labour and the fact that the start-up capital needed was out of reach of most farmers. This did not prevent sales-people from using American prosperity as bait:

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<sup>112</sup> SANA A38/15: Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Trustees of the National Veld Trust , 5 October 1944, 2.

<sup>113</sup> H.W. Turpin, “’n Waardevolle Boek oor die Droogtevaagstuk,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (November 1936): 455-457, 473. The book is also practically repeated in the Journal.

<sup>114</sup> Although this may not be the best scientific assessment, it is better than just assuming the book was read. < <http://blues.sabinet.co.za.ez.sun.ac.za/> > (Search done 13 July 2008).

<sup>115</sup> Student, “Diere- en Meganiese Arbeid: Hoe dit Suid-Afrika tref,” *LW* (26 February 1930): 2653.

<sup>116</sup> Ross, *Soil Conservation in South Africa*, 8.

“Agents who sell tractors will usually tell farmers that in America, the use of tractors are increasing annually, with good results. He will, however, forget to tell farmers the price of a tractor, and the price of fuel in America, in comparison with South African prices.”<sup>117</sup>

As the War continued, changing the whole industry of agriculture, the need for mechanisation quickly became less of a debate of cost-efficiency and the value of oxen and horses, and more a question of a competitive necessity. In the light of American dominance of agriculture, South Africa was being left behind, and they had to increase the pace of mechanisation if they wanted to compete.<sup>118</sup>

The language of progress, mechanisation and industrialisation, coupled with man’s mastery over nature were not necessarily restricted to those wanting to increase South Africa’s competitiveness in the global market, but was also used by those wanting to sell their machinery. The recurring use of the idiom in advertising also points towards its resonance with mainstream farmers. It is however, not yet clear in how far individual farmers actually associated concepts like mechanisation and ‘progress’ with the United States as such.

### **3.9 Active propagation by the United States?**

Most of the time, Afrikaners, other white farmers and bureaucrats actively engaged with the large amount of American knowledge and produce available to them, extracting and using what they deemed applicable, attractive or necessary in the South African context. Still, it was not only a one-way process, with ‘American knowledge’ as a reified, stagnant object. It was a more dynamic process. To a certain extent, supposed American expertise was actively promoted by the Americans, especially after they officially entered the Second World War in December 1941. The combat of soil erosion and other agriculture-related issues, formed part of the process of

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<sup>117</sup> “Agente wat trekkers verkoop sal gewoonlik die boer se aandag daarop vestig dat in Amerika die gebruik van trekkers jaarliks toeneem, en dat goeie resultate aldaar verkry word. Hy sal altyd egter vergeet om die boer te vertel wat die aankoopprys van ‘n trekker, asook die prys van olie en brandstof, in Amerika is, in vergelyking met die Suid-Afrikaanse pryse.” M.C. Rykaart, “Die Trekkervraagstuk in Suid-Afrika,” *LW* (21 January 1942):15.

<sup>118</sup> (n/a) “Toenemende Meganisasie van die Boerdery: Die Oorlog versnel die Pas,” *LW* (14 March 1945): 17.

establishing cultural and economic hegemony in the West – forming part of the campaign against the communist threat.

The most visible persona to visit South Africa from the United States, and who was oft quoted and referred to, was Hugh Hammond Bennett of the United States Soil Conservation Service. He visited the Union from August to October 1944.<sup>119</sup> The proposal for the visit seems to have come from the United States Office of War,<sup>120</sup> an office from which agricultural information was frequently disseminated around the world.<sup>121</sup>

The Veld Trust was closely involved with Bennett's visit, his arrival warranting a special meeting of the board.<sup>122</sup> He was considered something of a celebrity; an editorial in the *Farmer's Weekly* remarked that:

“it is impossible to praise too highly the inspiration that brought about the presence in South Africa of this world authority on soil salvation with his clear vision and eloquent, downright methods of driving home his techniques.”<sup>123</sup>

The goal of Bennett's visit was thought especially important to “raise awareness amongst urbanites.”<sup>124</sup> His trip did generate an unusual amount of media, not only in print media but also with talks on national radio.<sup>125</sup>

The tour concentrated mostly on agriculture in the white areas –awkwardly neglecting the native areas<sup>126</sup> - and the message was one that, although the soil is in a terrible state in South Africa, with American techniques it can all be saved. In the pamphlet published following his visit, Bennett remarked:

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<sup>119</sup> For a detailed discussion see B. Dodson in both “Above Politics?” 53- 57 and “A Soil Conservation Safari: Hugh Bennett's 1944 Visit to South Africa,” *Environment and History* 11 (February 2005):35- 54.

<sup>120</sup> J.G.N. Strauss, “Foreword,” H.H. Bennett, *Soil Erosion and Land Use in the Union of South Africa* (Pretoria: The Department of Agriculture and Forestry, 1945). 15 000 Copies of this pamphlet were printed.

<sup>121</sup> (n/a) “Is dit ‘n Fout om Grond te Ploeg,” *LW* (2 January 1944): 7.

<sup>122</sup> SANA A38/15 Telegram to Havenga, 3/10/1944.

<sup>123</sup> (n/a) “Dr Bennett Bids South Africa Goodbye,” *Farmer's Weekly* (18 October 1944): 237. Also see Sapa, “Kenner op die Gebied van Grondbewaring: Wat in Amerika Gedoen word,” *Die Burger* (5 August 1944).

<sup>124</sup> Mr J.J Fouche, MP for Smithfield, HANSARD (23 May 1946): 8518.

<sup>125</sup> J.C Ross “Redaksioneel: Dr.H.H Bennett se Besoek aan Suid-Afrika”*Boerdery in Suid-Afrika*, (February 1945): 67.

<sup>126</sup> This aspect is discussed in detail by Dodson in “Above Politics?,” 53- 57 and “A Soil Conservation Safari.”

“We [Americans] know how to handle the dongas and the sheet erosion, and we are getting along with the work. And the results are increasing yields and farm income, the farmers like it. If we can do these things in America, you can do them here in South Africa.”<sup>127</sup>

The idea that America ‘knew best’ then, was not always purely projected upon the United States by South Africans. At a press conference just after his arrival, Bennett said that South Africa needs guidance with regards to the issue of soil erosion.<sup>128</sup> In an editorial devoted to a letter by Bennett addressed to the farming community, he did mention that he would also like to learn something from the South Africans, but such comments were few and far between, and like this particular one, enveloped in a rhetoric of diplomacy.<sup>129</sup> In fact, in 1943, *before* his ‘safari’ as Dodson calls it, a letter from Bennett to South Africans was published in the *Landbouweekblad*. He specifically addressed the South Africans and made the motivation behind his letter clear: soil conservation is not just a national, but also international concern, calling for international insights and understanding:

“Dear Editor: I write here on soil conservation, not to my compatriots in the USA, but to South Africans, thousands of miles from here... Soil conservation is not just an issue of private concern of a certain nation or group of people. Soil conservation is of importance to all nations, and every civilian in every country... Soil conservation is after all, really the conservation of man self... It is a platform for world peace.”<sup>130</sup>

Bennett’s ambitions to bring his country’s knowledge to the wider world was not restricted to South Africa – indeed in one article he wrote that, in order to implement a programme of world-wide conservation efforts, one of the things countries need to do was send their technicians to the United States for training, as the Americans had the most and best expertise.<sup>131</sup> It is as Donald Worster wrote, “[according to Bennett],

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<sup>127</sup> Bennett, *Soil Erosion and Land Use in South Africa*, 28.

<sup>128</sup> SAPA, “Kenner op die Gebied van Grondbewaring: Wat in Amerika Gedoen word,” *Die Burger* (5 August 1944).

<sup>129</sup> H.H. Bennett, “Bewaar U Grond!” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (September 1944), 547.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*. (The letter was reprinted from the *Farmer’s Weekly* and the *Landbouweekblad*)

<sup>131</sup> Bennett gave Basutoland as an example of where the American approach succeeded. He also visited Basutoland during his visit to the Union. H.H. Bennett, “Soil Conservation in a Hungry World,” *Geographical Review* 38 (April 1948): 315, 317.

there was a wide, hungry world out there... waiting for American know-how and American plenty.”<sup>132</sup>

Interestingly, at least one farmer found Dr. Bennett’s advice patronising, especially disliking his emphasis on the responsibility of the individual farmer in conjunction with the state:

“Just where you rest your eyes today, you read the priggish advice of Dr Bennett from America, on the big disaster that is looking SA in the eyes. Without hesitation I want to tell his highness that his advice is directed at the wrong address. There are people who just let things flow,<sup>133</sup> that I do not doubt, but in 90 per cent of cases the farmer is so without help that he cannot even cultivate his farm, never mind filling up gulleys etc.”<sup>134</sup>

He went on to say that roads and railways cause more erosion, and the culpable ones are the “foreign know-alls who do nothing.”<sup>135</sup> Another farmer who disliked the emphasis on the responsibility of the individual farmer said that the perpetual polemic will not bring anyone anywhere, and that in America it did not work until “government experts were appointed to, hand-in-hand with the farmer, rehabilitate his farm.”<sup>136</sup> Bennett, another letter-writer contended, did not have answers for everything – especially seeing that South African farmers did not have access to the resources American farmers have access to.<sup>137</sup>

It was not just big American personalities such as Bennett that actively promoted ideas from the United States as representatives of the United States, but also some rural betterment programmes, the biggest of which was the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). Part of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s legacy, it is recognised as “the

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<sup>132</sup> Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 214.

<sup>133</sup> “Laat Gods water oor Gods akker loop” The Afrikaans idiom directly translates as “Let God’s water flow over God’s acres”, meaning that no personal responsibility is being taken, everything is left to fate. The idiom was often used in agricultural articles as it resonated with the practice.

<sup>134</sup> “Net waar jy vandag jou oë laat rus lees jy van wysneusige raadgeulings van dr Bennett van Amerika, oor die ramp wat S.A. in die gesig staar, nl. gronderosie. Sonder aarsel wil ek sy grootheid sê dat sy advies in baie groot mate aan die verkeerde adres gerig is. Daar is mense wat Gods water maar oor Gods akker laat loop, lei geen twyfel nie, maar 90 per cent gevalle is die boer so sonder hulp dat hy nie sy plase kan bewerk nie, wat staan nog te sê slote opdam ens.” C.F Hugo, “Grondverspoeling,” *LW* (1 November 1944): 21

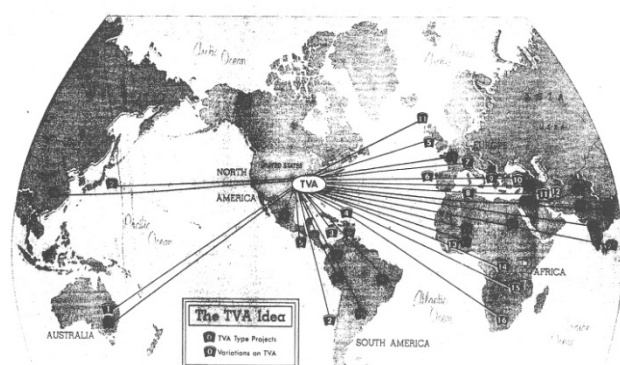
<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>136</sup> (n/a) “Menings van Ons Lesers: Die Ideale Versperring en Onderaardsewater-Bewaring,” *LW* (11 April 1945): 19.

<sup>137</sup> Landgenoot, “Menings van ons Lesers: Versperring van Slote om Erosie te Bestry,” *LW* (24 October 1945): 27.

most famous organization of the New Deal.”<sup>138</sup> In the 1940s, it was promoted as a model multi-purpose development programme, with an organisational structure that encouraged community participation. The TVA was established in 1933 by an Act of Congress of the USA, and it operated in parts of seven states. In the words of Roosevelt, its purpose was to be “a corporation clothed with the power of government but possessed of the flexibility and initiative of a private enterprise.”<sup>139</sup> Its major mission was hydraulic engineering in order to provide electricity. Its other major objective was the improvement of the economy of the region, especially agriculture. To this end four major steps were taken: Firstly, the readjustment of the cropping system as to effect an increase in the area devoted to soil-protecting crops. Secondly, they advocated the liberal application of phosphatic fertilizers with supplements as needed in the interest of rehabilitating and permanently maintaining soil fertility. Thirdly, they used mechanical erosion-control devices supplementary to the application of fertilizers and lastly, the progressive adaptation of these elements of soil-management systems into “sound farm business organization providing adequate

farm income,” was encouraged.  
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Magic Letters - The TVA model's global reach, 1939 (Mitznaker Journal)

Figure 3.3: This map, with the USA and the TVA prominently occupying the centre of the world is an illustration of the company's global ambitions.

Source: Ekbladh, D. “Mr. TVA’: Grass-Roots Development. David Lilienthal, and the Rise and Fall of the Tennessee Valley Authority as a Symbol for U.S. Overseas Development, 1933- 1973.” Diplomatic History 26 (Summer 2002).

Several articles appeared on the TVA or referred to the TVA in the *Landbouweekblad*. Amongst them was one that compared the Transvaal Sour-Veld to the Tennessee Valley, saying that this region too, has the ability to prosper in the same way the Tennessee Valley did.<sup>141</sup> An article on the soil conservation efforts of the TVA, concentrated

<sup>138</sup> J. Radkau, *Nature and Power: A Global History of the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 257.

<sup>139</sup> (n/a) “From a New Deal to a New Century: A short History of the TVA” <<http://www.tva.com/abouttva/history.htm>> (Accessed 9 September 2008).

<sup>140</sup> W. Shepard, *Food or Famine: The Challenge of Soil Erosion* (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1946), 178-179.

<sup>141</sup> (n/a) “Tennessee-Vallei van Suid-Afrika,” *LW* (4 January 1950): 39.

on how they answered to the *patriotic* duty towards the soil as a laudable enterprise. The same article also mentions that the South African agricultural attaché went to inspect the TVA area, and said that he will report on some stadiums of the TVA that can be adapted to South Africa.<sup>142</sup> The TVA was definitely aware of its own global significance, including in South Africa, as Figure 3.4 illustrates.

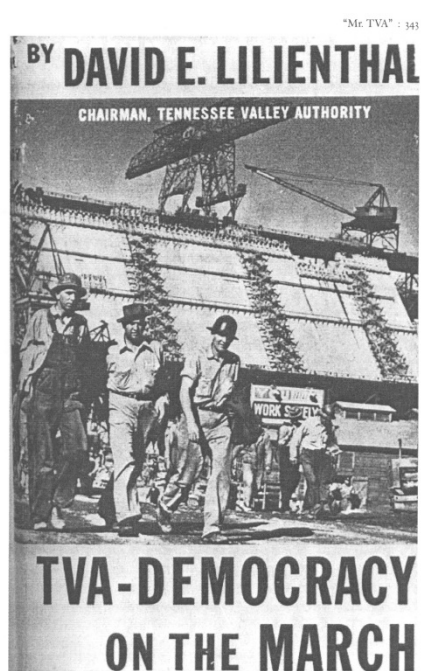


Figure 3.4: The TVA ideology is strikingly visualised on the cover page of this book by its first president.

Source: Ekbladh, “Mr. TVA.”

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the TVA became emblematic of the power of the American democracy. In the words of Arthur Schlesinger Jr.:

“(n)o other people in the world approach the Americans in the mastery of the new magic of science and technology. Our engineers can transform arid plains or poverty-stricken river valleys into wonderlands of vegetation and power... The Tennessee Valley Authority is a weapon which, if properly employed, might outbid all the social ruthlessness of the communists for the support of the peoples of Asia.”<sup>143</sup>

The spreading of the gospel of their technology, that had the ‘divine power’ to produce ‘wonderlands of vegetation and power’ was evidently also a major strategy of the United States in establishing post-World War II cultural hegemony.

### 3.10 Conclusion.

What makes the study of American influence in the agricultural knowledge systems of white South African farmers historically significant is that it underscores that the

<sup>142</sup> (n/a) “Hoe Amerika sy Bronne Beskerm: Nuttige Opbouingswerk: Valleie op ons Eie Land se Bodem,” *LW* (18 July 1945): 21, 23.

<sup>143</sup> D. Ekbladh, “‘Mr. TVA’: Grass-Roots Development. David Lilienthal, and the Rise and Fall of the Tennessee Valley Authority as a Symbol for U.S. Overseas Development, 1933- 1973.” *Diplomatic History* 26 (Summer 2002).



point of gravity in the global nexus of knowledge, both scientific and cultural began to shift with increasing acceleration towards the United States of America. The goal of this chapter was not to assess the impact of the Americanisation of agriculture on the environment *per se*, but rather to explore what the Americanisation entailed. Joachim Radkau succinctly binds the two concepts together in his book on *Nature and Power* (2008):

“Americanisation has not been successful on a global scale – nor could it be, for ecological reasons alone. Global disparities have become greater than ever before, and it appears that the gap has widened precisely as a result of the increasing interconnectedness of the world.”<sup>144</sup>

In this chapter it has been shown that agriculture in general, and soil conservation in particular, were undeniably affected by the growing dominance of America – and because of what was seen as historical and ecological similarities, the Union was fertile ground for American ideas. Although South African farming was perceived as more primitive than international agriculture, it was believed that through soil conservation strategies, based on American examples shaped to South African needs, a stable production standard for the future would be ensured.<sup>145</sup> Agriculture, especially the role of soil in agriculture, was arguably the aspect of American influence that was the most pertinent in this era (along with the American South that was partially drawn upon for inspiration for the racial questions in South Africa by prominent politicians such as J.B.M. Hertzog, prime minister, Paul Sauer, prominent Nationalist politician and policy maker, as well as D.F. Malan, who became apartheid’s first prime minister).<sup>146</sup> However, its influence was neither all-encompassing nor unquestioned. Indeed, in an article already published in May 1931 by the widely circulated *Huisgenoot*, “Welvaart in die Verenigde State,” [*Prosperity in the United States*], economist C.G.W. Schumann declared that South Africa had “gone too far” in the direction of Americanisation.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Radkau, *Nature and Power*, 260.

<sup>145</sup> (n/a) “Beleid vir Boerdery in die O.V.S. en Noord-Kaapland,” *LW* (20 August 1947): 59.

<sup>146</sup> H. Giliomee, *Die Afrikaners: 'n Biografie* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2004): 252, 256.

<sup>147</sup> C.G.W. Schumann, “Welvaart in die Verenigde State,” *Die Huisgenoot* (22 Mei 1931): 25.

It was also shown that while the influence of American ideas on soil conservation may have been entrenched with the Dust Bowl, it also predated the Dust Bowl.<sup>148</sup> This is mainly the case in science and legislation of soil conservation, although American influence in agriculture was not exclusive to soil conservation. In 1929, the extension officers for instance, looked towards American published handbooks on extension to help the young and inexperienced service until South African sources were created.<sup>149</sup> Farmer's co-operatives, which played a significant role in keeping farming viable in the Union, were also established along American lines.<sup>150</sup> The most lasting spheres of influence were probably through the Soil Conservation Act of 1946, and the links between agricultural science, mechanisation, progress and wealth with America. In this equation, Nature became a resource to be carefully but productively used, with "good business sense."

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<sup>148</sup> A point also made by Sarah Phillips in Phillips, "Dryland Agriculture and Soil Erosion in the United States and South Africa 1900-1950."

<sup>149</sup> "Distriks Uitbreidingsbeampes Kursusse en Konferensie Gehou te Grootfontein, Middelburg, K.P." May 1929, 16.

<sup>150</sup> SANA A 34/4 Memorandum J.C Kemp to Dr Geldenhuys, 19 November 1929, 10.

## CHAPTER 4

### “To kill the locusts, not the farmers”: Officials, Farmers and the Plagues of Pharaoh, c. 1920 -1950<sup>1</sup>

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#### 4.1 Introduction.

Locust plagues are not the only, nor even the worst, agricultural pest in South Africa. Other insects that annually plagued farmers, and do so unto today, included the “mieliestamrusper”, the commando worm, the codling moth and many such creatures that thrived in the habitats created by commercial agriculture.<sup>2</sup> None of these, however, invoked the visceral reaction, elicited such strong and often highly personal debate and had such cultural resonance, as the locust plagues. Since 1910, every six or seven years of great swarming activity have alternated with quieter times of about equal duration.<sup>3</sup> For the generation from 1920 to 1950, locust infestations became sites of public debate which went beyond the plague itself.

Six distinct but overlapping themes are evident during severe locust infestations in the Union. They range from the explicit scientific and political to the more ephemeral and personal themes of religious and racial identity.

#### 4.2 The locusts and grasshoppers of South Africa.

The history of locusts as an agricultural pest will help clarify the political and cultural debates catalysed by a season of locust outbreaks. Locusts evolved separately from grasshoppers. In Afrikaans, however, both locusts and grasshoppers are mostly referred to as *sprinkane*. Where the distinction is important, locusts are called *treksprinkane* (migrating *sprinkane*) and grasshoppers, *veldsprinkane* (field

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<sup>1</sup> The title quote comes from “...om al die sprinkane dood te maak, maar nie om die boer uit te roei nie”, (n/a) “Bevegting van Sprinkane: De Aar Boerevereniging,” *LW* (30 January 1924): 1011.

<sup>2</sup> Other historians who have discussed the dimension of knowledge exchange within entomology and other agriculture related sciences include K. Brown, “Political Entomology: the Insectile Challenge to Agricultural Development in the Cape Colony, 1895-1910.” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29 (June 2003): 529-449; W. Beinart, Soil Erosion, Conservationism and Ideas about Development: A Southern African Exploration, 1900-1960.” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 11 (October 1984): 52-83.

<sup>3</sup> D.H. Botha and A. Lea, “Do Brown Locust Plague Periods come in Cycles?” Reprinted from *Farming in South Africa*, (1970), 387, Pamphlet sourced from ARC-PPI): 1.

*sprinkane*). Both belong to the order Orthoptera, and the family Acrididae.<sup>4</sup> There are thousands of grasshopper species worldwide but only about 12 to 15 species of locusts, of which four can be found in South Africa.<sup>5</sup> The brown locust, (*Locustana pardalina*) (Walker)<sup>6</sup> is endemic to the Karoo and the red locust (*Nomadacris septemfasciata*) (Serville) frequently ravages the eastern coastal region of South Africa. During severe outbreaks, both these species can wreak havoc over the larger part of South Africa, including most of the western interior to the central Free State and the eastern interior up to the escarpment. Two other species, the desert locust (*Schistocerca gregaria*) (Forskål) and the migratory locust (*Locusta migratoria*) (Linnaeus) are more infrequent visitors.

The life-cycle of the locust and grasshopper can be summarised as follows: The first instar nymph is small, with a large head and no wings. During the first five moults, the insects grow larger with larger wing pads, and are known in South African English as well as Afrikaans as *voetgangers* ('pedestrians'; British: hoppers). It is at their hopper stage that locusts are more easily destroyed. The fifth instar nymph moults into a fully winged adult. For the first three days the adult locust or grasshopper is not sexually mature and cannot fly. It is this period during which most of the damage to crops and fields is caused, because the grasshopper or locust consumes the most food in this time. This is mainly due to the high energy expenditure of the grasshopper/locust for the developing wing muscles and the hardening of the exoskeleton. Most of the flight takes place in the first ten days after the wing muscles developed, the sexually mature locust or hopper then completing the lifecycle through mating and oviposition.<sup>7</sup>

The main difference between grasshoppers and locusts is that locusts have the behavioural predisposition to aggregate and form swarms. When they reach adulthood, they fly in swarms of thousands during the day. It is also this characteristic

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<sup>4</sup> Notes prepared by C.S. Bazelet, Conservation, Orthopterist, University of Stellenbosch. Based on R.F. Chapman, *Biology of Locusts* (The Institute of Biology's Studies in Biology 71, Southampton: The Camelot Press, 1976).

<sup>5</sup> P.W.J. Roux, "Environmental Impact of Acridicides in the Karoo", (MSc thesis, University of the Orange Free State, Bloemfontein 1998), 1.

<sup>6</sup> This name in brackets after the scientific name of the insect refers to the person who first named it. It is standard practice to quote it at first mention.

<sup>7</sup> Notes prepared by Bazelet.

of locusts that, for the purposes of this chapter, is the most interesting part, namely their transformation from the solitary phase to the gregarious phase. In short, it means a change from a visually unimpressive solitary insect that lives in scattered formation, “like an innocent little grasshopper,”<sup>8</sup> and causes relatively little harm, to voracious swarms that can ravage whole farms.

The discovery of these different phases was made almost simultaneously by South African entomologist J.C. Faure and the Russian, B. Uvarov.<sup>9</sup> All locusts can exist in both solitary and gregarious forms, as well as transient forms in between. There are some physical differences between a locust in the solitary phase and a locust in the gregarious phase, most notably in colouring (solitary nymphs are uniform in colouration, depending on their environment, whereas gregarious nymphs are strikingly coloured, not needing the protection of camouflage).<sup>10</sup> Locusts are not born gregarious; any locust can become either gregarious or solitary, even two individuals hatching from eggs in the same pod. The most important factor in locusts’ becoming gregarious is the social interactions during the lifespan of the nymph, which becomes gregarious through contact with other nymphs. This contact is fostered indirectly by environmental factors such as warmth and food availability. The implications of this are that when abundant food is available, the environment will be more uniform and nymphs be more scattered. The reverse is also true, if there is too little food, the nymphs will not come into contact with one another. Mixed Karroo and shrub land provide the ideal environment for the gregarisation of locusts, where there are patches of green vegetation amongst an otherwise barren landscape.<sup>11</sup> When locusts start becoming gregarious, a gregarisation pheromone is released. This then alters certain brain cells, so that the whole nature and appearance of the locusts during the hopper instars begin to change in the direction of the swarm phase.<sup>12</sup> Other factors that play a role in the gregarisation of locusts include the number of insects in the

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<sup>8</sup> “soos ‘n onskuldige sprinkaantjie.”

D.H. Botha, “Locusts and their Control in South Africa,” (Reprinted from *Farming in South Africa* 8-1969, 383, Pamphlet from ARC-PPI), 2.

<sup>9</sup> With both drawing on the work of the other. See J.C. Faure, “The Life-History of the Brown Locust/Die Lewensgeskiedenis van die Bruin Sprinkhaan” *T.U.C Bulletin* 4 (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1923).

<sup>10</sup> SANA CEN/833 L 407: O.C. Locust Administration to the Magistrate, Vryburg, 24 February 1923.

<sup>11</sup> Notes prepared by Bazelet.

<sup>12</sup> D.H. Botha, “Locusts – and their Control in South Africa: Life Cycle of the Brown Locust (Continued),” (Reprinted from *Farming in South Africa* January 1970 382, Pamphlet sourced from ARC-PPI), 2.

affected area, the degree of interaction between the insects, climatic conditions such as rainfall and humidity and to a lesser extent the phase of the locust parent.<sup>13</sup>

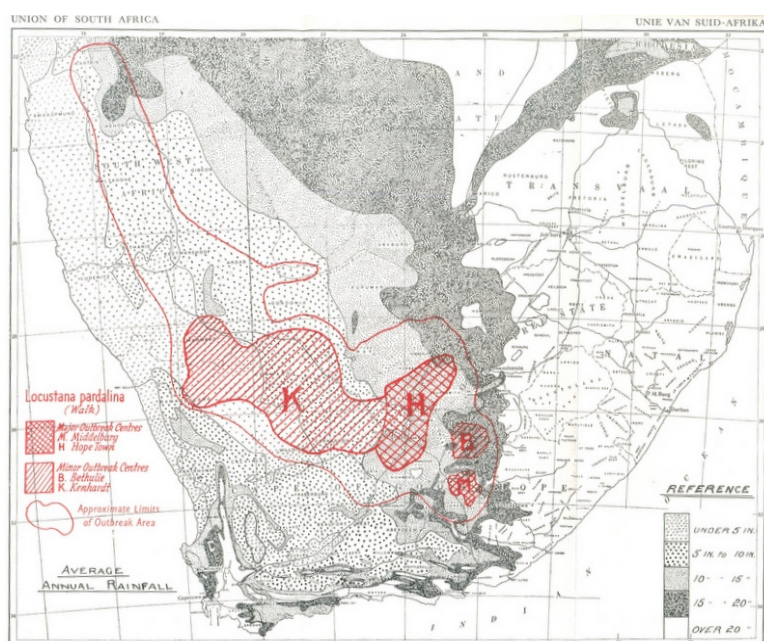


Figure 4.1 Map showing the major outbreak areas of the brown locust, part of which falls in the south western Free State. Source: J.C. Faure, The Life-History of the Brown Locust. T.U.C. Bulletin 4 (Pretoria 1923).

Solitary phase locusts are found all over southern Africa, but not all parts of their natural distribution area are suitable for the transformation from the solitary to the gregarious phase. The parts suitable to these transformations, such as parts of the Western Free State, are called “outbreak areas” (*uitbreekwyke*).<sup>14</sup> Brown

locust plague cycles have their origin within the 100 000 square mile outbreak region of the species – which consists mainly of Karroo-type veld with a mixture of predominantly short grasses and bushes.<sup>15</sup> If the locusts are not attacked and killed within the outbreak region swarms of adults are likely to emigrate and breed over a much larger area causing great devastation and serious damage to crops in the so-called invasion area. These outbreaks occurring in outbreak regions are preceded by an increase in numbers of solitary phase locusts locally known as the “*opbouers*” (“up-builders”). The outbreaks are succeeded a generation later by the true swarm phase locusts.<sup>16</sup> The dominant periodicity of brown locusts in gregarious phase is 17.3 (three years in seventeen-year cycles).<sup>17</sup> The cyclical nature of locust outbreaks complicates a sustained effort of

<sup>13</sup> Notes prepared by Bazelet.

<sup>14</sup> Botha, “Locusts – and their Control in South Africa: Life Cycle of the Brown Locust (Continued),” 2.

<sup>15</sup> Botha, “Locusts and Their Control in South Africa,” 1.

<sup>16</sup> Botha, “Locusts – and their Control in South Africa: Life Cycle of the Brown Locust (Continued),” 2.

<sup>17</sup> M.C. Todd & R. Washington & R.A. Cheke and D. Kniveton, “Brown Locust Outbreaks and Climate Variability in Southern Africa,” *Journal of Applied Ecology* 39 (2002): 32.

control, as experts come and go, and it is difficult to get bureaucratic machinery functioning at such short notice.<sup>18</sup> The suddenness with which a swarm can break out influenced the farmers' attitude towards the insect, especially since before the publication of the phase theory this unexplained phenomena led to elaborate myths of why locust swarms suddenly appear or disappear (at the time, gregarious locusts and solitary locusts were thought of as distinct species).<sup>19</sup> The periodicity also led to the conclusion that locusts do best in good seasons that follow upon great droughts.<sup>20</sup> This made the locust scourge seem even worse for white farmers, coming just after farmers were relieved from great drought.<sup>21</sup> Although some elements of the locusts-follow-drought theory are still thought applicable today, it is generally accepted that it only substantiated in the case of early summer droughts.<sup>22</sup>

During the period under discussion (c.1920-1950) there were three major locust outbreaks in the Union, the first being 1922 to 1926, when the brown locust invaded most of the western and central interior,<sup>23</sup> reaching its peak in 1923/24, with the hatching of hoppers reported in 46 districts in the Cape, 29 in the Free State and 15 in Transvaal.<sup>24</sup> The next big outbreak was from 1933 to 1936, when there was an enormous outbreak not only of the red locust (causing the most damage during this cycle), but also of the brown locust as well as the desert locust.<sup>25</sup> There was also an infestation of the migratory locust, the latter coming in the form of swarms from Namibia and Botswana,<sup>26</sup> and moved rapidly eastwards across the Karoo covering as

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<sup>18</sup> Botha and A. Lea, "Do Brown Locust Plague Periods come in Cycles?" 4.

<sup>19</sup> Notes prepared by Bazelet.

<sup>20</sup> (n/a) "Vernietiging van Sprinkane: Beknopte Inhoud van die Vereistes en Aanbevelings," *LW* (11 April 1923): 1201.

<sup>21</sup> This is an interesting example of how the same reality can be perceived differently depending on culture and modes of production. Faure recounts how the San were of the opinion that a mighty sorcerer, somewhere in the north, now and then rolls away a big rock from the mouth of what must have been a deep well, and that the locusts bubbled forth like from a fount, providing food for the people. [ "...van mening was dat 'n magtige towenaar, êrens ver in die noorde, nou en dan 'n klip weggerol het van die mond van 'n seker diep put, en dat die sprinkane dan in groot menigte uitgeborrel he tom as voedsel te dien vir die mense." ] J.C. Faure, "Die Bruin Sprinkaan," *LW* (31 October 1923): 579.

<sup>22</sup> Botha and Lea, "Do Brown Locust Plague Periods come in Cycles?" 3.

<sup>23</sup> R.H. Williams, "Sprinkaanuitroeing: Vooruitgangsrapport," *LW* (28 March 1923):1145; J.C Faure, "Die bruinsprinkaan" *LW* (7 November 1923): 627.

<sup>24</sup> F.E. Geldenhuys, "Die Aanstormende Sprinkaanvyand," *LW* (24 October 1923): 551.

<sup>25</sup> D. Brown, "Obituary: Henry Arnold Francis Lea (1907-1989)" *Journal of the Entomological Society of Southern Africa* 54 (1991): 102.

<sup>26</sup> C. du Plessis, "Voorkoms van Bruin en Rooisprinkaan in Unie gedurende die Seisoen 1934-35," *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika*, (1935): 10; Brown, "Obituary,"102; D.H. Botha "Locusts and Their Control

many as 150 miles a day.<sup>27</sup> The third one was during 1946/47, again of the brown locust.<sup>28</sup>

### 4.3 The destruction of locusts.

Locust destruction – both what they destroy and how they are destroyed, were one of the major preoccupations of farmers in the 1920s and 1930s, coupled with related problems ranging from drought to labour. The brown locust, which is perhaps economically the most important species, feeds mainly on grass species, putting staple foods such as maize and wheat at risk. The swarms can fly over 100 kilometres and eat their own weight in food a day, which put the summer grain crops in the Free State in danger.<sup>29</sup> It was reported that, during bad infestations, locusts even ate curtains and clothes<sup>30</sup> and when there is no green food available, they “attack trees and even eat the bark off them.”<sup>31</sup> One can almost believe one parliamentarian when he described the locust’s life mission during a parliamentary debate in February 1924:

“He comes out of a sod, and the first thing he does is, he rubs his eyes and bows before Providence and then he takes an oath and says: ‘I promise faithfully to destroy everything that comes in my way.’”<sup>32</sup>

The destruction wrought by a swarm trekking over a field was portrayed as a bizarre, visually grotesque sight. In 1921, at the commencement of what would become the greatest locust outbreak experienced by whites in southern Africa up to that time, the *Landbouweekblad* felt compelled to describe it to the readers in the Boland, so that they could have more empathy with their kinsmen from the interior:

“I have seen how farmers, in the late afternoon, watch the horizon with great joy, because in the distance they see a few clouds rising, and now they will get

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in South Africa (Part III)” (Reprinted from *Farming in South Africa*, 389, 1969, Pamphlet sourced from ARC-PPI), 1.

<sup>27</sup> Botha, “Locusts and Their Control in South Africa (Part III),” 1.

<sup>28</sup> Brown, “Obituary,” 105.

<sup>29</sup> A. Thackrah, “The Viability of a Locust Early Warning System,” *Proceedings of the ARC-ISCW Wise Land Use Symposium* (26 & 27 October 1995, ARC-ISCW, Private Bag X79, Pretoria 0001), 73.

<sup>30</sup> J.C. Faure, “Die Bruin Sprinkaan,” *LW* (28 November 1923): 740.

<sup>31</sup> SANA CEN/ 662 OB 7/455/212: Botha, South African Police, Zoutpansdrift to District Commandant, Boshof, c.29 November 1921.

<sup>32</sup> “Hy kom uit die kluit en die eerste ding is: hy veeg sy oë uit en dan buig hy voor die voorsienigheid en dan maak hy ‘n eed en sê: ‘ek sweer getrou om alles te verniel wat voor my kom.’” HANSARD (20 February 1924): 347.



rain after all, today or tomorrow. And they are yearning after the rain, because it is so bitterly dry, and their crops are dry and their veld is so scarce and their water so little, so that they will suffer great damages of their stock and crops if it does not rain soon. Now they are filled with new hope and joy... No, then bitter disappointment, if not despair, are taking hold of them, because one of the sons with better vision says that it looks so strange to him, as if it can be locusts... Who can fathom the bitter disappointment of the farmer? The next day, everything he had left in terms of grass and crops were devoured and destroyed, and the scourge moved on to the next farm to destroy everything there as well...”<sup>33</sup>

Thus a locust swarm meant more to farmers than the loss of vegetation or money. The words used are emotional – “hope and joy”, “bitter disappointment”, “yearning” and “despair”. Locusts served as a reminder of being exposed to the elements and lacking control over them. The comparison of an approaching locust swarm with storm clouds was not that exaggerated either, also being made by entomologists like J.C. Faure and other farmers alike.<sup>34</sup> The anguish caused by the mere imminence of such a plague is evident in the following extract from a 1923 letter written by the chairperson of the Leeuwdoorn Farmers’ Association (near Vryburg) to the Chief of the Locust Division:

“...not alone is hatching out general but ... immense swarms are now laying. The resultant swarms unless adequately dealt with will reach us at the most critical time in March, destroy all crops, grass food for stock & on top of our three previous bad years & serious drought prevailing up to this month the position in the district will be Simply Awful. I am to urge you, & more than urge, to beg

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<sup>33</sup> “Ek het gesien dat boere im die agtermiddag met groot vreugde na die horsion staan en kyk, omdat hulle daar ver ’n paar wolke sien oprys, en nou sal hul wel vannag of more reen (sic) kry. En hulle kyk tog al so smagtend na reen (sic) uit want dit is al so bitter droog, en hulle gesaaide is al amper verdroog, hulle veld is al skaars en water op of so min, sodat hulle groot skade sal ly aan vee en gesaaides indien dit nie gou reen nie. Nou is hulle egter met nuwe hoop en blydschap vervul! ... Nee, die bittere teleurstelling, indien nie wanhoop nie, neem van hulle besit, want een van die seuns met ’n skerper uitsig sê: Pa, maar hoe lyk dit dan vir my so snaaks, asof dit sprinkhane (sic) kan wees... Wie kan hom die bittere teleurstelling van die boer voorstel. Die volgende dag is al wat hy nog besit het aan gesaaide en gras, afgevrete en verwoes, en die wreedards is op weg na die volgende plaas om daar ook alles te vernietig.” Bolander, “Die Sprinkhaanplaag. (sic) Hoe dit Lyk. Van waar dit kom. Bestryding daarvan,” *LW* (30 November, 1921): 767.

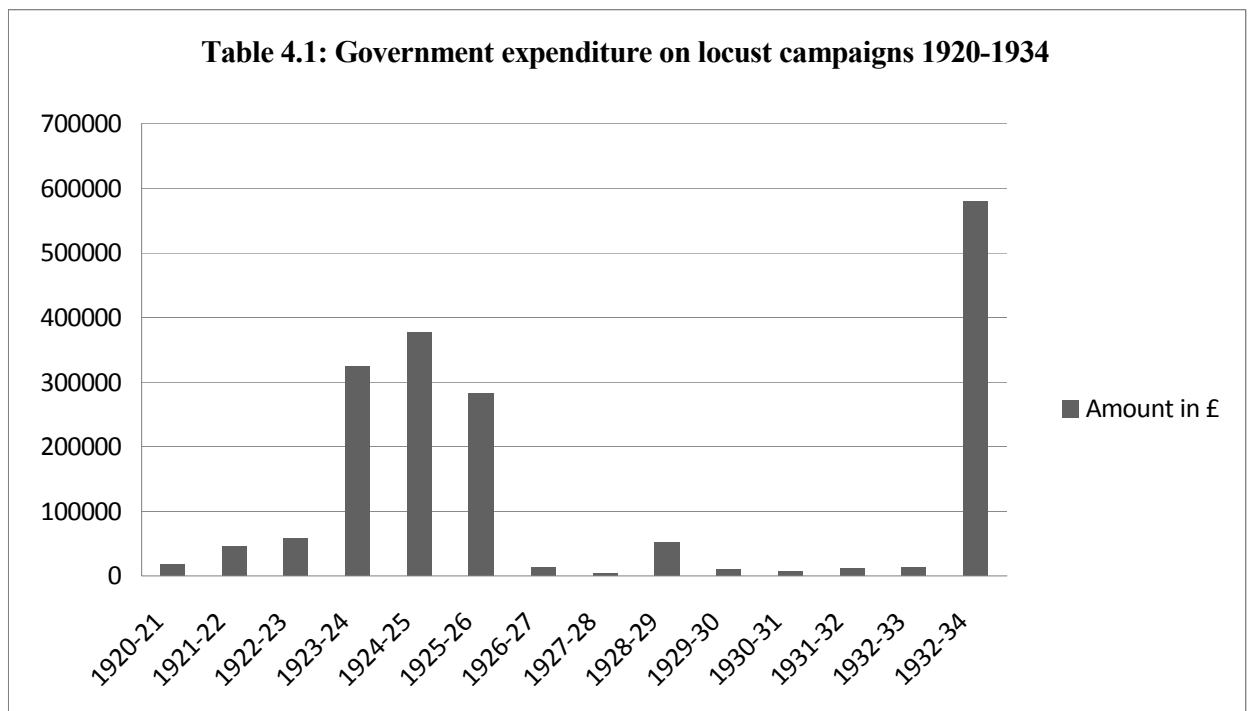
<sup>34</sup> J.C. Faure, “Die Bruin Sprinkaan,” *LW* (31 October 1923): 579.

you, to use every possible endeavour & spare no expense to save us from what would prove absolute ruin to the majority of the farmers here.”<sup>35</sup>

Locust plagues could mean ruin to farmers, and could cause local food shortages.<sup>36</sup> With a predilection for grass, locusts could destroy grazing, which lead to the starvation of stock, and subsequent dwindling of meat supply. Swarming locusts also devoured crops such as wheat and maize. In 1924, 75 per cent of the harvest in the Orange Free State was destroyed by locusts.<sup>37</sup>

The following table (Table 4.1) illustrates the vast expenses incurred during the periods where many swarms indeed escaped. One can clearly distinguish the cycles of 1922-1926 and 1933-35. Table 4.2 shows the correlation between number of swarms killed and expenditure during the 1922-1926 outbreak.

Table 4.1 Government expenditure on anti-locust campaigns<sup>38</sup>



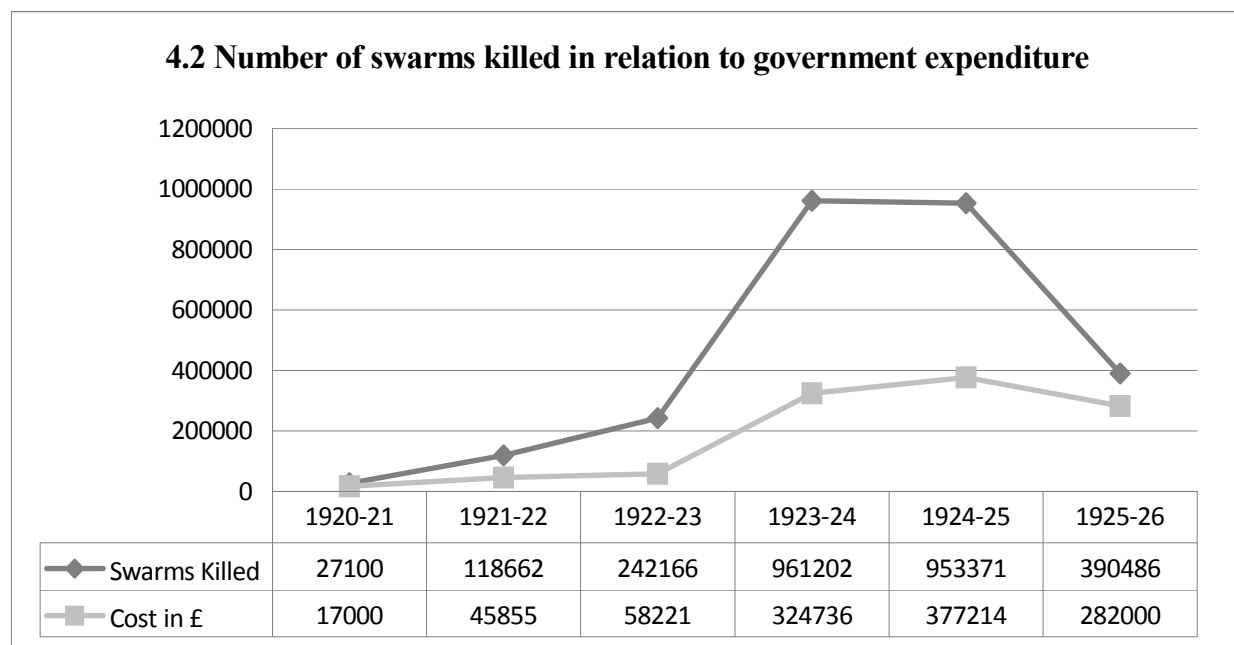
<sup>35</sup> SANA CEN/833 L/ 407: W.H Killington to The Chief Locust Division, 30 January 1923.

<sup>36</sup> Not that all farmers cursed the locust; a small percentage of pastoral farmers welcomed them, arguing that the locusts eats *steekgras*, a type of grass that gets stuck in sheep wool and is almost impossible to remove, spoiling the wool. HANSARD (20 February 1924): 365.

<sup>37</sup> J. Nöllkamper, “Bevegting van Sprinkane: Doornpan, Distrik Bloemfontein,” *LW* (6 February 1924): 1045.

<sup>38</sup> Based on *Report of the Proceedings of the Inter-State Locust Conference 30 July to 3 August 1934*, (Pietermaritzburg: The Natal Witness, 1935), 37.

Table 4.2 Brown locust swarms killed in relation to government expenditure 1920-1926<sup>39</sup>



#### 4.4 The science of destruction.

There was no simple correspondence between money spent and locusts killed. It also depended heavily on environmental factors. Locusts have two major natural enemies in South Africa, the locust fly (*Wohlfahrtia pachytyli*) (Walker), a facultative parasite<sup>40</sup> of locusts and predator of locust egg pods<sup>41</sup> as well as several kinds of birds, sometimes called locust birds or *sprinkaanvoëls*.<sup>42</sup> The latter played a major role in the eradication of brown locusts in 1934.<sup>43</sup>

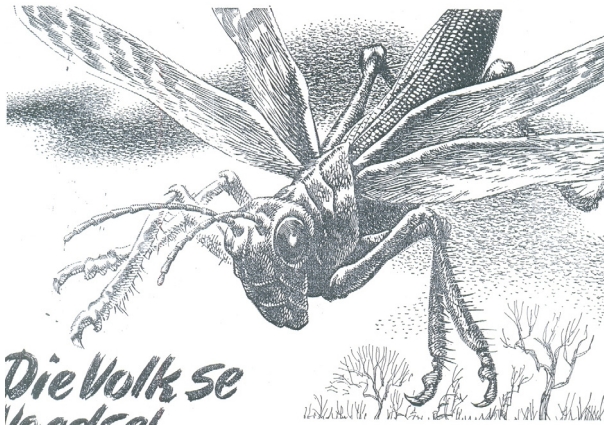
<sup>39</sup> J.T Potgieter, *A Contribution to the Biology of the Brown Swarm Locust* Science Bulletin 82, Stellenbosch-Elsenburg College of Agriculture of the University of Stellenbosch Scientific Bulletin 6, (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1929): 5.

<sup>40</sup> An organism that lives independent of a host but may occasionally be parasitic under certain conditions. (<http://www.biology-online.org/dictionary/Facultativeparasite>) (Accessed 9 October 2008).

<sup>41</sup> R.E. Price and H.D. Brown, "The status of the locust fly, *Wohlfahrtia pachytyli* (Diptera : Sarcophagidae), in the Karoo and the impact of locust control operations on its abundance," *African Entomology* 14 (September 2006):35.

<sup>42</sup> J.C. Faure, "Klein en ander Sprinkaanvoëls," *LW* (19 March 1924): 1281.

<sup>43</sup> C. du Plessis, "Voorkoms van Bruin en Rooisprinkaan in Unie gedurende die Seisoen 1934-35," *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (1935):11.



## Die Volk se Voedsel word Bedreig!

Die ongekende **SPRINKAAN-INVAL** wat Suid-Afrika se voedsel-voorraad bedreig, sal U voorraad Multi-Benhex verhoog

Die huidige uitbrek van sprinkane is die ergste in die afgelope 25 jaar. Vier-en-dertig distrikte is reeds deur voëtgangers binnegetrek en as hulle die vlek-stadium bereik, dan sal die gewas wat versuig word, aanster-  
lik gester wees.

\* BHC Benathre Poer is die doeltreffendste middel teen sprinkane—dit vernietig hulle swaiger en meer gewas as enige ander insek-vergift. Dit is, daarenteen, onskadelik vir mens en dier.

Suid-Afrika is heeltemal afhanklik van KOP vir BHC om sprinkane uit te roei.

Die benodigde van die Sprinkaan-afdeling moet onmiddellik bevestig word. Meer as 300 ton BHC Benathre Poer is alreeds na die sprinkaan-distrikte gestuur—genoeg BHC om 40,000,000 gelling dip-  
mengsel te maak. Dit beteken dat voorrade Multi-Benhex wat gereël was vir boere om wondraai en  
hommers te fleuri, gekommandeer was, en selfs meer mag nog nodig wees. As die sprinkane nie dadelik  
uitgeroei word nie, dan sal hulle seker soveel £30,000,000 se ooste bedreig.

Die fabriek het sy opbrengs aansienlik vermeerder en werk tans 24 uur per dag... as u straks moet wag op u  
voorraad BHC-dipstowe en spuitstowe, dan sal u verstaan dat dit aan die nasionale noodtoestand  
is wye ik.

**WANTOENRIEMING:** 'n Kwota BHC is vir landbou-opsiedende opny geëit en ons het 'n streng regerings  
toetsstelsel ingevoer wat sal verseker dat alle belange 'n ewerdige goddelike van ons bevestigde voorrade  
Multi-Benhex sal ontvang. Sodra hierdie ernstige gevaar van sprinkane uit die weg geruim is en wanneer  
produksie weer langs normale kanale gevoer word, dan sal ons weer eens in staat wees om in al die behoeftes  
van KOP-Benhex Hexachloried in sy menigvuldige vorme te voorsien.

verdig deur KLIPFONTEIN ORGANIESE PRODUKTE-KORPORASIE, Pk. CHLOORKOP, oor JOHANNESBURG, TRANSVAAL

**KOP se BENSEEN-  
HEXACHLORIED-  
insektvergifte behels  
MULTI-BENHEX  
DUBBLE-BENHEX  
DETHEX BEHEX  
Dip- en Spuitstowe  
BEXADUST-  
Landboupoer  
PARADEX  
huishoudelike spuitmiddels**

Figure 4.2 An advertisement for BHC. Note the war metaphor, with the bigger-than-life locust and the heading that reads: *The folk's food is threatened!*  
Source: *Die Landbouweekblad*, (6 December 1950): 37.

Farmers and scientists were well aware of these natural enemies, and often called upon the state to fund projects whereby the population numbers of natural enemies such as the locust fly or fungi could be artificially increased.<sup>44</sup> In the 1920's, however, the use of fungus was gradually seen as something with “imaginary results” – and this was confirmed by overseas experience.<sup>45</sup>

Other methods utilised included mechanically combating locusts through repellent smoke or burning the fields to destroy the pods. Some trapped locusts, crushed them or ploughed the young *voëtgangers* into the fields,<sup>46</sup> or poisoned the *voëtgangers* with sheep or cattle dip.

Yet another way was suffocating them with soap water or paraffin oil.<sup>47</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s, however, the most frequently used and most notorious way of fighting locusts was through the application of sodium arsenide, either by mixing it with manure or grass and using it as a bait, or by direct spraying. The problem with sodium arsenide was its high toxicity to the environment. It would scourge plants, kill or seriously weaken livestock, and, in addition “it has a painful corrosive effect on the hands of the

<sup>44</sup> *Report of Proceeding at Inter-Colonial Veterinary Conference on Animal Diseases in Southern Africa held at Cape Town 25-31 May 1904* (Cape Town: Government Printer, 1904):73.

<sup>45</sup> SANA CEN 616/L20: Chief: Division of Entomology to E. Prior, 6 November 1923. Also see C.P. Lounsbury, “The Pioneer Period of Economic Entomology in South Africa” *The Journal of the Entomological Society of Southern Africa* II, (30 October 1939): 26.

<sup>46</sup> Bolander, “Die Sprinkaanplaag. Hoe dit Lyk. Van waar dit kom. Bestryding daarvan,” *LW* (30 November, 1921): 767; SANA CEN/662 E 5659 James S. Munro to Mr Government Entomologist, 21 November 1921; Lounsbury, “The Pioneer Period,” 24.

<sup>47</sup> (n/a) “Maak die Sprinkaan dood,” *LW* (7 November 1923): 623-625.

workers distributing it.”<sup>48</sup> The dusting and spraying with arsenide of soda was discontinued as official government scheme in 1935, and baiting was adopted as the standard measure for locust control.<sup>49</sup> After the Second World War, the use of synthetic insecticides proliferated, including highly toxic and destructive organochlorine compounds like DDT<sup>50</sup> and BHC (the latter being called “even deadlier to locusts than arsenic, and yet ... a safer means”).<sup>51</sup> The biology of the locust meant that it was impossible to drive them to extinction (extinction as a goal in itself not really being widely questioned at the time).<sup>52</sup> This was partly on account of the technology not yet being sophisticated enough and also because locusts do not heed political borders, locust habitat covering wide swathes of Southern Africa. The exchange of knowledge and providing of intelligence between states was therefore a pressing concern amongst government officials and entomologists.<sup>53</sup>

Two countries the Union were particularly involved in with regards to locust eradication were the Bechuanaland Protectorate (Botswana) and South West Africa (Namibia). Before the phase-theory, the general perception was that locust swarms came from the Kalahari desert. Although not all swarms originated there, the sparse human population meant that incipient swarming in this region was infrequently noticed and reported on. Therefore, locust officers were sent to patrol the area on camel-back, to scout the area and speak to the indigenous people, asking for their cooperation. The blacks in Bechuanaland were thought “too independent” to enforce cooperation to report and destroy any locusts through legislation, but apparently they argued that, because the Union farmers were their main (cattle) market, they will do nothing to endanger that market.<sup>54</sup> Sometimes, localised conflict also arose around

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<sup>48</sup> A. Lea and M.C.A Nolte, *Laboratory Experiments on Poison Baits for the Brown and the Red Locust: 1937-38*, Locust Research Series 9, Science Bulletin 230 (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1940), 3.

<sup>49</sup> W.J de Wet, *Field Experiments in Baiting Fliers of the Brown Locust, with Notes on Physical Ecology*, Locust Research Series No 10, Science Bulletin No 31, (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1941).

<sup>50</sup> B. Smit, “Bestryding van Insektelepe” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika*, Maart 1952, p. 164.

<sup>51</sup> “Die gebruik van BHC het die stryd teen sprinkane wonderlik vergemaklik... Die BHC waarmee sprinkane nou bespuit word, is eintlik meer dodelik vir die sprinkaan as wat die arseen was, en tog is dit ‘n veiliger middel.” (n/a) “Sprinkaanplaag onder die Knie,” *LW* (29 November 1950): 3.

<sup>52</sup> J.C Faure, “Insektelepe van Sprinkane,” *LW* (26 March 1924): 1315.

<sup>53</sup> Karen Brown made a similar point with regards to entomology at the Cape 1895-1910. See K. Brown, “Political Entomology: the Insectile Challenge to Agricultural Development in the Cape Colony, 1895-1910.” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29 (June 2003): 529-449.

<sup>54</sup> (n/a) “Verslag van die Sprinkaanekspediesie” *LW*, (12 November 1924): 1224.

questions of whose responsibility it was to eradicate locust *voetgangers* and fliers on thinly populated land between South West Africa and South Africa.<sup>55</sup>

It seems that coordinating the locust eradication effort amongst colonial and Union officials and scientists proved much more difficult than sourcing intelligence from the chiefs. It was agreed that a proper intelligence system was important, with the various states warning one another of imminent outbreaks.<sup>56</sup> In 1929, a Pan-African Agricultural and Veterinary Conference was convened, and a resolution was passed that the desirability of an Interstate Locust Information Centre, to be headquartered in South Africa, must be explored.<sup>57</sup> Little was done, however, with officials arguing that direct communications would be more efficient.<sup>58</sup> By the following conference, in 1934, which was attended by the southern African countries, there was no such body in place. The Union officials felt that they have already dealt effectively with the brown locust plague and could do the same with the red locust if a similar research effort was made.<sup>59</sup> The way that the Union scientists and policy-makers insisted upon cooperation on South African terms was illustrative of a sense of South Africa's superiority to the colonies and protectorates. In any case, for further research into the red locust, they needed the cooperation of the other countries and wanted to reinvest in the idea of a locust bureau. A plea by General Kemp likened interstate cooperation in terms of locusts to a war-time pact, perhaps to convey the urgency of the matter through a military tenor:

“We have all attained a certain amount of success, but, Gentlemen, I think that you are all in entire agreement with me when I say that if we continue as in the past – more or less independently of each other - we can hardly hope for ultimate success. Experience has definitely taught us the impossibility, may I say futility, of dealing with the problem in this manner. My plea, therefore, today, is for joint action and for closer cooperation. Let us unite our efforts to deal with a common enemy.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> SANA CEN/818 L2I :“R.H.W. of the O.C.L.A. to Mr Cross,” 13 June 1934.

<sup>56</sup> *Report of the Proceedings of the Inter-State Locust Conference 30 July to 3 August 1934*, 8.

<sup>57</sup> *Pan-African Agricultural and Veterinary Conference, Pretoria, 1 August to 27 August 1929, Report of Proceedings*, 110.

<sup>58</sup> *Report of the Proceedings of the Inter-State Locust Conference 30 July to 3 August 1934*, 8.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

The idea to “nip future outbreaks in the bud” through a continental bureau was also brought forth at the International London Conference of 1934, imploring Africa-wide cooperation.<sup>61</sup> Although it was not most centrally located, its superior resources made the Union of South Africa the best place for such a bureau. Partly as



*Figure 4.3 The inscription on the back reads: “Field conference in Aberdeen district with field and technical staff. B.H.C: Much nicer and holier than the arsenic of yore.” Death by arsenide was slow, taking up to three days. Judging on the people present, which include entomologists like Faure and Du Plessis, the photo must have been taken in the 1940s.*  
*Source: ARC-PPI.*

result of the frequency of locust outbreaks in South Africa, it had the dubious privilege of being on the forefront of locust research. South African entomologists played a prominent role in the international anti-locust war that was mounted in Africa during the 1930s, at the instigation of the Imperial Institute of Entomology and supported by all the major colonial powers.<sup>62</sup> During the Second World War, a Union entomologist, Arnold Lea was also seconded by B.P. Uvarov, locust advisor to the British War Cabinet, from the South African Defence Force to the British Military Administration to fight locusts in the Middle East.<sup>63</sup>

The state was slow to support the entomologists because official policy first had to make a shift from a philosophy of combative control in reaction to swarming to preventative control, an option that became more practical once the phase theory became generally accepted. Beforehand, the whole of Southern Africa was seen as the “permanent zone,” making it difficult to scout for incipient swarms.<sup>64</sup> When the fact had been established that in comparison to the invasion area, there is a relatively small

<sup>61</sup> Brown, “Obituary,”103.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*,101.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>64</sup> *Pan-African Agricultural and Veterinary Conference, Pretoria, 1 August to 27 August 1929, Report of Proceedings* (Pretoria: The Government Printer, 1929):114 and (n/a) “Sprinkaanbestryding,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (November 1936): 509.

outbreak area, permanently inhabited by the phase *solitaria*; a policy of preventative control was suggested.<sup>65</sup>

That his department spent too little on research into locust eradication before the outbreak was one of the main reproaches against the Ministry of Sir Thomas Smartt early in the 1922-26 outbreak.<sup>66</sup> Smartt was the Minister of Agriculture until the 1924 election. Faure frequently petitioned for more money for scientific research on the brown locust, saying that it will save money in the long term.<sup>67</sup> In 1923, when the Transvaal University College (T.U.C.) (where Faure was lecturing) applied for government funding to help with locust research, the Secretary of Agriculture replied that he would suggest the T.U.C. should pay for their own investigations. The letter nevertheless, ‘expressed support’ for the continuing studies of Faure, stating that his studies were initially hampered when he worked for the government because he had to concentrate on suppression of the insect.<sup>68</sup> In 1926, however, Faure was paid by the government and offered a government vehicle for field trips to pursue locust research, especially encouraging research that focussed on the phase theory.<sup>69</sup>

Getting the government to accept the importance of science in combating locusts was one thing, relaying the information to farmers was another. As with soil erosion, the relationship between the expert and the farmer was often one of mutual distrust. C.P. Lounsbury, an American and the first state entomologist at the Cape of Good Hope, showed some irritation with the Afrikaner farmers’ distrust of state legislation and insistence on farming like “the fathers and the grandfathers.”<sup>70</sup> J.C. Faure’s opinion of farmers was a bit more tolerant, but he too was aware of a distrust in the expert:

“You get farmers who have no trust in experts – the doubting Thomases who are past praying for. Often it is the fault of the expert, but in most cases, in my opinion, it is due to the farmer’s lack of education. If a farmer has any

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<sup>65</sup> C. du Plessis, *The Incipient Outbreaks of the Brown Locust in 1937-38 with Special Reference to Biometrical Analysis*. Locust Research Series 6, Science Bulletin 209, (Pretoria, Government Printer 1939), 61.

<sup>66</sup> HANSARD (20 February 1924): 345 and HANSARD (21 February 1924): 379.

<sup>67</sup> J.C. Faure, “Die Bruin Sprinkaan,” *LW* (6 February 1924): 1047; (n/a) “Algemene Nuus: Sprinkaanuitroeing,” *LW* (11 June 1924): 83.

<sup>68</sup> SANA CEN/662: CPL to The Secretary for Agriculture re Locust Study: T.U.C proposal, 2 November 1923.

<sup>69</sup> SANA CEN/662 E 5656: I.B Pole Evans: Chief: Division of Botany, Horticulture and Entomology to J.C Faure, 16 January 1926.

<sup>70</sup> Lounsbury, “The Pioneer Period,” 21-22.



understanding of nature, with which he daily works, if he knows her major laws, then he will be more able to realise the value of scientific inquiry and then he will better believe the experts.”<sup>71</sup>

If Faure was not initially aware of the difficulties in relaying information to farmers, he was made so by the Secretary of Agriculture. Upon submitting a shortened version of his article on the life-history of the brown locust to be printed as a government pamphlet, the Acting Secretary of Agriculture wrote back saying that he wanted the leaflet to be “brief” and “snappy” as a certain class of farmer would already have read the (expensive) publication of the whole article in the *Agricultural Journal*. Initially, the article was submitted to the *Agricultural Journal* by Faure with the specific goal of informing farmers:

“As you are aware, farmers do not recognise the scattered phase of the locust as such, and when the scattered individuals begin to collect into swarms valuable opportunities for good work are missed. Instead of doing his best to kill the small scattered klompies [“groups”], the farmer leaves them in peace to multiply and give rise to swarms the next season.”<sup>72</sup>

The Secretary did not think, however, that farmers will take notice of it in the form of a shortened scientific article, saying that:

“If we published this resume the class of farmer whom we wish to read it would not take the trouble to do so. He would, however, take the trouble to read the leaflet containing a few concise statements in regard to the life history of the locusts.”<sup>73</sup>

The reworked and simplified article was also published as a series in the *Landbouweekblad* in 1923 and 1924.<sup>74</sup> It was also recommended that 4 000 extra copies of the pamphlet should be printed.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> “’n Mens kry boere wat glad geen vertrouwe in deskundiges stel nie – hulle is ongelowige Thomasse waar geen self aan te smere is nie. Baiemaal is dit die deskundige se skuld, maar in die meeste gevalle is dit mynsinsiens aan die boer se gebrek aan opvoeding toe te skrywe. As die boer enigins ’n begrip het van die natuur, wat hy dageliks mee werk, as hy haar groot wette min of meer ken, sal hy beter in staat wees om te besef wat die waarde is van wetenskaplik ondersoek en dan sal hy ook meer geloof stel in sy deskundiges.” J.C. Faure, “Landbou in ons Leerplan,” *LW* (28 April 1920): 1685.

<sup>72</sup> SANA CEN/662 E/5656 J.C Faure to The Secretary for Agriculture, 6 March, 192?

<sup>73</sup> SANA CEN 616/L20/7421 O.C Locust Administration to J.C Faure, 9 November 1923

<sup>74</sup> J.C. Faure, “Die Bruin Sprinkaan,” *LW* (24 October 1923); (31 October 1923); (7 November 1923); (16 January 1924); (6 February 1924); (26 March 1924); (19 March 1924).

<sup>75</sup> SANA CEN/818 L/20: Chief: Division of Entomology to The Editor: *Agricultural Journal*, 4 September 1923.

The relationship between farmers and experts was not always one of conflict. The entomologists often responded with interest to letters suggesting methods of control, and especially appreciated receiving samples, especially those that were alive and well preserved.<sup>76</sup> Suggestions by farmers and artisans were nonetheless regarded with suspicion when there was money involved. The Secretary for Agriculture in particular had little patience with these “alleged non-poisonous and effective means for destroying locusts,”<sup>77</sup> and he was backed by the minister (Smartt) who felt that “everyone who knocks at the door of the Agricultural Department comes with the extraordinary idea that any invention he has must be accepted by the Agricultural Department.”<sup>78</sup> This attitude of Smartt is, however, just a glimpse into the political ramifications of locust outbreaks in the first half of the twentieth century.

#### **4.5 The politics of destruction c. 1920 – 1936.**

During the first half of the twentieth century, locust outbreaks lay bare more than a few acres of lands; it also exposed some of the politics of the time – on national, government-citizen interaction level, as well as in the everyday politics in the affected communities themselves. At large, it was a question of who carries the ultimate responsibility for the control of this agricultural pest, and by implication, it also touched on issues of property and ownership rights. Furthermore, it was an expression of ideas about who had the authority over nature.

On a basic level, the locust outbreaks permeated official debate because it affected large parts of the (white) parties’ constituencies, and it was simply one of the most tangible crises of the time, making it an easy foil for political opportunism. Of all the outbreaks of the period, the most politically significant one is probably the 1922-26 brown locust outbreak. In 1920, the chief entomologist of the Union, C.P. Lounsbury, insisted in the *Landbouweekblad* that magistrates, police and farmers must not at any

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<sup>76</sup> SANA CEN/662 E/5659: James S. Munro to Mr Government Entomologist, 21 November 1921 and E 5630/ OB 7/455/212: Botha, South African Police, Zoutpansdrift to District Commandant, Boshof, c.29 November 1921; SANA CEN/18 L/20: A.S.A to U.S.A. 18 September 1923; Pretoria Magistrate “Locust Distruction (sic) – Spray Pumps”, 11 August 1923; O.C Locust Administration to Private Secretary for Minister of Agriculture, 15 August 1923; T. Burke to R.H Williams, “Re: Mechanical Locust Destroyer,” 3 August 1923; CPL to Secretary for Agriculture, “Flame Thrower”, 13 July 1923.

<sup>77</sup> SANA CEN/818 L/280: Acting Secretary for Agriculture to O.C. Locust Administration, 28 September 1923.

<sup>78</sup> HANSARD (20 February 1924): 362.

one moment tarry to report locusts in their constituency. He warned that a number of swarms of locusts might be forming without any notice being taken of them. Lounsbury believed that the insect could become abundant after the 1919 drought has been broken.<sup>79</sup> The phase theory has not become established knowledge yet, but it seems as if Lounsbury's intuition was right, only the outbreak started in all earnest a season later than he expected. Although the Secretary of Agriculture issued early warnings to farmers to be vigilant, and report the hatching out of *voetgangers*,<sup>80</sup> that particular season (1922/23) the locust invasion exceeded expectations not only in number of outbreaks, but also in the area affected- it overwhelmed the locust administration.<sup>81</sup> There was a shortage of pumps and poison<sup>82</sup> and, when the demand for poison reached 5 000-6 000 tins a day,<sup>83</sup> there was a world-wide shortage of arsenic<sup>84</sup> so angry questions of culpability arose.

Historically, one of the first political acts when a pest has a significant impact on a group of people is to establish measures of control, through codifying rules and regulations. The first act in Southern Africa to force farmers to report locust outbreaks on their farms was promulgated in 1906 in the Orange Free State.<sup>85</sup> After the Union in 1910, one of the first acts signed into existence was the "Act to prevent the introduction into and spread within the Union of Insect Pests, Plant Diseases and Bee Diseases and to regulate the importation into the Union of Exotic Animals"<sup>86</sup> (the official short name was Agricultural Pests Act, but it was known amongst farmers as the Locust Act). It was amended in 1922 by Article 20. The most controversial aspect of the Act was that it made the destruction of *voetgangers* compulsory for farmers or farm-owners on whose farms they hatched, with the government providing the poison and the pumps. If the farmer or farm-owner neglected to do so, he was held liable for the cost of government eradication campaigns. Furthermore, the Act stipulated that it was a civil offence to knowingly or unknowingly drive *voetgangers* to the land of a

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<sup>79</sup> (n/a) "Sprinkhane," *LW* (21 April 1920).

<sup>80</sup> P.J. du Toit, "Goggas: Waarskuwing vir Boere teen Sprinkhane," *LW* (30 November 1921):766.

<sup>81</sup> F.E. Geldenhuys, "Sprinkaanbevegting," *LW* (19 December 1923): 815.

<sup>82</sup> F.E. Geldenhuys, "Die Aanstormende Sprinkaanvyand," *LW* (24 October 1923): 551.

<sup>83</sup> (n/a) "Die Sprinkaan Posiesie," *LW* (19 December 1923): 819.

<sup>84</sup> HANSARD, (20 February 1924): 364.

<sup>85</sup> Roux, "Environmental Impact of Acridicides in the Karroo," 3.

<sup>86</sup> Statutes of the Union of South Africa 1910-1911, Act 11 of 1911, "Act to prevent the introduction into an spread within the Union of Insect Pests, Plant Diseases and Bee Diseases and to regulate the importation into the Union of Exotic Animals," 350.

neighbour, except where growing crops were threatened. If this was the situation, it needed to be proven that it was the case and that the locusts were only driven away and not killed as a last resort.<sup>87</sup> The reason given for these measures – of putting the onus for locust destruction on farmers – was that locust destruction was a national necessity, and that in most cases it could be handled better by the farm occupier than the government.<sup>88</sup> These articles, however, caused considerable dissent amongst farmers, dissent that maybe originated with the Act and the pests themselves, or, in some cases, it was symptomatic of pre-existing conditions.

Firstly, many farmers felt that through implementing the Locust Act, the government is shifting not only the liability, but also the blame for the severity of the outbreak to the farmers. The argument was that the farmers neglected to report *voetganger* outbreaks on their farms, and therefore larger than normal swarms could build up. This was apparently implied by one of the main officials of the Department of Agriculture, and, as the opposition in parliament stated, the farmers resented this shift in blame:

“The Department of Agriculture is guilty of criminal neglect with regards to preparations for the locust campaign. Unfortunately, one of the heads [of the department] said that it is the fault of the farmers for not reporting the outbreaks of locusts. I want to give you the assurance that the farmers of the *platteland* are really resenting this allegation.”<sup>89</sup>

The major indictment against the Locust Administration remained the lack of sufficient pumps and poison to cope with the outbreak.<sup>90</sup> It was argued that the law required the farmers who own the land to kill the locusts, but the government did not keep its part of the deal through not having enough poison and pumps available.<sup>91</sup> The consequence, it was alleged, was that in the future the people would be unwilling, because they will remember that the department did not make the necessary preparations, even when notified in time.<sup>92</sup> One irate farmer wrote to the *Landbouweekblad* that “as soon as the farmers work together well, then there is no poison available, and then the *rooibaadjies* [red-jackets, fliers] trek away safely,

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<sup>87</sup> Act 11 of 1911, Article 19, 364.

<sup>88</sup> (n/a) “Vernietiging van Sprinkane,” *LW* (October 1923): 519.

<sup>89</sup> HANSARD (20 February 1924): 345.

<sup>90</sup> F.E. Geldenhuys “Die Aanstormende Sprinkaanvyand,” *LW* (24 October 1923): 551.

<sup>91</sup> HANSARD (20 February 1924): 345.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*.

leaving only bare field behind.”<sup>93</sup> Not everyone agreed that the government could be blamed, and claimed that the criticism came only from the opposition. A member of the ruling party quoted the following poem to sum up the situation:

“Who sends the locusts to the farm  
And lets them do the greatest harm?  
Who fails to give any balm?  
The Government.

Who brings droughts that try us so?  
Who makes the dry and dreary winds to blow?  
Who spreads disease that causes woe?  
The Government.

...

*Le Envoi.*

Down with the blooming, boiling lot,  
It’s time they went, they’ve got to trot,  
Or else we’ll see that they are shot!  
Poor Government!”<sup>94</sup>

In the official’s mind, there was a misconception amongst farmers that the government wanted to implement stricter regulations on farmers. This they countered by saying that “the goal of the department is to kill the locusts, not the farmers.”<sup>95</sup> The underlying political strife, however, did not do much to help combat the locust, leading the editor of the *Landbouweekblad* (who was rather sympathetic to the government position) to declare:

“Now is not the time for blame! But if there is one class of blame to be specifically mentioned it is political blame! Farmers! Remember, locust extermination is the task of the farmer. It has nothing to do with party-politics. And if we want the campaign to succeed, we must appoint officers who can lead us, and not because they belong to a specific party...Farmers need to take exception when those who are not farmers want to use the situation for their own political means.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> “Net soos die boere mooi saamwerk, dan is daar nie gif te krye nie, dan trek die rooibaadjies weer veilig en laat niks agter nie as die kale aarde” P. Cassie, “Stem van die Boer: Bultfontein,” *LW* (12 December 1923): 783.

<sup>94</sup> HANSARD (20 February 1924): 355-356.

<sup>95</sup> “Die strewe van die Dept. is om al die sprinkane dood te maak, maar nie om die boer uit te roei nie.”

(n/a) “Bevegting van Sprinkane: De Aar Boerevereniging,” *LW* (30 January 1924): 1011.

<sup>96</sup> F.E. Geldenhuys, “Sprinkaanbevegting,” *LW* (19 December 1923): 815.

It was considered that “locust eradication is not an issue of party-politics, it is an issue of the farmer as farmer, and therefore all farmers must take hands, avoid politics and just keep their eyes on the locust.”<sup>97</sup> This was however not the case, and the battle lines against the locust also became increasingly drawn along party-lines, with the blame being put on the Smuts government for allowing the plague to happen and upholding what was seen as a draconian locust law by using South African Party (SAP) locust officers and neighbour-farmers with political vendettas. A tale that was recounted twice within one sitting was of a farmer who visited a neighbour, and, angrily dismounting, shouts “General Smuts went to England to make peace when there is not peace in his own country.”<sup>98</sup> He went on to say that the locusts came to his farm and ruining his harvest, but he could not fight them on his own.

The locusts threatened to become a rallying point for the general election. The editor of the *Friend of the Free State Gazette*, an influential newspaper in central South Africa, wrote in his commentary on the locust plague that:

...[S]uch a bread-and-butter matter as the locust plague... will be put in the balance against the fine promises of the congress room... there can be little doubt that the ordinary elector will regard the killing of locusts a more important thing than any of the others. And so the official breakdown against locusts is likely to do harm against the Government politically, as it will, without any question, mean a serious blow to the recuperation and progress of the country.”<sup>99</sup>

It was of course, not the only factor in the 1924 election, but the locust plague certainly played a powerful political role, adding an electoral dimension to debates on the locust campaigns under the new government, where General Kemp replaced Sir Thomas Smartt as Minister of Agriculture. When Kemp asked parliament for an extra £190 000 towards locust eradication, he justified it by saying that:

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<sup>97</sup> “...maar sprinkaanuitroei is nie ‘n saak van party-politiek; dis ’n saak van die boer as boer en daarom alle boere moet hande inmekeer slaan, die politiek vermy en hulle oog net hou op die sprinkaan.” (n/a) “Die Sprinkaan Posiesie,” *LW* (19 Desember 1923): 819.

<sup>98</sup> “Gen. Smuts het naar Engeland gegaan om vrede te maak en daar is nie vrede in sy eie land nie” HANSARD (20 February 1924): 349.

<sup>99</sup> SANA CEN/807 L/20: Cutting from *The Friend of the Free State* “The Locust Menace”, c. October 1922.

“I do not want to do as the honourable member of Fort Beaufort (Sir Thomas Smartt). When war had to be made, he first had to go and make poison and pumps, and now he is jealous that we are able to destroy the locusts, something he was unable to do!”<sup>100</sup>

Many of the locusts in the 1924/25 season died from the locust fly, leading to accusations that Kemp got undue credit. It was however also said, not just as banter, that the parasite made its appearance because “there was a curse on South Africa, and when the new Government came into power, the curse was lifted.”<sup>101</sup>



Wat die boer van vandag werk.

Figure 4.4 The subtitle reads: “What the farmer of today works.” Farmers were kept from planting and harvesting by the locust plague. Note the diminutive black worker carrying what can be a bucket of water to wet the bait, but is probably the poison mixture to be used in the pump.

Source: *Landbouweekblad* (5 December 1924): 772.

Despite the curse supposedly being lifted, there was still need for urgent calls for cooperation between the farmers and the government, also under the leadership of Kemp, who called on a supposed sense of nationalism and citizenship the farmers to war:

“My fellow citizens and farmers of the Union of South Africa! With your help and self-sacrifice in the expending of vast sums of money by the Government, we were under

divine leadership able to cleanse all parts of the Union of hoppers... The extermination of locusts means war against a common enemy. It is therefore an important issue of national interest. I am sure that I am not calling on you in vain...”<sup>102</sup>

He was however, unwilling to help the farmers financially, saying that the government will continue to supply poison and pumps, but in the past the large sums of money spent was not justifiable, and he therefore calls on farmers to, in their own

<sup>100</sup> HANSARD (16 July 1925): 6964.

<sup>101</sup> HANSARD (5 March 1925): 694.

<sup>102</sup> HANSARD (16 July 1925): 6963.

interest, help with the campaign against the locust, and in order to pay the government back for the work they have done.<sup>103</sup>

The problem with the above statement was that farmers were reluctant to lose the time and labour that it cost to spray locusts, when it could lead to stock poisoning or when they had to spend time and money whilst their neighbours did not incur any cost. Most farmers in the 1920s were not particularly prosperous, nor was the South African economy doing well. Even when farmers had the labour and capital available, they did not always succeed in destroying the locusts, as the following letter, read to a Bloemfontein meeting of the Agricultural Union of the Free State testifies:

“We were getting ready to attend the Farmer’s Day Meeting, but we apologise for not being able to make it. From that morning six ‘o’ clock and the whole day through, my wife, my children and my labourers were busy fighting the locusts. Yesterday evening, the swarms sat on my trees and veld. My rye and oats, 65 morgen of 3 inches tall and younger, has been eaten to the ground, my whole farm was devoured. I suppose the rest will go today. Yet, the locust officer said that I have no reason to be frightened. My farm has been a miserable failure the past 8 months and it is all the fault of the locusts.”<sup>104</sup>

A note was attached, saying that this particular farmer had more than 100 labourers on his farm.<sup>105</sup> For most farmers, the situation was much worse, with general famine believed a very real possibility.<sup>106</sup>

This leads us to another socio-economic concern that was underscored by the locust outbreaks: poor-whiteism. In his book on the locust and the American West, Lockwood makes the argument that “with the decline of agrarianism and the commensurate rise of industrialism, the country began to equate success with money. As wealth became a measure of virtue, poverty became not simply a material failing but evidence of moral turpitude.”<sup>107</sup> A similar claim can be made in the South African

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<sup>103</sup> J. Kemp, “Beroep deur die Minister van Landbou op Boere in verband met die Uitroei van Sprinkane,” *LW* (24 December 1924).

<sup>104</sup> (n/a) “Die Sprinkane in die Vrystaat” *LW* (11 June 1924): 83.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>106</sup> J. Nöllkamper, “Bevegting van Sprinkane: Doornpan, Distrik Bloemfontein,” *LW* (6 February 1924): 1045.

<sup>107</sup> J.A. Lockwood, *Locust: The Devastating Rise and Mysterious Disappearance of the Insect that Shaped the American Frontier*. (New York: Basic Books, 2004): 65.



situation. One letter writer to the *Landbouweekblad* said that there is a link to be made between the naiveté amongst some farmers<sup>108</sup> with regards to locust destruction and the reason for the number of poor whites (or ‘takhare’ as certain poor whites in the interior were derogatorily called). This link was a lack of primary or even secondary contact with “learned men.”<sup>109</sup> Apart from placating their constituencies and keeping the agricultural sector economically afloat, politicians were apprehensive about the effect the locust outbreak could have on poor whites:

“We can do much to save the people and the Minister knows how the situation is that the farmers find themselves in due to the drought and the locusts and that it is not a small number, but a large number of farmers who are faced with ruin. If we do not do anything in this sitting, the poor white question will be worsened; the people will keep on fleeing to town.”<sup>110</sup>

It was feared that, “either the locust must die or many farmers will fall into destitution,” adding to the “host of poor whites that is so big already.”<sup>111</sup>

The poor whites notwithstanding, a successful locust campaign was at any rate measured not only by complete extermination, but the most important characteristic is that it was done economically.<sup>112</sup> The perceived high cost of locust eradication upset a large amount of farmers, as is strikingly portrayed by the following comment:

“The Locust Plague has made its existence known on the open lands that have been already been fleeced by the locusts, and the little patches of green that are still available here and there, are attacked from all sides. The Free State, Transvaal and Cape Province are attacked, and in many cases the people suffer so severely under the plague, they are so discouraged that some districts have

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<sup>108</sup> For more on this see section 4.6

<sup>109</sup> H. Lemmer, “Sprinkane uitroei,” *LW* (16 July 1924): 325.

<sup>110</sup> “Ons kan veel doen deur die mense te red en die Minister weet hoe die toestand is waarin die boer verkeer as gevolg van die droogte en die sprinkane en dat nie ‘n klein aantal nie, maar vele bedreig word met ondergang. As ons nie iets doen in hierdie sitting nie, sal onse arme blanke vraagstuk baie vererger word; die menses al bly trope na die dorpe toe vlug.” HANSARD (20 February 1924): 346.

<sup>111</sup> “Een ding is seker, of die sprinkaan dood, of baie boere word in ellende gedompel,” F.E.

Geldenhuis, “Die Aanstormende Sprinkaanvyand,” *LW* (24 October 1923): 551.

<sup>112</sup> “Information and Instructions for Magistrates, Native Commissioners, Senior, District, Ward and Local Locust Officers: Effective from 10<sup>th</sup> August 1934 and Superseding all Previous Instructions.” Circular No.11 of 1934, G.P.-S.6481, (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1934):6.

even called public meetings, claiming that it is an unnecessary waste of money to exterminate locusts.”<sup>113</sup>

As a result, many suggestions were made for launching a different sort of campaign “so that poor people will benefit, and not just the locust officers”.<sup>114</sup> The method most popularly advocated as a substitute was a government bounty system where people were paid per bag of dried dead locusts, to be grinded into a powder that can be used



Figure 4.5 One company, S.A Farm Industries, capitalised on the locust outbreaks, buying dried and dead locusts.

Source: *Landbouweekblad* (21 November 1924):686.

as stock feed. There was already a company who did so privately (see figure 4.5). There is some evidence that the government considered it, but lacked the means to implement the considerable logistics needed.<sup>115</sup> Furthermore, although locusts are very nutritious,<sup>116</sup> their supply was too variable to sustain an industry.<sup>117</sup>

The other possible solution recurrently called upon was the deployment of the South African defence force.<sup>118</sup> At a meeting of the Transvaal Agricultural Union in 1923, several speakers urged that the campaign against locusts should be regarded as “a war” and that theirs should be “war councils.”<sup>119</sup> Others put it more bluntly, “locusts are just as much an enemy as annexing

<sup>113</sup> “Die sprinkhaanplaag laat sy teenwoordigheid op die reeds kaalgevretre vlaktes in die land erg voel en die groenighede wat daar nog hier en daar op plekke is word van alle kante aangeval. Die Vrystaat, Transvaal en die Kaapprovinsie en in baie gevalle word ... die plaag mense so erg mismoedig - soveel so, dat daar distrikte is wat op openbare vergaderings verklaar het dat dit ‘n onnodige geldvermosing is om sprinkane te probeer uitroeï... Dan is daar nog een klas van die volk wat ‘n groot sonde in sprinkaanuitroeï sien. So het die beamptes te kampe nie alleen teen die sprinkaan nie maar ook teen baie ander invloede wat die beampte en gewillige boere se arms laat slap word.” (n/a) “Oorsig van die Boerdery-Toestand: Week Eindigende 19 Januarie 1924,” *LW* (23 January 1924): 1001.

<sup>114</sup> T.P. “Doodmaak van Sprinkane,” *LW* (13 August 1924): 531.

<sup>115</sup> R.H. Williams, “Sprinkaanuitroeïing. Voortgangsrapport No 13,” *LW* (2 May 1923).

<sup>116</sup> (n/a) “Benuttiging van Sprinkane,” *LW* (23 December 1924): 29.

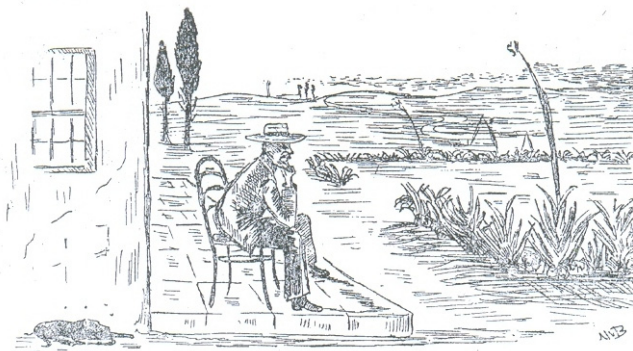
<sup>117</sup> Onderstepoort Archives, Pretoria, Box 39, File 8/7 “Feeding Cattle on Locusts,” 13 June 1923.

<sup>118</sup> See for example HANSARD (21 February 1924): 383.

<sup>119</sup> SANA CEN/818 L 20/4/20: G. Gross to Williams, 9 June 1923.

powers”,<sup>120</sup> and suggested that the best way of combating locust swarms was through a military attack system, with compulsory service for farmers and farm labourers.<sup>121</sup> Others again thought that it would be best to use the deployment of the defence forces, since the farmers and farm labourers were needed for harvesting and planting.<sup>122</sup>

#### 4.6 The agents of destruction: neighbours and locust officers.



Moedeloos omdat sprinkane uit ander distrikte sy veld opnuut weggevreet het.

*Figure 4.6 The caption here reads “Despairing because locusts from other districts ate all his veld. Farmers sometimes blamed other farmers and districts for letting the locusts ‘escape.’*

*Source: Landbouweekblad, (19 March 1924): 1281.*

A major source of conflict between the farming community and the government was the implications of the locust law for neighbourly relations. It caused considerable strife amongst the small farming communities, and threatened to impede locust destruction campaigns. That the act of prosecuting or reporting farmers for neglect was tightly interwoven with political tension

was clear to officials since the first Union Agricultural Pests Act was promulgated in 1911. When Faure wanted to pursue a case of “flagrant neglect” against a particular Free State farmer in 1915, and wanted to “make an example” of him, the magistrate refused to prosecute. Faure attributed the magistrate’s unwillingness to prosecute to the ‘political unrest’ in the region, probably referring to the aftermath of the Boer Rebellion.<sup>123</sup> But because the combat of the locust was a national issue, it was felt that “it is not sufficient that an owner combats the locusts on his own farm, but it is his

<sup>120</sup> “Sprinkane is maar net sowel ‘n vyand van ‘n land as ‘n anekseerder.” Rooie, “Gebruik Verdedigingsmag vir Sprinkaanbevegting,” *LW* (5 March 1924): 1195.

<sup>121</sup> W.J Eksteen, “Kommandeer almal teen die Sprinkaan,” *LW* (13 February 1924): 1091 and J. Nollkämper, “Nuwe Skema tot die Algehele Vernietiging van die Sprinkaan,” *LW* (12 December 1923): 785-786.

<sup>122</sup> M.P., “Nuwe Metode van Sprinkaanbevegting,” *LW* (9 January 1924): 907.

<sup>123</sup> SANA CEN/818 L/241/4570 Faure to Chief: Division of Entomology, 23 March 1915

strict duty to report each and every one of his neighbours who are negligent in exterminating locusts on their own property.”<sup>124</sup>

This opened the space for several complaints that some farmers pulled their weight and some not, and undoubtedly some farmers exploited the situation to settle previous grievances. Some farmers, it was said, use:

“...every means available to kill locust hoppers on their farms, whilst others let them just trek over their fields. For something of this nature, where it is due to negligence and lethargy, one can only express indignation and disapproval. The excuse of Cain of ‘am I my brother’s heeder’ is no excuse.”<sup>125</sup>

There were also discontent amongst farmers because, “‘cheque-book farmers,’ who are merely speculating with land, get out of their responsibility to kill locusts by putting a poor-white or a bijwoner on the farm.”<sup>126</sup> Another objection was that farmers were reported for not eradicating locusts when they did their duty, simply because people did not see them doing it.<sup>127</sup> The validity of this assertion cannot be tested without understanding each individual context, but there were many complaints from farmers about neighbours who are not doing their part in the locust campaign and let the swarms escape.<sup>128</sup> There were also calls for cooperation amongst farmers,<sup>129</sup> and when farmers apparently did cooperate, it was deemed good enough news to be used by politicians, such as the following comment by J.B.M. Hertzog:

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<sup>124</sup> “Die bestryding van die sprinkhaan is ’n nasionale saak – dis nie voldoende dat ’n eenaar die sprinkhane op sy eie plaas uitroei nie, maar dit is sy strenge plig om ieder van sy bure te rapporteer wat nalatig is om sprinkane op hulle eiendom uit te roei.” P.J. du Toit, “Goggas: Waarskuwing vir Boere teen Sprinkhane,” *LW* (30 November 1921): 766.

<sup>125</sup> “Die verskyning van dié jaar skyn die grootste te wees wat Suid-Afrika sover ondervind het en tensy die bestryding doeltreffend is, sal onberekenbare groot skade gedaan word en dit sal weer as gevolg hê die ondergang van ’n groot aantal boere en die vergroting van die arme-blanke- leër, wat al juis so groot is... Sommige boere kla dat, terwyl hulle alles in hulle vermoë doen om die voetgangers dood te maak, andere g’n besondere poging aanwend en maar toelaat dat die voetgangers oor hulle plase trek. Vir iets van die aard, waar dit te wyte is aan die agtelosigheid, onverskilligheid, traagheid, kan slegs die grootste afkeuring en verontwaardiging geuit word. Die verontskuldiging van Kain, ‘is ek my broer se hoeder’ is g’n verontskuldiging.” F.E. Geldenhuys, “Die Aanstormende Sprinkaanvyand,” *LW* (24 October 1923): 551.

<sup>126</sup> SANA CEN/833 L/407: “Liability of Owner for Destruction of Locusts,” 1 December 1933.

<sup>127</sup> M.J. Salzmann, “Boeresamwerk: Die Sprinkaanboere,” *LW* (26 December 1923): 867.

<sup>128</sup> (n/a) “Sprinkane in Bloemfontein,” *LW* (7 November 1923): 639 and D.V. “Phillipstown,” *LW* (20 February 1924).

<sup>129</sup> F.E. Geldenhuys, “Die Aanstormende Sprinkaanvyand,” *LW* (24 October 1923): 551; C.P., “Die Stem van die Boer: Frankfort en Reitz,” *LW* (12 December 1923): 783. (n/a) “Die Veldtog teen Sprinkane,” *LW* (6 February 1924).

“I believe that never before in the Free State have people felt with such unity and gravity that they must work together to destroy a swarm of locusts and I can ensure the House that I know of district upon district where they worked with fervour and I can proclaim that nothing could be better, no spirit and no exertion could be greater.”<sup>130</sup>

The neighbourly conflict was indeed thought serious enough to propose an amendment to the law on Agricultural Pests to be proposed, making it compulsory for “every occupier of land adjoining the land on which any swarm appears [to] assist to the best of his ability in the destruction of that swarm in his becoming or being made aware of the existence of that swarm.”<sup>131</sup> In the end, the majority of the house voted against the amendment on account that it would lead to too many farmers not labouring in the fields.

Apart from the farmers themselves, the most significant tool in the locust bureaucracy was the locust officer, or the *sprinkaanbeampte*. They were government officials appointed at times of severe locust outbreaks, to inspect farms and demonstrate how to work with poison – they were the messengers of government and were often treated as such.

Before they even started with their duties, many officials were already steeped in controversy at their appointment. Their status in the community was one of ambivalence. It is very difficult to generalise in this regard, as locust officers not only came in ranks (such as district or ward officers), but the context differed from town to town. From the parliamentary debates, magazine and newspaper clippings it is still possible to draw a picture of the role of the locust officer, and how their standing often brought to light larger issues.

During large outbreaks, especially under Kemp’s ministry (1924 – 1934), local locust officers were appointed by magistrate in order to help coordinate the campaign. Their

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<sup>130</sup> “...hoe ek geloof dat nog nooit in die Vrystaat met soveel eendrag en erns gevoel werd dat almal moes saamspan om die swerm sprinkane te verniel en ek kan die Huis verseker dat ek weet van distrik tot distrik hoe hulle met geesdrig gewerk het en ek moet verklaar dat niks beter kon wees nie; geen gees en inspanning kon groter gewees het nie.” HANSARD (20 February 1924): 367.

<sup>131</sup> HANSARD (3 March 1924): 587.

task was more than clerical: people elected as locust officers should be “bilingual, *influential and tactful*, and if possible possess a motor car”<sup>132</sup> [my emphasis]. The position, which came with some status and a reasonable salary, was so desirable that strict anti-nepotism regulations were imposed.<sup>133</sup> The officials were, however, often also seen as agents of government, interested only in persecuting farmers who are from the opposition party.

In some communities, it was often a farmer who has been ‘uitgeboer’ (lost his farm, usually to a more prosperous neighbour or family member) that was appointed locust officer, a person with a slippery hold onto his class.<sup>134</sup> This is perhaps most strikingly portrayed in the popular Afrikaans novel by Jochem van Bruggen *Die Sprinkaanbeampte van Sluis* (The locust officer of Sluis) (1933) that won the prestigious W.A. Hofmeyer prize in the year of its release, in which “Lambertus Bredenhamp” loses his farm and tries to win back his status by being appointed a local locust officer.<sup>135</sup>

Some members of parliament thought that the salary of a locust officer, and the status that came with it, was a wasteful expense. Several members objected to inspectors receiving good salaries even though they are “in general irresponsible people.”<sup>136</sup> One member accused the inspectors of just wanting to accuse farmers of negligence.<sup>137</sup> Another member mentioned that some townspeople had been appointed as locust officers and that they are not sympathetic towards farmers,<sup>138</sup> a comment that would probably resonate with farmers already disgruntled by being dictated to by people who are not ‘boerende boere’.<sup>139</sup> The most divisive aspect, however, was that of the locust officer’s political association. When a member of the ruling party of the time,

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<sup>132</sup> SANA CEN/819 L/315: O.C Locust Administration to the Magistrate, Fouriesburg, 1 September 1922.

<sup>133</sup> [G.P.-S.6481], 6.

<sup>134</sup> A similar comment is made by Beinart in his article on the Pondoland revolt, saying that the work of locust officer was a way for poor whites to defend their racial status. W. Beinart, “Environmental Origins of the Pondoland Revolt,” S. Dovers, R. Edgecombe and B. Guest *South Africa’s Environmental History: Cases and Comparisons*, (Athens: University of Ohio Press and Cape Town: David Phillip, 2002): 81.

<sup>135</sup> J. van Bruggen, *Die Sprinkaanbeampte van Sluis* ( Pretoria: J.L. van Schaik, 1988 (first edition 1933)).

<sup>136</sup> HANSARD (20 February 1924): 350, 351, 354

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 348.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.

<sup>139</sup> “practical farmers” or farmers who actually farm (and are not just the owner of a farm or agricultural experts on paper).

the South African Party, mentioned that the locust officers had been chosen irrespective of their party political considerations, he was instantly queried by members of the opposition.<sup>140</sup> Similar accusations were made by farmers themselves. A farmer from Marquard, a town in the central eastern Free State, reported in the *Landbouweekblad* that, although most farmers were doing their best to cooperate in eradicating locusts, there was one locust officer who really prosecuted people, fearing that this strife might threaten the future of the *volk* :

“I cannot understand that our Afrikaner nation is so hateful towards one another. The prosecution of one Afrikaner by another brings enmity between Afrikaners. I think we must help one another in the extermination of the locust and not in the extermination of the Afrikaner nation in prosecuting one another”.<sup>141</sup>

In order to avoid this “prosecution”, some farmers felt that it would be better if the “goggavangers”<sup>142</sup> were chosen amongst themselves, and drew up petitions in this regard.<sup>143</sup> Governing bodies, however, felt that an officer elected by the farmers would be apt to neglect his duty “for fear of falling foul of his neighbours.”<sup>144</sup> Locust officers were indeed not always popular, in one case, angry farmers sprayed a locust officer with chemicals to blind him, and his poison was buried.<sup>145</sup> It was also suggested that locust eradication be supervised by divisional councils on voluntary basis. This suggestion too was rejected on basis that such members will not be willing to work without remuneration.<sup>146</sup> He was especially against the salaries paid to locust officers when it does not seem to work.<sup>147</sup> Some merely came to the conclusion that, seeing as the locusts seemed unstoppable, appointing locust officers was a further squandering of tax-money, and that “the only thing that will save us will be a when a natural enemy of the locust takes over.”<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> HANSARD (20 February 1924): 363.

<sup>141</sup> G.F. Muller, “Stem van die Boer: Marquard,” *LW* (12 December 1923): 783.

<sup>142</sup> Catchers of insects or ‘creepies’; “gogga” is an informal Afrikaans word that is difficult to translate. Bolander, “Die Sprinkhaanplaag. Hoe dit lyk. Van Waar dit Kom. Bestryding Daarvan,” *LW* (30 November 1921): 766.

<sup>143</sup> SANA CEN/818 L/20: O.C Locust Administration MEMO, 7 June 1923. Also see (n/a) “Sprinkane in Bloemfontein,” *LW* (7 November 1923): 639.

<sup>144</sup> SANA CEN/818 L/20: “Resolution passed at Free State Agricultural Union,” 3 July 1923.

<sup>145</sup> J. Nollkämper, “Nuwe Skema tot die Algehele Vernietiging van die Sprinkaan,” *LW* (12 December 1923): 785-786.

<sup>146</sup> SANA CEN/818 L/20: RHW O.C. Locust Administration to The Secretary for Agriculture, 1 June 1923.

<sup>147</sup> W.H. Boshoff, “Vang die Sprinkaan,” *LW* (24 October 1923): 572.

<sup>148</sup> J.P. Vorster, “Hoe om Sprinkane uit te Roei,” *LW* (16 January 1924): 962.

Locust officers were also sometimes vilified because they were responsible for the distribution of dangerous sodium arsenide, although the state insisted that correctly mixed poison posed no danger of collateral damage.<sup>149</sup> The poison, however, took a few days to have the desired effect, and farmers often increased the ratio of poison hoping for a quicker kill. The Department of Agriculture did, however, compensate for the loss of stock when there was proof of negligence on the side of the locust officer or other government officials.<sup>150</sup> Claims could not be made in cases where the poison was not administered by locust officers, although one farmer claimed that the government was responsible for the loss of stock on his farm because under law he was forced to spray poison.<sup>151</sup> In some cases, stock losses could be significant. At least one farmer lost 20 heads of cattle and his horse due to locust poisoning,<sup>152</sup> and several farmers claimed for similar losses.<sup>153</sup> It was, however, very difficult to prove negligence and the cost of sending material to Onderstepoort, the state veterinary laboratory in Pretoria, to test if it was indeed locust poison that killed the animal, was very high (some farmers tried to claim for stock loss due to locust poison when in fact their animals died from *lamziekte*).<sup>154</sup> It seems, however, that claims by “strong supporters of the Act” were recommended.<sup>155</sup>

Although potential stock loss was one of the biggest objections to using poison, there was also an understanding that the consequences were more complicated than that. It was an understanding that did not just take into account the possible economic impact, but combined it with more subtle issues of what is ‘natural’ and the consequences of man’s increasing power over ‘nature.’ In one case, dams supplying water to the farm houses were poisoned when it rained after the veld was sprayed against locusts causing that farmer to question the government method of spraying poison.<sup>156</sup> Some farmers therefore advocated more ‘natural’ methods of combating the locust plague. It was observed by one farmer that, after a campaign with locust poison, the veld:

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<sup>149</sup> (n/a) “Sprinkane. Waarskuwing,” *LW* (9 May 1923).

<sup>150</sup> For example SANA CEN/820 L/ 37: Verklaring D.W. Schoeman, 31 January 1924.

<sup>151</sup> SANA CEN/820 L/37: P.J. du Toit to J.H. Coetzee, 30 June 1924 and SANA: CEN/820 L/37, Testimony under oath by William Frances Hallat, 15 March 1924.

<sup>152</sup> SANA CEN/820 L/37: H.J. du Plessis to Sir Thomas Smartt, 11 June 1923.

<sup>153</sup> See SANA CEN/820: File 37 for examples.

<sup>154</sup> SANA CEN/820 L/37: Secretary for Agriculture to Messrs Christie Bros, 27 May 1924.

<sup>155</sup> SANA CEN/820 L/37: From R.A. Hockly, 17 March 1924.

<sup>156</sup> Onderstepoort Archives, Pretoria, Box 39, File 8/7, J. Lubbe to the Secretary for Agriculture, 29 January 1935.



“became so unhealthy that a stock farmer can scarcely make a living on it – it is a well-known fact that locusts digest rotten grasses and all the parasites that causes stock diseases with it. Since the locusts have been so severely extirpated in 1922 – there has been an increase in stock disease.”<sup>157</sup>

He suggested relying on “natural enemies such as birds.”<sup>158</sup> A locust officer wrote in his daily report that, like the farmers in his area, he wanted to leave “it to the birds to kill them”, but was strongly reprimanded.<sup>159</sup> The issue of rather ‘leaving it to nature’ to get rid of locusts resonated with the general public. A concerned member of the public, a certain C.J. de Villiers, wrote to the chief of entomology, suggesting that they should rather concentrate on biological means, such as the locust blowfly, for curtailing the locusts. He was concerned about the number of birds killed by the poison, saying that “I am, and have been for some time, thinking that we humans are ‘cutting our own chords.’”<sup>160</sup> Lounsbury, who replied to him, made specific mention that it is better not to answer through the press and that the destruction of locusts “by artificial means is an economic necessity. Whether that destruction is by poisoning or by mechanical means, the flies and birds and other naturel (sic) enemies incidentally suffer to some extent.”<sup>161</sup> Even when the sentiment was that locusts are expendable, the language used remained personal and humanised, suggesting the relationship between farmers and this particular agent of nature had a relatively high amount of emotional investment. This comes across particularly well in the language used in instructions for killing locusts, calling the insects “gluttonous cannibals”,<sup>162</sup> that will devour their “suffering kindred”.<sup>163</sup> The most tangible way in which locust destruction was made personal, however, was through bringing them into the sphere of religion.

#### **4.7 The religion of destruction.**

When faced with the immensity of the locust plague, strata within the Afrikaner farming community relied on religion to try to make sense of the situation. Their

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<sup>157</sup> Veeboer, “Sprinkaanbestryding,” *LW* (March 1940): 27.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> Onderstepoort Archives, Pretoria, Box 39, File 8/7: “Locust Destruction”, 3 December 1925.

<sup>160</sup> SANA CEN/818 L/20: C.J. de Villiers to Agricultural Department, 15 September 1923.

<sup>161</sup> SANA CEN/818 L/20/5312: CPL to C.J. de Villiers, 21 September 1923.

<sup>162</sup> (n/a) “Aanwysings vir die gebruik van Sprinkangif,” *LW* (18 April 1923): 1198.

<sup>163</sup> (n/a) “Sprinkane. Waarskuwing,” *LW* (9 May 1923).

relationship towards the locusts was often mediated through a language and value system they were more comfortable and familiar with, that of a Christian religion. It was not just the reformed Calvinism, but there were also elements of pietism or revivalism present.

The key question in the debate was whether it was a sin to kill locusts or not. The premises for the argument that it was a sin to eradicate a swarm of locusts, was that it was a plague sent by God as a punishment for the sins of the people, and that it was the best to accept this resignedly. In the *Landbouweekblad*, the debate started when a farmer from the Transvaal, who wrote under the penname “Ou Trevelaar”,<sup>164</sup> wrote the following letter that is quoted at length because most of the underlying themes surfaced in it:

“I want to call upon the Afrikaans Christendom with regards to the locusts that are ruling in our land. The locust law is a law after all and we must bow under the law and kill the locust, as it is being done, but my dear brothers and sisters, yesterday I sat on a high mountain and, with a clear mind I saw that it is a great sin to kill locusts. Dear readers, I feel convinced with the conscience that [it is a sin] to eradicate a plague that has been sent for a short while. Do you not feel it, Christian; do you not feel it, foreman of our people? No, my vision is that we must ask God to take away the punishment. Why else do we have a God? When we as civilised and Christian people stand together in true faith, then we will be able to ban the scourge without spending money...In the time of Pharaoh, he asked Moses to pray that the plague must go away. He did not say “kill them”, although he was a heathen. Think about it, Christendom, what will it help us to eradicate the locusts when it costs us money and there is disunity, and the Creator can just let a wind blow over the earth and the whole world will be full of locusts again, or he will shut the Heavens... Dear people, realise, that we are children, and that the punishment is merely the rod of censure, and if we as children go against the rod, what will the Father do? He will send a greater

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<sup>164</sup> The meaning of this word is unclear, but it is probably an archaic word for “ou sukkelaar,” (toiler or nomad), or a corruption of “traveller.”

plague...Those who say that praying will not help, do not have to believe that there is a God.”<sup>165</sup>

A note by the editor at the end of the letter, illustrative of the counter argument, stated that:

“God gave humans the power and the knowledge to rule over soil, plants and animals...In the sweat of thy face shall thou eat bread...and he must use his God-given talents to serve Him and to help in the victory of good over evil and the superior over the inferior”<sup>166</sup>

Nowhere in the (published) debate did anyone question the religious tone of the debate itself.

There were three main biblical narratives that proponents of the view that locust eradication is sin drew upon. All three drew upon a supposed analogous relationship between Afrikaners and the Israelites, another ‘chosen people’. The first narrative, used by Ou Trevelaar was how God sent several plagues and disasters, mostly agricultural, upon Egypt so that they will set the Israelites (who were enslaved by them) free. After the locust plague came upon Egypt and “covered the surface of the whole land till it was black”<sup>167</sup> the Pharaoh asked Moses to “intercede with the Lord your God and beg him only to remove this deadly plague from me.”<sup>168</sup> The argument was that, if Pharaoh, who was a heathen, asked Moses to pray to the Lord and not campaigned against the locusts himself, a civilised, Christian nation must do the

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<sup>165</sup> “Ek wil net ’n beroep doen op die Afrikaner Kristendom omtrent die sprinkane wat so heers in ons land. Die sprinkaanwet is eenmaal ’n wet geword en ons moet buig onder die wet om sprinkane dood te maak, soos dit ook gedoen word, maar geagte lesers en mede-broeders ek het gister op ’n hoë berg gesit, en dink met ’n helder verstand dat dit ’n groot sonde is om die sprinkane te wil uitroei. Geagte lesers ek voel oortuig met die gewete om ’n plaag te wil uitroei wat tydelik gestuur is. Voel u dit nie ook nie, Kristen, voel u dit nie ook nie voorman van ons volk? Nee, my sienswyse is dat ons God moet vra om die straf weg te neem. Waarvoor het ons dan ’n God? Ons as beskaafde en kristelike volk moet net bymekaar staan deur die ware geloof, en ons sal die straf uitroei sonder geld...In die tyd van Farao het hy vir Moses gesê om te bid dat die straf weggaan. Hy het nie gesê: “maak hulle dood nie,” daar hy ’n heiden was. Dink daaraan kristendom, wat sal dit nou help as ons al die sprinkane uitroei en dit die land baie geld kos en daar is tweedrag, en die Skepper laat net ’n wind op die aarde opkom en bring wees die hele wêreld volenteers sprinkane, of sluit net die Hemel vir ons toe...Liewe volk, dink daaraan dat ons kinders is en dat ons moet doen wat die wil van die Vader is, en dat die straf alleenlik ’n tugroede is, en as ons as kinders teen die roede gaan, wat sal die Vader dan doen? Hy sal ons erger straf...Perty van ons lesers sê al bid ons ook, die plaag sal hier bly. O nee. die wat so sê hoef dan ook nie te glo dat daar ’n God is nie.” Ou Trevelaar, “Bid vir Sprinkane: Vir Land en Volk,” *LW* (23 January 1924): 997.

<sup>166</sup> F.E. Geldenhuys, “Antwoord: Ou Trevelaar ‘Bid vir Sprinkane: Vir Land en Volk,’” *LW* (23 January 1924): 977.

<sup>167</sup> Exodus 10:15, *The New English Bible with the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.* Exodus 10:17.

same. The point was made by “Ou Trevelaar” and reiterated by several letter-writers, who wrote that in the time of Pharaoh, he did not combat the locust plague himself, but asked Moses “a man of God”<sup>169</sup> to pray so that God will send them away. “If he as a heathen knew that, why do we not do the same?” they asked.<sup>170</sup> The argument was also made in Van Bruggen’s account of the era in *Die Sprinkaanbeampte van Sluis*.

The fear that the immorality of eradicating locusts will lead to a fall from the status of civilisation was brought even closer to the South African context, where one farmer felt that:

“The Lord sent locusts as a punishment for our sins, and now we want to eradicate them with poison, and I say, we and all the poison in the World will not be able to eradicate the locust plague...My viewpoint is that locust-eradication is a waste of money and that it causes dissatisfaction amongst black and white. It is said that kaffirs are heathens, yet they see the sins we commit, and we who are Christians do not see it...”<sup>171</sup>

From this one can trace elements of a struggle to uphold racial superiority.

The figure of Moses appealed to some Afrikaner elements in the same way Siener van Rensburg<sup>172</sup> appealed to them. In the course of the debate, ‘Ou Trevelaar’ was cast in the same mould as a prophet, and the correspondence following upon his letter was proof that his words had influence. One writer put particular emphasis on his role as prophet in the spirit of the *volk*:

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<sup>169</sup> H.J.S., “Is Sprinkaanuitroei Sonde?” *LW* (13 February 1924): 1091.

<sup>170</sup> H.J. Swanepoel, “Verkeerd om Middels te Gebruik teen Sprinkane,” *LW* (6 February 1924): 1047; Jong Afrikaner, “Die Sprinkaanplaag en ‘n Middel daarteen,” *LW* (12 March 1924): 1233; H.J.S., “Is Sprinkaanuitroei Sonde?” *LW* (13 February 1924): 1091; Theunis V. “Sprinkaan uitroei is sonde,” *LW* (7 May 1924): 1537; B. Smit, “Bestryding van Insekteplae,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (March 1952): 164.

<sup>171</sup> “Die Here het die sprinkane gestuur vir ‘n straf om ons sonde en nou wil ons dit met gif uitroei, en ek sê, ons en al die gif van die wêreld sal die sprinkaanplaag nie uitroei nie...My sienswyse omtrent die sprinkaan-uitroei is dat dit net geldmors is en ontevredeheid onder swart en wit verwek. Dit word gesê dat kaffers is heidens; dog hulle sien dat dit sonde is wat ons doen en ons wat kristene is kan dit nie sien nie.”

Sprinkaan. “Is Sprinkaan-uitroei Sonde?” *LW* (16 January 1924): 943.

<sup>172</sup> “Siener van Rensburg,” was a ‘farmer-prophet’ from what is known today as the North-Western province. He was regarded by his followers as the Afrikaner prophet who foretold the fates of the Afrikaner people, the Nostradamus of the *Volk*. He is especially known for having ‘foretold’ the death of General Koos de la Rey.

“Now, friends, let us not forget to thank the Lord for calling upon father Trevelaar to be used as an instrument to wipe out the locust. With best wishes to the *Landbouweekblad* and the Afrikanervolk.”<sup>173</sup>

About a decade later, the honour of being called a leader of biblical proportions was not exclusively the preserve of those taking recourse to repentance and prayer anymore, with Van Bruggen suggesting that General Kemp, with his popular credentials as war-hero and rebel, would have well served the Pharaoh: “Those old Egyptians in Pharaoh’s time should have had general Kemp with them, then we would not have seen the harvests being devoured before our eyes, although it was actually the locust officers that did the destruction work.”<sup>174</sup> It is of course possible that Van Bruggen’s view was a more ironic take on the matter, but it is highly unlikely.

The second biblical narrative frequently drawn upon was based upon II Chronicles 7: 12-14, in which God admonishes the Israelites. The text, often quoted in the context of Christian Revivalism, reads:

“If I shut up heaven that there be no rain, or if I command the locusts to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among my people; If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.”<sup>175</sup>

What makes this interesting as a point of reference, is that the subsequent interpretation – that all that must be done and could be done was the repenting of one’s sin, went against the grain of the Calvinist doctrine of ‘pray and work’.<sup>176</sup> That it went against this ethic, was also the main counterargument used.<sup>177</sup> The postulation that the only means to get rid of locusts was to confess one’s sins and humble oneself

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<sup>173</sup> C.K. Aveling, “Is Sprinkaanuitroei sonde,” *LW* (2 April 1924): 1345.

<sup>174</sup> “Die ou Egiptenare in Farao se tyd moes general Kemp daar gehad het, dan sou ons gedurende die laaste twee jaar nie die die oeste voor ons oë sien opvreet nie, ofskoon dit eintlik die sprinkaanbeamptes is wat die uitroei-werkstalligheid verrig.”

Van Bruggen, 114.

<sup>175</sup>“13. Zoo ik den hemel toesluite, dat er geen regen zy, of so ik den sprinkanen gebieden het land te verteren, of zo ik pest onder mijn volk zende, 14. en Myn volk, over delweken My naam genoemen word, zich verootmoedigen en biden en myn aangezicht zoeken, en zich bekeren van hunne boze wegen, zo zal ik uit den hemel horen en hunne zonden vergeven en hun land genezen.”

King James Bible, 2 Chronicles 7, 13-14.

<sup>176</sup> ‘bid en werk’

<sup>177</sup> See, for example, J.G. de Bruyn, “Sprinkaanuitroei is geen Sonde,” *LW* (2 July 1924):223.

before the Lord, was often coupled with a reference to the failure of poison and the monetary cost of government campaigns to eradicate locust. ‘Ou Trevelaar’ commented that “when we as civilised and Christian people stand together in true faith, then we will be able to ban the scourge without spending money.”<sup>178</sup> Others felt that, instead of reaching for the drum of poison, the only means would be to repent and trust the Lord to take the scourge away.<sup>179</sup> Still another farmer concluded that human interference would be of no avail, because:

“when there was a lack of pumps and poison, God sent the birds and the fly that lays worms in the locusts...because of rebellion against God...He lashes us with plagues of drought and locusts, and instead of bowing our heads and acknowledging that God is the Head and Governor of everything, you [the editor] say that we must grab the Hand that is chastising us, and be the Lord one ahead with the eradication of His plagues. Do you mean that it is not God who punishes us, or that there is no God?”<sup>180</sup>

The editor’s comment referred to was that “God does not just send the plague but also the means to combat it.”<sup>181</sup> God may allow things such as locust plagues to happen, but that he also gives the means to fight it – it was the doctrine of pray and work: “In the sweat of thy face shall though eat bread...Yes, repent your sins, yes pray, but also work!”<sup>182</sup> This point of view was supported by some of the readers. Some of them equated refraining from killing locusts as a sin that amounts to laziness by saying that: “We must do our duty towards God, but we must not be too lazy to work if we want to make South Africa a great land.”<sup>183</sup> Others said that in destroying the locusts man is doing God’s will, because when Adam, who was given command of the plant and animal kingdom, sinned, “it was the Creator’s will that man must work for his bread.”<sup>184</sup> In keeping with the Israelite metaphors, one locust officer said that he would rather prefer a comparison to Gideon, one of the first figures in the Bible to use

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<sup>178</sup> Ou Trevelaar, “Bid vir Sprinkane: Vir Land en Volk,” *LW* (23 January 1924).

<sup>179</sup> H.J. Swanepoel, “Verkeerd om Middels te Gebruik teen Sprinkane,” *LW* (6 February 1924):1047.

<sup>180</sup> “Daarom slaan hy ons met sy plae van droogte en sprinkane en in plaas dat ons God erken as Heer en Regeerder van alles, wil u nou hê ons moet die Hand gryp wat ons slaan, en die Here nou voor wees met sy plae uit te roei. Bedoel u nou dis nie God wat ons straf of daar is nie ‘n God?” J.J. Duvenhage “Roei nie uit,” *LW* (20 February 1924): 1131.

<sup>181</sup> (Editor) “Antwoord: Is Sprinkaan-uitroei Sonde?” *LW* (16 January 1924): 943.

<sup>182</sup> (Editor) “Antwoord: Verkeerd om Middels te Gebruik teen Sprinkane,” *LW* (6 February 1924): 1047.

<sup>183</sup> W.J. Gouws, “Slaan jou Hand aan die Ploeg,” *LW* (27 February 1924): 1161.

<sup>184</sup> Adamskind, “Is Sprinkaanuitroei sonde?” *LW* (5 March 1924):1195.

guerrilla-tactics: “...I just want to say that if there are locusts sleeping here and God is with my little band of Gideon, at night I will give the Medianites – the locusts – a horrendous poisonous spray!”<sup>185</sup>

The debate on whether or not it is a sin to kill locusts also revealed a measure of alienation amongst farmers, especially those of the interior, amidst an environment where agriculture was increasingly regulated, and where a ‘scientific method’ was increasingly pressed upon them. This comes through in the arguments of birds working better than poison, and that poison is an expensive sin. In some instances, this disquiet was more overt. To them, the way of the editor – using the God-given tools of science and intelligence are the means “modern scientific man wants, namely money and oppression” and not that “advised by God in II Chronicles 9: 13-14.”<sup>186</sup>

The third biblical narrative threaded through the debate, that of the Prophet Joel, was also used to convey a feeling of frustration with what was experienced as divisive and oppressive legislation. In the book of Joel, it was understood, God gave the prophet the task to tell the people that they must call a day of Covenant to repent, and locusts in particular were singled out as a carrier of God’s wrath.

“Let us ask ourselves, in the time before the locust law, was there not more love and peace amongst our people? ... We must petition the Justice, so that the law can be revoked and the plagues and the punishment be taken away from our people.”<sup>187</sup>

A day of repentance would bring “prosperity in South Africa for farmer, Unionist and Labourer.”<sup>188</sup> In the revivalist tradition, it was thought that when people returned to the values of their forefathers, their situation would improve. There was a call for the return to the piety of the forefathers,<sup>189</sup> and one young Afrikaner in particular wrote

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<sup>185</sup> This also draws on an Old Testament tale of the trials and tribulations of the Israelites. See the book Judges “...as hier sprinkane kom slaap en die Heer is met my Gideonsbende, sal ek die Medianiete – die sprinkane- die nag ‘n vreeslike gifbespuiting toedien.” S.J. Kruger, “Roei die Sprinkane uit,” *LW* (27 February 1924): 1161.

<sup>186</sup> “... maar seker nie die middles waardeur die wetenskaplike mens dit wil laat geskied nie, nl. deur geld en verdrukking, maar seker die middle deur God aanbeveel soos ons in II Kronieke 9:13-14 vind” (the verse refers to King Solomon’s wealth and has no obvious link to the issue at hand, it probably rather referred to chapter 7. ). J.A. Buitendach, “Middel om Sprinkane uit te Roei,” *LW* (13 February 1924): 1091.

<sup>187</sup> Petrusviller, “Roei die Sprinkane Uit,” *LW* (27 February 1924): 1161.

<sup>188</sup> Jong Afrikaner, “Die Sprinkaanplaag en ‘n Middel daarteen,” *LW* (12 March 1924): 1233.

<sup>189</sup> Theunis V, “Sprinkaan uitroei is sonde,” *LW* (7 May 1924): 1537.

that “most young people would rather believe in learnedness and the works of nature, book- and political knowledge, than in the word of God.”<sup>190</sup> He too, felt that the punishment would continue lest there was a return to older values. He then formed part of a significant group of Afrikaner farmers who saw in technology and state intervention a threat to the realities they were comfortable with.

The state was not only aware of the religious undertones but mostly even sympathised.<sup>191</sup> Scientists and officials working with the farmers were less patient, and none so more than a character called ‘Lentulus’ who wrote short remarks to current issues in the *Landbouweekblad*. According to him “the greatest plague in the country today is people who, under the pious cloak of religiosity want to pretend that it is a sin to kill locusts...Such people know that they are doing the *volk* and themselves an injustice.”<sup>192</sup> This “class of our people” who believed that eradicating locusts was wrong, were accused of impeding the work of locust officers and willing farmers, leading to further neighbourly conflict.<sup>193</sup> Faure also remarks that “the medieval idea persists in SA amongst a few unenlightened persons in remote districts, but luckily, nowadays most farmers see it from a modern, sensible viewpoint,”<sup>194</sup> but seeks to explain the farmers’ perception, saying that it is probably because plague outbreaks occur suddenly after good rains.<sup>195</sup> Locust officers were however not completely secular, disengaged tools of a state completely separated from religion. For one, they were not allowed to work on Sundays, except when the Magistrate gave them explicit orders to.<sup>196</sup> Thus the religious debates around locust destruction was to a large extent probably a result of socio-economic circumstances, a case of leaving it to Providence, as it will cost less money and effort. It was however also part of a struggle to hold on to a certain identity, albeit a mythic, constructed one, in the face of rapid social change.

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<sup>190</sup> Jong Afrikaner, “Die Sprinkaanplaag en ‘n Middel daarteen,” *LW* (12 March 1924): 1233.

<sup>191</sup> HANSARD (20 February 1924): 367.

<sup>192</sup> Lentulus, “Lentulus dink,” *LW* (23 January 1924): 977.

<sup>193</sup> (n/a) “Oorsig van die Boerdery-Toestand: Week Eindigende 19 Januarie 1924,” *LW* (23 January 1924): 1001.

<sup>194</sup> J.C. Faure, “Die Bruin Sprinkaan,” *LW* (24 October 1923): 553.

<sup>195</sup> J.C. Faure, “Die Bruin Sprinkaan,” *LW* (9 January 1924).

<sup>196</sup> [G.P.-S.6481], 6.



#### 4.8 Black Africans and locust destruction.

From the above it would seem that, apart from needing them as farm labour to help with locust killing, Africans were completely absent from the rural scene in South Africa as far as locusts were concerned. To a certain extent it is true – except where black people as such were under discussion, they were mostly ignored in white South African discourse. Having said that, unlike the Soil Conservation Act of 1946 that applied to whites only, (the African population being administered by a different department under separate laws), the Agricultural Pests Act of 1911 specifically mentioned that the male heads of the reserves, under supervision of the (white) magistrate, are responsible for locust destruction.<sup>197</sup> If they failed to do so, the expenses incurred would be recoverable from the male inhabitants or *pro rata* in a similar fashion than the hut tax. Although the black population did not unquestioningly just adhere to the law, as Beinart showed in his study of revolt in Pondoland,<sup>198</sup> they were effectively excluded from any debate on the topic of locust destruction as agents in their own right. Even so, where black people did feature in the debate, in discourse captured on text, it strikingly illuminated white understanding of black Africans and their relationship.

The most obvious stage of locust eradication where the white-black relationships was played out was the division of labour. The more tedious, but “less dangerous” tasks were often relegated to black women and children, like the collection of manure for bait, “at small cost”.<sup>199</sup> The more dangerous tasks, such as the cleaning of poison drums and the handling of poison, were consigned to black men. In photographs on pamphlets showing the pumps used to spray locusts, they are often handled by nameless black men. Black convicts were also used to clean drums of poison, and the following excerpt shows how they were considered as rather expedient:

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<sup>197</sup> Act 11 of 1911, 350.

<sup>198</sup> Beinart, “Environmental Origins of the Pondoland revolt,” 78-82.

<sup>199</sup> SANA CEN/616: Annexure to Locust Circular F.S 1904 dated 25-10-1923: Notes by Locust Officials for Guidance of Farmers.

“[I]t would be a good idea to employ native convict labour on a large scale for a few days to clean and stack the returned drums of poison ... I understand there are a goodly supply of native convicts in Bloemfontein.”<sup>200</sup>

There was also less concern about their protection, and whereas farmers were advised to use gloves, it was considered enough to “give natives grease to put on parts of their bodies that can come in contact with the spray, because poison sometimes causes boils.”<sup>201</sup> The most glaring example of the racist perception that black labourers should be treated differently from whites, even as sub-human, comes from a letter to the *Landbouweekblad* that won the distinction of containing a “prize tip” for the locust problem:

“If one gets paid per bag of dead locusts, then everything that lives, including the animals, amongst others Adonis, his *meid* and *kleinmeid* and little *kaffertjie* and humans, amongst others uncle Hunchback and Gout-hip, that always use their ailments as excuse not to take part...will do their best to bring in a huge locust harvest.”<sup>202</sup> [My italics].

Africans were also, to a certain extent, regarded as part of the ‘natural’ solution to the locust problem. One motivation for this was that black people, who probably had a different perception of locusts that the whites could not or would not comprehend, and they were not averse to eating locusts as a delicacy.<sup>203</sup> This led Faure to list Africans, together with baboons, rats, mice, snakes and cats, as “natural enemies” of locusts.<sup>204</sup> When the locusts were killed by poison, however, blacks were reluctant to cooperate in the destruction of the locusts, let alone eat them. To some members of parliament, it was therefore “of prime importance that the kaffir must start to catch locusts again,

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<sup>200</sup> SANA CEN/818 L/244: O.C Locust Administration to the Superintendent, Locust Poison Works, 16 September 1926.

<sup>201</sup> “Beskerm Uw vel met handskoene of vet, en gee vir kaffers grease om aan dele van hul liggaam te smeer wat nat gespuit kan word, omdat gif pertymaal sere veroorsaak.” SANA CEN/807 L 17/1 “Niet Soetgemaakte Sprinkaan-Gif” c. 1922.

<sup>202</sup> The expressions used here are (in italics) are racist terms designating a black worker (with a name that is frequently also given to baboons), his wife (the word use is similar to ‘concubine’) and children. “Dan sal al wat leef, ek meen die diere o.a. Adonis, sy meid, kleinmeidjie en kaffertjie en mense o.a oom Hoepelrug en Jigbeen, wat altyd hul kwale voorhou as verskoning.. sal hul bes doen om so ;n groot moontlike sprinkaanoes in te samel.” Excelsior farmers, “Die Afgesaagde Sprinkaankwessie,” *LW* (6 August 1924): 509.

<sup>203</sup> In saying this, one should be careful not to imply that black people had a ‘noble native’ kind of relationship with locusts. Black Africans actively combated locust outbreaks, through means often copied by the white settlers (see Beinart, “Environmental Origins of the Pondoland revolt,” 78-82.)

<sup>204</sup> J.C. Faure, “Die Swerms van Sprinkane: Ontstaan en uitroeiing,” *LW* (9 July 1924): 261.

but now he is afraid to be poisoned.”<sup>205</sup> Like locusts, black people were also considered part of the “wild” landscape of Africa. One farmer wrote that he knew how countries looked where locusts had free range (that is, where whites were not combating them): “where no man lives, just wild animals and kaffirs ... where they cannot be killed and where their breeding places are.”<sup>206</sup> In an article on the history of locust plagues written in 1952, an entomologist compared the smell excreted by the elegant locust to “that of an African native.”<sup>207</sup> There is, however, more nuance to the white perception of blacks – one letter, for instance, also refers to the name that the natives give the locust –implying that ‘their’ name is better known.<sup>208</sup> In general, however, Timothy Keegan’s observation that blacks belonged to the natural elements the Boers had to battle with, like drought or locusts, holds true.<sup>209</sup>

#### **4.9 Conclusion.**

This chapter sought to explore aspects of Afrikaner agriculture through the lens of one of the major agricultural pests that it had to cope with, locust plagues. It was shown that locust plagues took the role of a lightning conductor – relaying a host of interrelated concerns. These issues included the relationship between scientists and farmers and the increasingly important role of science in the state. It also showed how an agricultural pest such as locusts became consciously and subconsciously intertwined with the political conflicts of the time, probably influencing not only the outcome of an election, but also influencing farmer’s perception of the role of the state. More than a question of blame, it was symptomatic of disquiet amongst farmers with methods of control – on the one hand there was the all-powerful state and on the other there was the constantly vigilant community and observation by their peers. With the Locust Act, the state and the community were conflated, leaving farmers feeling alienated from the ownership of their land.

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<sup>205</sup> “Dit is van groot belang dat die kaffer weer sprinkane vang, maar nou is hy bang dat hy vergewe sal word.” HANSARD (20 February 1924): 359.

<sup>206</sup> Ou Trevelaar, “Die Sprinkane,” *LW* (9 April 1924): 1383.

<sup>207</sup> B. Smit, “Bestryding van Insekteleae,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (Maart 1952): 164.

<sup>208</sup> SANA CEN/662 E/5659: James S. Munro to Mr Government Entomologist, 21 November 1921.

<sup>209</sup> T.J. Keegan, “The Transformation of Agrarian Society and Economy in Industrialising South Africa: The Orange Free State Grain Belt in the Early twentieth Century,” (D.Phil.diss., University of London, 1981), 23.

It was however in the realm of religion that locusts became a catalysing element in a debate that essentially revolved around the modernisation and the secularisation of not only agriculture, but society in general, where some called for a return to the values and the piety of their forefathers, whilst others tried to reconcile science and the human ability to influence nature with their faith.

It would seem that for a large segment of the Afrikanercommunity in South Africa, locusts presented a site of conflict, between themselves and their government but also between them and the African environment. On the one hand, they sought to come to terms with this environment through science, as one colonial observer stated:

“...advances in studies which are slowly leading to an understanding of locust ecology may be expected before many years pass, to prevent or at least reduce these visitations, and thereby render the African environment far more favourable to man.”<sup>210</sup>

With this he ignored the fact that Africans rendered the continent as favourable to them as possible with the means at their disposal for more than a few millennia already.

Combating locust plagues became part of a civilising effort, a scourge that has been in the country since “Jan van Riebeeck”, that, according to one scientist, “like droughts and rugby they will continue to play their part in our [white] national life.”<sup>211</sup> On the other hand, locusts formed part of the environment that formed the basis for the indigenisation of especially white Afrikaans speaking farmers. One German commentator noted that the sudden appearance of locusts that often wiped out a farmer’s work of a year, could possibly be the explanation for their apparent lethargy, “that unknowing Europeans make out to be backwardness.”<sup>212</sup> Perhaps it is best captured by a little poem by F.W Reitz, who served as president of the Orange Free

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<sup>210</sup> E.B Worthington, *Science in Africa: A Review of Scientific Research relating to Tropical and Southern Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), 13.

<sup>211</sup> D.H. Botha, “Locusts and their Control in South Africa,” 1.

For much of the twentieth century, the popular idea amongst the white public was that South African history commenced on 6 April 1652, when Van Riebeeck landed at the Cape of Good Hope.

<sup>212</sup> “...nicht selten liegt hierin auch das Verstaendnis fuer eine gewisse Letarghie des Buren, die der unwissende Europaer gern mit dem alleinigen Schlagwort der Ruckstaendigkeit abtut.”

C.T. Klugist, *Grundlagen und Entwicklungsrichtung der Landwirtschaftliche Erzeugung in der Suedafrikanischen Union*. (Berlin: Verlagsbuchhandlung Paul Parey, 1935), 29.

State in the nineteenth century, a poem that was frequently cited in articles on locusts throughout the first half of the twentieth century:

*“Die sprinkaan en die droogte  
Lê swaar op onse land  
En wat van ons moet worde,  
Is bowe my verstand.”*<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> (“The locust and the drought,  
Lie upon our country, onerous  
And beyond my comprehension  
Is whatever will become of us.”)  
My thanks to Doret Jordaan for the translation.

## CHAPTER 5

### **“A time of Depression, Drought and Locust destruction:”<sup>1</sup> Drought and agriculture in the Union of South Africa.**

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When researching drought as a historical phenomenon in sources (as this thesis initially set out to do), one would expect to capture something of the flavour of public opinion and state discourse of drought in a similar fashion to other agricultural challenges like pests or erosion.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, however, drought was almost never mentioned in isolation as a phenomenon unto itself. Instead, it was almost always mentioned in conjunction with other agricultural challenges. These challenges included some with a strong anthropogenic element, like soil erosion, and those that were meshed with ‘the vagaries of nature,’ that were seen as uncontrollable by the farmers, like the economy, the natives and locusts. So the concept of drought was rather like the cloth on which other factors – such as the three seemingly divergent topics of erosion, the effect of the United States and locust plagues – were embroidered. This backdrop itself changed in the process, becoming a mesh that grounded the patterns of agriculture in South Africa.

This, the concluding chapter, will take a look at the embroidered backdrop from two angles. Firstly, drought as phenomenon will be analysed. In a similar fashion to the chapters on erosion and locusts, “drought” as a geographical concept in South African context will be discussed. Next, aspects of drought as experienced by white Afrikaans farmers will be discussed, and how it came to be the backdrop for discussions of erosion, locusts and the knowledge networks of the time.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Dit was ‘n tyd van Depressie, Droogtes en Sprinkaanverwoesting.” SANA 34/3 Letter from Aberdeen Farmers Union to General Kemp on his resignation. 18 January 1935.

<sup>2</sup> Such as popular books, newspapers, magazines and government publications intended for public access.

<sup>3</sup> Another possibility would be to gauge the historical impact of drought itself on the community, i.e. the impact of different droughts (like the 1919, 1933 or 1945 droughts) on an economical or political level. This would necessitate a different research approach, for instance assessing stock numbers, numbers of drought districts declared, and analysing the meteorological or geological data of that period. Although drought as a geographical phenomenon will be shortly discussed in this thesis, an assessment like the one just described falls outside the scope of this work.

## 5.1 Desiccation and drought: descriptions and definitions

Ideas about drought are shaped by the perceived deviation from ‘normal’ weather.<sup>4</sup> The following quote, taken from a 1947 book on drought, is still applicable to various role-players’ definition of drought as an agricultural phenomenon today:

“We have no good definition of drought. We may say truthfully that we scarcely know a drought when we see one. We welcome the first clear day after a rainy spell. Rainless days continue for a time and we are pleased to have a long spell of such fine weather. It keeps on and we are a little worried. A few days more and we are really in trouble. The first rainless day in a spell of dry weather contributes as much drought as the last, but no one knows how serious it will be until the last dry day is gone and the rains have come... we are not sure about it until the crops have withered and died.”<sup>5</sup>

Still, it is also argued, that a working definition of drought is important, because “conflicting ... definitions often leads to confusion among decision makers [that] can also lead to inaction, indecision, and ... ad hoc responses of the societal and environmental implications of those responses.”<sup>6</sup> Broad definitions are therefore helpful but only to the extent to which they are made useful by those applying them.

Drought is most often divided into operational categories that are defined by the ruling outcome of a particular dry spell. The main categories are meteorological, agricultural, hydrological and socio-economic drought.<sup>7</sup> Meteorological drought occurs when the amount of precipitation is significantly less than the seasonal average, due to a complex interaction of various meteorological components such as winds and sea streams. They are therefore treated as stochastic in nature, determined by random distribution of probabilities.<sup>8</sup> In a meteorological sense, drought occurs annually in southern Africa. The degree thereof varies greatly, but at times all

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<sup>4</sup> D. Daly, *Wet as a Shag, Dry as a Bone* (Queensland: Department of Primary Industrie), 1994),5.

<sup>5</sup> I.R. Tannehill, *Drought, its Causes and Effects* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947). Quoted by D.A. Wilhite and M.H. Glantz, “Understanding the Drought Phenomenon: The Role of Definitions,” D.A. Wilhite, W.E. Easterling and D.A. Wood, eds. *Planning for Drought: Toward a Reduction of Societal Vulnerability* ( Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1986), 13.

<sup>6</sup> Wilhite and Glantz, “Understanding the Drought Phenomenon,”13.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*,14.

<sup>8</sup> F.K. Hare, “Drought and Desiccation: Twin Hazards of a Variable Climate,” Wilhite et al., *Planning for Drought*,” 3.

agricultural regions are affected.<sup>9</sup> Agricultural drought transpires when some aspects of meteorological droughts, such as lack of rainfall, negatively impacts on agricultural needs, like soil moisture. The severity of such a drought depends on the amount of water needed to run a farm, amongst other things.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, what a crop farmer might experience as a drought might not be experienced as such by a neighbouring stock farmer. A hydrological drought is described as one that arises when water runoff from rainfall does not replenish surface and underground water supply,<sup>11</sup> or when groundwater has been excessively mined.<sup>12</sup> Lastly, in defining a socio-economic drought, the fact that the anthropogenic significance of drought cannot be divorced from its social context is taken into account. The impact of drought depends largely on society's vulnerability to drought at that particular moment,<sup>13</sup> or as Daly put it "when land is used beyond its capacity, demand for water will eventually be greater than supply, and the distinction between true droughts and artificially created droughts will blur."<sup>14</sup> When attempting to define drought it becomes clear that designating a particular weather pattern as a drought is in itself a rather futile exercise, drought only becomes a salient concept when it is viewed as such.

It is also important to distinguish between the concepts of 'drought,' 'aridity' and 'desiccation,' since they all refer to conditions of dryness with which those farmers had to cope. The concepts are related, and their similar but distinct characters are important for understanding the discourses surrounding a lack of rain and dryness. Drought, as one meteorologist described it, "resembles mononucleosis: you get it, you get over it...", whereas desiccation "is like a chronic wasting disease: you get it but you don't get over it. It slowly worsens."<sup>15</sup> Aridity describes a more permanent state, the environment of a particular area on a spectrum of moisture levels.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> J.F. Erasmus, "Methodologies for Drought Monitoring Using Meteorological Data," (DPhil (Agric) diss., University of the Free State, 1991), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Daly, *Wet as a Shag, Dry as a Bone*, 18-19.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> J. Bandyopadhyay, "Riskful Confusion of Drought and Man-Induced Water Scarcity," *Ambio* 18, (1989): 284.

<sup>13</sup> Willhite and Glantz "Understanding the Drought Phenomenon," 13.

<sup>14</sup> Daly, *Wet as a Shag, Dry as a Bone*, 5.

<sup>15</sup> As will be seen, drought was also treated as an illness by some state officials in the 1930s.

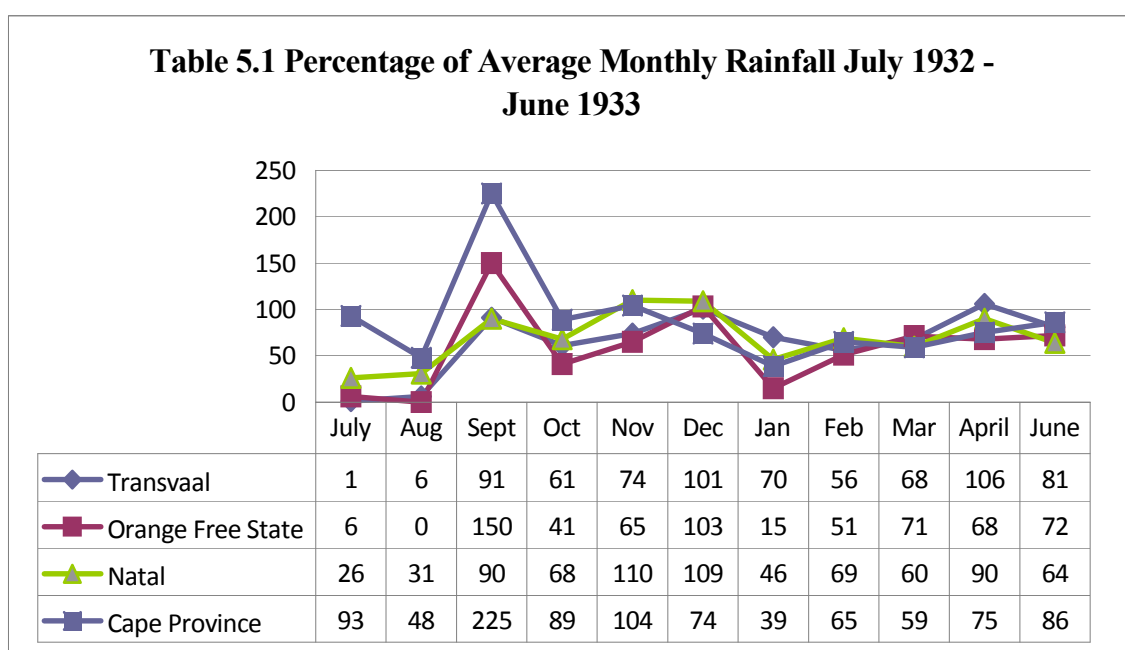
Hare, "Drought and Desiccation: Twin Hazards of a Variable Climate," 3.

<sup>16</sup> Erasmus, "Methodologies for Drought Monitoring," 6.



Nearly 91 per cent of South Africa is classified as arid, semi-arid or dry sub-humid.<sup>17</sup> The following chart illustrates the rainfall pattern for the 1932/1933 season, a season remembered as one of great drought. As can be read from the chart (table 5.1), the Orange Free State had some particularly dry months, more so than any other province. Usually, a drought was declared when less than 70 per cent of the expected average rainfall *per month* is received over a period of a few months. This took into account that winters with very little rain were the norm. From this chart one can see that the Orange Free State received only four months of what was considered sufficiently average rainfall, two of them only barely so.

Table 5.1<sup>18</sup>



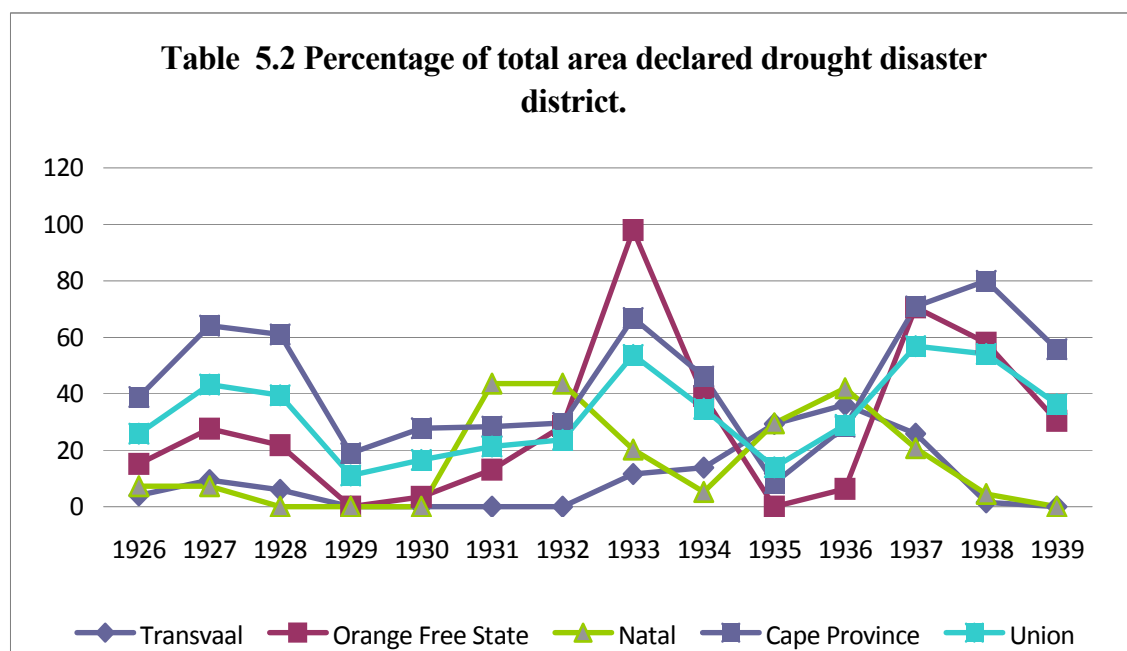
In 1935, a German specialist in South African agricultural conditions stated that the average farmer had an average of two dry years in every five, and that this determined

<sup>17</sup> R.O. Barnard, A.J. van der Merwe, M.C. de Villiers, G.M.E. van der Merwe & N.E. Mulibana, "Problem Soils including Degraded Soils: Extent, Present Use, Management and Rehabilitation in South Africa," *Management of Degraded Soils in Southern and East Africa (MADS-SEA)* Proceedings of the 2<sup>nd</sup> MADS-SEA-Network Meeting held at ARC-ISCW, Pretoria, (18-22 September 1995): 126.

<sup>18</sup> T.E.W. Schumann, "Die Jaar se Weerstoestande in die Unie," *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (December, 1933): 523.

the whole agricultural set-up in South Africa.<sup>19</sup> Major droughts that lead to crop failures and major stock losses in the Union of South Africa included the 1919 drought, which prompted the Drought Investigation Commission. Another drought hampered agriculture from 1926 to 1928. The Great Drought of 1933, falling, not coincidentally, with the Great Depression, probably had and still has the most deep-reaching cultural meaning attached to it. The following chart, although it is based on the amount of drought districts declared – and therefore has all the traps of bureaucratic definitions of drought – still gives an indication of the severity of drought in the late 1920s and early 1930s, seen then as a particularly difficult time for (white) agriculture in the Union:

Table 5.2<sup>20</sup>



As can be seen, the Union was, in the space of thirteen years, never without a declared drought district, and during the 1933 drought, almost the whole Orange Free State was declared a drought disaster district. What is also interesting to note is that during 1937, there were on average more drought disaster districts than in 1933. This could

<sup>19</sup> C.T. Klugist, *Grundlagen und Entwicklungsrichtung der Landwirtschaftliche Erzeugung in der Suedafrikanischen Union*, (Berlin: Verlagsbuchhandlung Paul Parey, 1935), 32.

<sup>20</sup> S.J. de Swardt, "Staatsvoorsiening teen Droogte: Die omvang van die Droogtevraagstuk." *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (June 1941):17.

suggest a couple of things. It could show that something must have struck a particular psychological chord during the 1933 drought, strengthening its social impact, and therefore it is still perceived as probably the worst drought in Southern Africa until the 1950s. The second possibility is that it was merely a sign that the government took stronger measures, or intervened more strongly for political reasons. Nevertheless, it does underline the arbitrariness of declaring drought. The third major drought of the era under review is that of 1945, when memories of 1933 abounded.<sup>21</sup>

## 5.2 Drought as historic phenomenon in South Africa.

It is often claimed that in ‘the past’ drought was merely considered to be a meteorological phenomenon; “an event caused by meteorological circumstances and characterised by a lack of water.”<sup>22</sup> “Drought,” it is believed, “is *still* generally viewed as either an ‘idiosyncratic’, a transient event, or a temporary climatic aberration.”<sup>23</sup> [My emphasis].

Generally, no evidence is supplied to support this assumption. The view of drought as idiosyncratic was not one necessarily adopted by most South African meteorologists. Rather, it appears as if they had readily accepted the notion that droughts are a ‘normal occurrence’, part of the ‘average’ weather patterns in South Africa by the time of the Union. In the words of one meteorologist from the Transvaal:

“Droughts are of common occurrence in South Africa. They must be regarded as an integral part of the controls governing South African life and are constantly recurring, varying in intensity from season to season and from one part to another.”<sup>24</sup>

The Drought Investigation Commission mentioned in 1923 that conditions determining drought in South Africa are far removed from that of say, London.

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<sup>21</sup> M. Shadiack, “Droogte,” *LW* (17 December 1941): 17; J.P. Botha, “Droogte,” *LW* (7 January 1942):15; Leoma, “‘n Boer mag nie moed verloor nie: Herinnerings aan die 1933-droogte,” *LW* (27 May 1942):17; J.H. Potgieter, “Ek sal die 1933-droogte nooit vergeet nie,” *LW* (27 May 1942):37.

<sup>22</sup> Erasmus, “Methodologies for Drought Monitoring,” 6.

<sup>23</sup> J. McIntire: “Would better information from an early warning system improve African food security?” Wilhite et al, *Planning for Drought*.

<sup>24</sup> W.R. Thompson, *Moisture and Farming in South Africa* (South African Agricultural Series 14, (Pretoria: Central News Agency, 1936), 39.

Technically, it would seem that their definition was purely meteorological: “ordinarily the word drought means a want of rain, or dry weather”,<sup>25</sup> but they quickly qualified their definition saying that “the meaning then, to be attached to the word drought in this report, is a period when grazing has become so scarce and the supply of water at the drinking places so diminished that loss of stock results.”<sup>26</sup> The Commission started out with, amongst other things, the task to inquire whether or not the rainfall in South Africa has significantly decreased.<sup>27</sup> Yet, in their report they concluded that the rainfall had not diminished, nor did droughts necessarily increase. They found that the effects of drought and the intensity thereof worsened due to human impact on the land and the subsequent increased vulnerability to drought. Furthermore, the stakes were raised with commercial farming and at least quantitatively, more could be lost. (If a subsistence farmer lost everything due to a drought, the qualitative impact would be just as bad, if not worse). The commission surmised that this (the higher risk factor) was the reason that the 1919 drought was worse in the Cape than in the Orange Free State:

“The signs are visible; the writing is on the wall: destruction of vegetation and the spread of non-edible plants, soil erosion, and a dwindling population are all present. Only the fact that the Orange Free State has not been stocked as long as the Cape Midlands has saved it from exhibiting, for as long a period, the same unsatisfactory symptoms.”<sup>28</sup>

Drought, therefore, was not taken to be just a simple lack of rain against which man was powerless. In this, however, the perceptions of drought and of desiccation were often comingled. The worsening effects of drought, superimposed on the semi-arid environment, were frequently taken as proof of South Africa’s ‘drying up’. In this context, there was an understanding that drought was not an aberration, but a condition that can and should be controlled. The control was seen as especially important as patriotic duty, with rhetoric questions like the following: “We talk about

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<sup>25</sup> *Finale Rapport van die Droogte Ondersoek Kommissie, Oktober 1923* (Cape Town: State Press, 1923) [U.G. 49-'23.], 4.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

love of the father land, but what if there is no father land to love?”<sup>29</sup> To conquer drought was seen as vital for ensuring the survival of the white race in Southern Africa, expressed in a very similar manner than the call to fight erosion. The following plea is illustrative of this:

“Free Staters be vigilant! Everyone must conscientiously do their best to fight against drought and so that the predicted “barren South Africa” will be turned into a land of prosperity, of happiness and contentment, yes, of plenitude, not just for us, but also for our children.”<sup>30</sup>

The concept that drought – as an outcome rather than an event – can and must be controlled was not just relayed to farmers through appealing to patriotic duty, but also through appealing to the private sphere of individual survival. This came through in the following piece published in the *Landbouweekblad* after a drought had been broken:

“If the difficult times of drought are past, and the rain brought new life to the veld and the land, eager to display its fertility, to resuscitate the crops, will the farmer in the easing brought by the long-awaited rain, forget the lesson of the waning crops and the lifeless animals? .... Will he once again suppose nature to be infallible, the same nature that so oft fails him? Will he not at last realise that our land is one of infrequent rainfall, where droughts, mostly long, are the rule and not the exception. Will he not learn that drought is a frequent visitor, and in the light of this adopt better farming methods?”<sup>31</sup>

This passage also displayed several elements of the scientific and official discourse around drought. It recognised the emotional connotations of drought. Having said that, it was also a strongly worded appeal which sought to warn farmers that droughts

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<sup>29</sup> “Ons praat van Vaderlandsliefde, maar wat sal die liefde baat as daar nie ‘n vaderland is om lief te hê nie?” Agricola, “Is Suid-Afrika aan die Opdroog?” *LW* (11 August 1948): 39 - 44. Also see J.C. Greyling, “Lesse en Ernstige Vermanings aan Boere van Suid-Afrika,” *LW* (6 February 1946):19.

<sup>30</sup> “Vrystaters wees wakker!! Doen elkeen nou pligsgetrou sy uiterste tot die bestryding van die droogte en hierdie voorspelde “Dorre Suid-Afrika” sal omskep word in ‘n land van voorspoed, van geluk en tevredenheid, ja van oorvloed nie net vir ons nie, maar ook vir ons nageslagte.” C. Foord, “Middels wat Aangewend Behoort te Word tot Oplossing van die Droogtevraagstuk,” *LW* (1 January 1941):42.

<sup>31</sup> “As die swaar dae van droogte verby is en die reëns weer nuwe lewe aan die veld gebring het en die grond, ywerig om sy vrugbaarheid ten toon te sprei, die gewasse weer laat herlewe, sal die boer in die verligting van die langverwagte reëns, weer die les van kwynende gesaaides en dooi diere vergeet?... Sal hy weer reken dat die natuur onfeilbaar is, die natuur wat hy nie kan beheers nie en wat hom so dikwels in die steek gelaat het? Sal hy nie ten laaste besef dat ons land ‘n land is waar die reënsval onseker is, en waar droogtes, meestal lank, die reel en nie die uitsondering is nie? Sal hy nie leer dat droogte ‘n gereelde besoeker is nie en in die lig van die kennis sy boerdery beter prober inrig nie? (n/a) “Droogte,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (March 1927): 441.

are the rule and not the exception. It follows that drought was seen a frequent, if unwelcome, visitor, whose destructiveness could be curtailed by taking the right precautions. One can maybe see the ‘visitor’ metaphor as a sign that drought was seen as idiosyncratic, a visitor that cannot be evicted remains a visitor, however, it is explicitly stated that farmers should stop thinking of South Africa as a country with abundant rain. This again conflated drought and aridity. Furthermore, the passage also showed that drought was not seen as a neutral characteristic, neither for humans nor for the veld, the latter receiving anthropomorphic attention in this passage. Yet another metaphor used by officials with regards to drought was that of a terminal and unfortunate ailment:

“The drought question is a constitutional ailment of South Africa. The geographical nature of our country and other natural factors are responsible for the irregular rainfall. These limitations have simply got to be recognised and taken into consideration; as a nation and as individuals we have to adapt our methods of farming to our conditions.”<sup>32</sup>

The Carnegie Commission of Inquiry into poor-whiteism also considered drought to be an accepted and indelible part of the landscape of South Africa. In itself, drought was seen as unconquerable, one of the “natural causes of doubt and instability in the farming sector, which frequently leads to undeserved pauperisation and decreases the potential of the farm.”<sup>33</sup> Although it was deemed possible to insure directly against hail and “even locusts”, insuring against drought was considered to be “an impossibility.”<sup>34</sup> Rather, farmers had to be taught how to make provision for drought.<sup>35</sup> By the 1940s, the idea of drought as part of the natural limitations on farming in South Africa was firmly established at least among officials.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> SANA 34/6: J.C.G Kemp Collection, Speeches and Bills, Anon. South African Agricultural Union Congress October 1928, Chief Items for discussion, 3.

<sup>33</sup> G.W.Schumann, “Werkverruiming op die Platteland deur die Algemene Bevordering van die Landbou,” P. du Toit (compiler), *Verslag van die Volkskongres oor die Armblankevraagstuk Kimberley* (2-5 October 1934):155.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Department of Agriculture and Forestry, *Reconstruction of Agriculture: Report of the Reconstruction Committee of the Department of Agriculture and Forestry* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1943). [G.P.-S – 1943-4], 4.

### 5.3 Drought, desiccation and erosion.

Even though it is clear that most scientists and officials saw drought as a normal characteristic of South Africa (with the exception of adherents to the Schwarz scheme, whose appeal will be discussed later), they still felt the urgent need to try and convince farmers that they must accept drought as a normal part of South African life.<sup>37</sup> This leads us to the question of why did they think it necessary to implore the farmers to accept this as a fact, and how did they go about it?<sup>38</sup>

The appeal for better farming methods to combat drought was closely tied to the call for combating erosion. Soil erosion, it was observed, not only aggravated the effects of drought, but it also causes agricultural and hydrological drought. J.D. Schonken, who wrote an apocalyptic and polemical book on the subject in 1921, described the relationship between erosion and desiccation like land that could not ‘sponge-up’ the water. It consequently flowed off the earth’s surface like it would from an iron plate.<sup>39</sup> Erosion, being a more visual, tangible phenomenon, became (with deforestation), the object that the state urged farmers to control, the symptom of the drought ailment that could be treated.

In terms of desiccation and erosion, the state took an expressed paternalistic role in its attempt to save ‘nature’ (and agricultural output) from the irresponsible and dependent hands of its children. In a speech reminiscing about his time as minister in the “times of suffering”,<sup>40</sup> when the government increased its interference with agriculture, Kemp verbalised this role of the state, saying that he “felt like a father punishing a child when my heart bled for him.”<sup>41</sup> With such a large and important part of their constituencies based in the agricultural arena, the state also had little choice

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<sup>37</sup>See, for example, (n/a) “ ‘n Versekering teen Droogte,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (September 1927):227.; (n/a) “Die Stryd teen Droogte,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (July 1928): 761.

<sup>38</sup> Whether or not there was an increase in the frequencies of drought climatologically or not is not an issue here, at that space in time it was not possible for the scientists to assess this. In fact, it remains a rather difficult thing to do, see for instance D.J. Nash, “On the Dry Valleys of the Kalahari: Documentary Evidence of Environmental Change in central South Africa,” *The Geographical Journal*, 162 (1996):154 – 168. What is more relevant to this thesis is that it was believed that South Africa was drying up.

<sup>39</sup> J.D. Schonken, *Dorre Suid-Afrika* (Bloemfontein: De Nationale Pers, 1921), 4-5.

<sup>40</sup> “swaarkry tye”

<sup>41</sup> “soos ‘n vader wat sy kind bestraf terwyl sy hart vir hom bloei.” SANA A34/6: Speech delivered by Kemp during his service as Minister of Lands.

but to intercede on the farmer's behalf. Agriculture gave internal stability to the state.<sup>42</sup> Bailing the farmers out during hard times through artificially keeping agriculture afloat was mutually beneficent to the farmer and state. This approach had arguably a significant effect on nature, something of which the farmers and the state were not necessarily unaware. To mitigate this, conservation farming was advocated as saving nature as well as saving the national and personal income. It is possible that erosion became a much bigger threat not just due to commercial farmers<sup>43</sup> farming 'against nature', but because of the increased demands on agriculture to produce for the consumer, which, especially in a pastoral country like South Africa, increased the problem of erosion.

The idea that South Africa was drying up and that farming methods needed adaptation, was widely accepted and generated a number of letters and popular works like that of Schonken which drew heavily on American examples for substance, even in pre-Dust Bowl years. Apart from providing the necessary material from what was seen as an ecologically comparable semi-arid country, the link to America also linked South Africa to a global agricultural knowledge network. The axis of this network was shifting away from the British metropole to what was believed an American idea of progressively taming the soil, making it heed the market demands by any means necessary.

Several schemes were proposed to both literally and figuratively 'tame' the environment in South Africa, literally bending rivers to the people's will, in order to reinvigorate agriculture in South Africa. Most had the explicit aim of bettering the (white) economic prospects of the country proposed to artificially change the geological landscape to such an extent that the amount of water available to the Union would be increased.

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<sup>42</sup> C. Potgieter, "Die Aard en Betekenis van Landbou," *LW* (19 February 1930): 257.

<sup>43</sup> A different set of reasons would probably apply to increased erosion in areas that focused on so-called subsistence farming, such as the native reserves, where overpopulation and a different order of political and economic variables applied. See for instance the work of Kate Showers and Nancy Jacobs.



Probably the most influential scheme, one that subsequently also picked up on in the erosion debates of the 1940s<sup>44</sup>, was that of E.H.L. Schwarz, a professor in geology who contended that the drying up of lakes in the Kalahari Ngami-basin was responsible for the unfavourable moisture situation in the Union.<sup>45</sup> According to him, the drying up of the ‘Kalahari lakes’ was due to erosion at the upper-reaches of the Zambezi River, in particular the formation of the Victoria Falls, draining the Kalahari lakes. He proposed their revival through redirecting the waters of several adjacent rivers into these lakes. He argued that this would lead to a decrease in evaporation levels, thereby gradually restoring a more favourable rainfall in the Union.<sup>46</sup> The scheme received wide publicity,<sup>47</sup> causing a sufficient amount of public interest to warrant a government investigation. The investigation was done in 1925 under the chairmanship of H.S. du Toit, who also led the Drought Investigation Committee.<sup>48</sup> The scheme was roundly dismissed.<sup>49</sup> Thompson, a prominent meteorologist, called the Schwarz-Kalahari scheme “fantastic”, saying that it “appeals particularly to the layman. In responsible scientific circles it receives no support.”<sup>50</sup> The scheme resonated with the public, however, as it promised an instant ‘quick-fix’ solution. Schwarz also specifically advocated the scheme as a solution for the poor-white problem, as irrigation communities could be established. He believed that it was “the moral influence of the droughts that are so pernicious; farmers year after year see their best efforts nullified, their hopes raised by every promise of a good season, to be

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<sup>44</sup> The most visible polemic to draw on the Schwarz scheme was the ‘Landegenoot’ debate in the *Landbouweekblad*, where he proposed the Drakensberg Mountains be exploded and the Orange River drained to create ‘thousands of marshes.’ See Landgenoot, “Daar sal gesê word: Die Ou Mense het nie van beter gewees nie,” *LW* (3 January 1945):15, 17, 19, 21-22, 25; (n/a) “Menings van Ons Lesers: ‘Laat ons maar by kontoerwalle bly,’” *LW* (24 January 1945): 19; Landgenoot, “Menings van Ons Lesers: Gronderosie,” *LW* (21 February 1945): 19, 21; H. de Bruin, “Menings van Ons Lesers: Kontoerwalle Ons Enigste Redding,” *LW* (24 January 1945): 19; (n/a) “Pak die Kwaad by die Oorsprong,” *LW* (14 March 1945): 23, 27; (n/a) “Menings van Ons Lesers: Die Ideale Versperring en Onderaardsewater-Bewaring,” *LW* (11 April 1945):19; H.J. Nel, “‘Landgenoot’ te Lyf Gegaan,” *LW* (6 June 1945): 27; Landgenoot, “Menings van Ons Lesers: Versperring van Slote om Erosie te Bestry,” *LW* (24 October 1945): 27 – 28.

<sup>45</sup> E.H.L. Schwarz, *The Kalahari, or Thirstland Redemption* (Cape Town: T Maskew Miller and Oxford: Blackwell, 1920); E.H.L. Schwarz, “The Kalahari and its Possibilities,” *Journal of the Royal African Society* 20 (October 1920):1-12.

<sup>46</sup> Thompson, *Moisture and Farming in South Africa*, 20.

<sup>47</sup> G.J. van der Merwe, “Die Veelbesproke Skema,” *LW* (14 March 1945):23; W.R. Thompson, *Moisture and Farming*, 20; W.J.R. Alexander, “Science, history and the Kasikili Island Dispute” *South African Journal of Science* 95, (1999):322.

<sup>48</sup> Another investigation followed in 1935 under the then Minister of Agriculture, Col. Deneys Reitz. F. Brownlee, “Kalahari Irrigation,” *Journal of the Royal African Society* 38 (January 1939):109-113.

<sup>49</sup> Thompson, *Moisture and Farming*, 21.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*.

dashed by its failure and persistency.”<sup>51</sup> In the broader picture, the control of the Kalahari considered vital, because “unless South Africa finds a way to conquer the Kalahari, the Kalahari will conquer South Africa.”<sup>52</sup>

The popularity of the Schwarz scheme could have been due to echoes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century paradigm of moral ethno-climatology. This was the belief that ethnic constitution was riveted to the climatic characteristics of a region – temperate climates encouraging the development of superior races and tropical climates shaping inferior ones.<sup>53</sup> The conclusion drawn from this, according to Enfield and Nash, was that “improvements in climate across regions fostered improvements in humanity.”<sup>54</sup> When interwoven with theories of European ability to adapt to ‘alien’ environments,<sup>55</sup> the resonance of such a scheme, and the equation of drought and related concepts like desiccation and erosion as threats to white existence in Southern Africa becomes clear.

The nineteenth century notion that whites must not become a ‘slave’ to nature, but rather a ‘master’, could also be conflated with the newer environment of the industrialisation and commercialisation of agriculture, and the difficulties this presented:

“The farming population is still the slave of nature and the economic circumstance. They are subjected to and dependent on the influencing environment, instead of being the master thereof. Through drought, locust, plant

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<sup>51</sup> Schwarz, “The Kalahari and its Possibilities,” 5.

<sup>52</sup> (n/a) “Review: The Kalahari, or Thirstland Redemption by E.H.L. Schwarz and The Kalahari Problem by August Karlson,” *Journal of the African Society* 20 (October 1920): 67.

<sup>53</sup> G.H. Endfield and D.J. Nash, “Missionaries and Morals: Climatic Discourse in Nineteenth Century Central Southern Africa,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 92 (December 2002): 728.

<sup>54</sup> Endfield and Nash “Missionaries and Morals,” 728.

<sup>55</sup> Aldo Leopold, a prominent American conservationist, expressed it as such: “Pioneering a new country is hard labour. It has absorbed the best brawn and brains of the Nordic race since before the dawn of history. Anthropologists tell us that we, the Nordics, have a racial genius or pioneering, surpassing all other races in ability to reduce the wilderness to possession.” A. Leopold, “Pioneers and Gullies,” S.L. Flader and J.B. Callicott, *The River of the Mother of God and other Essays by Aldo Leopold*. (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991): 106. Also see G.H. Endfield and D.J. Nash, “Missionaries and Morals: Climatic Discourse in Nineteenth Century Central Southern Africa,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92 (December 2002): 728. For a counter-example, there is the quote by John Iliffe: “Africans have been and are the frontiersmen who have colonised an especially hostile region of the world... That has been their chief contribution to history. The central themes of African history is the peopling of the continent, the achievement of human coexistence with nature...” J. Iliffe, *Africans: The History of A Continent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1.

diseases, animal diseases, the middle-man, undesirable market and transport opportunities, the harvest and the profit of the farmer is diminished or destroyed, because the farmers do not individually and jointly triumph over the Dingaans that are against them.”<sup>56</sup>

The speech, which was given on The Day of the Covenant, a key ethnic-nationalist event on the Afrikaner calendar, closely uses the myth-making tool of a public holiday, combining racial ideologies with the call to master the environment. Another element that can be traced in this speech is the element of fear. Anxiety about nature is heightened when it is also anxiety about one’s own safety, becoming “a public force when the objects of individual concern can be melded credibly into a threat to the nation and humanity.”<sup>57</sup>

#### **5.4 The trauma of drought.**

Fear and trauma are two emotions that dominated discourses around drought, and on this level locust plagues were associated with the more fearsome engagements with the environment in agriculture. Drought was “the most feared of all the natural scourges that the farmer has to cope with, and there is nothing else that makes them despair so much.”<sup>58</sup> The intensity of the fear and despair wrought by drought was keenly observed in the following extract from a short story that was published in the *Landbouweekblad* as part of a series of articles on the 1933 drought:

“Drought! The word sent shivers down his spine. Then some people speak so easily about drought! Of bore-holes, of maize, dry-feed and all such things but what does it help if it does not rain? As if humanity can survive without rain! ... Drought! It is enough to drive the strongest man to insanity! Why must he

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<sup>56</sup> “Die boerende bevolking is nogsteeds die slawe van die natuur en van ekonomiese omstandighede. Hulle is onderdanig en afhanklik van die beïnvloedende omgewing, in plaas van beheer daaroor te hê en meesters daarvan te wees, Deur droogte, sprinkane, plantsiektes, dieresiektes, die middelman, ongunstige mark-en vervoer geleenthede, word die oes en die profit ban die boer verminder, of vernietig, omdat die boere individueel en gesamentlik nog nie die Dingaans wat optrek teen hulle boerdery verslaan en in bedwang hou nie.”

F.E. Geldenhuys, “Toespraak gehou aan die Modderivier naby Bloemfontein, op Dingaansdag, 16 Desember 1922,” *LW* (20 Desember 1922):769.

<sup>57</sup> J. Radkau, *Nature and Power: A Global History of the Environment* (Washington D.C.: German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 2008), 266.

<sup>58</sup> P.R. Viljoen, “’nOorsig van die Unie se Landboubedryf: Jaarverslag van die Sekretaris van Landbou en Bosbou vir die Jaar geëindig 30 Augustus 1938,” *Boedery in Suid-Afrika* (December 1938): 460.

observe it a moment more? It would be better if he can lie down, like his animals out there on the plain, then he will rest! Rest from the misery that surrounds him! His eyes will not see anymore, and the horrific pain of sorrow that gnaws at his soul will not be felt!”<sup>59</sup>

At the end of the story, a shower of rain saves the main character from committing suicide.<sup>60</sup> On the same level drought was also linked to religion, with Days of Humiliation held where communities, usually in the form of their church congregation, held special services to pray for rain.

The despair that was caused by drought was described by C.W. de Kiewiet, in the paradigm of etho-climatology, as a determining factor in the character of the white Afrikaans farmer:

“Drought belaboured men of courage and persistence, who would not break under the first lash of adversity ... until in their minds and bodies was the barren apathy of men who believed it was vain to pit their energies against the weather.”<sup>61</sup>

This ‘barren apathy’ was also taken to cause a downward spiral, which could lead to extinction when it is not come to terms with:

“South Africa has indeed many questions that must still be solved, yet the one that overshadows the rest, even the native-question, is that of fighting drought... Alas, man, to whom the Creator gave the largest mind, came upon the scene and instead of helping nature to conserve its riches for the descendants ... he did everything in his power to destroy everything that nature took ages to create.”<sup>62</sup>

When drought has been overcome, it was implied, the existence on the soil would be ensured. In a description of the successful farmer, his ability to overcome drought,

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<sup>59</sup> “Droogte! Die word laat ‘n koue rilling deur al sy ledemate trek. Dan kan party mense so maklik praat van droogte! Van boorgate, mielies, droë voer en die dergelike dinge, maar wat help dit alles as dit nie reën nie? Net asof die mensdom sonder reën kan klaar kom! ... Droogte! Dis genoeg om die sterkste man waansinnig te maak! En waarom moet hy dit ‘n oomblik langer aanskou? Dit is beter dat hy soos sy diere daar buite op die vlaktes gaan lê, dan sal hy rus! Rus van al die ellende wat rondom hom is! Sy oë sal nie meer sien nie, en die vreeslike pyn van jammerte wat sy siel so deurknaag, sal hy ook nie meer voel nie!” M. Shadiack, “Droogte,” *LW* (17 Desember 1941): 17.

<sup>60</sup> M. Shadiack, “Droogte,” *LW* (17 Desember 1941): 17.

<sup>61</sup> C.W. de Kiewiet, *History of South Africa, Social and Economic* (1941), as quoted by W. Beinart and P. Delius, “Introduction” W. Beinart, P. Delius and S. Trapido eds *Putting a Plough to the Ground: Accumulation and Dispossession in Rural South Africa 1850-1930*, (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1986), 6.

<sup>62</sup> G.J. Bosman, “Die Droogtevraagstuk,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (February 1940).

and the battle against locusts amongst other things, was upheld as major reasons for success:

“he has the courage and the trust of youth. He is full of enthusiasm and has an uncommonly good sense of humour. It is mainly these attribute that, for a quarter of a century, helped him against the loneliness, the fight against the locusts, the drought-wrought despair, the destructive fires, now and then the flood and the hail, curious and mysterious diseases under his stock, and the continuing problems with barest labour.”<sup>63</sup>

On the one hand, the belonging to the soil was portrayed as an intimate part of the identity of the farmer, especially when “we spell Boer with a capital letter.”<sup>64</sup> On the other hand it was seen as an eternal struggle to set roots and survive: “If it is not droughts it was floods, if there are no locusts, then we get...some or other plague or pest,” Kemp told one audience.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, Kemp’s whole term was described as a “time of Depression, Drought and Locust destruction.”<sup>66</sup>

### **5.5 Soil and identity.**

The importance of locust plagues for Afrikaners cannot be untangled from the backdrop of drought, without it losing its particular psychological and cultural patterns. As already mentioned in chapter 4, locust plagues frequently seem to follow just as a drought has been broken, which made it a much more traumatic experience. On a more visceral level than erosion, locust plagues were a tangible part of the landscape that was experienced by the Afrikaner farmers through the filter of identity, a process that also altered that identity.

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<sup>63</sup> T.D. Hall, “Van Setlaar tot Suid-Afrikaner,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (April 1929):13.

<sup>64</sup> Boer is Afrikaans for farmer, as well as a marker of identity, hence the remark of boer with a capital letter. J.F.W. Grosskopf, “Boerdery as ‘n nering: Instandhouding van ons Boerelewe,” *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* (October 1935).

<sup>65</sup> “As dit nie droogtes is nie, is dit verspoelings; kom daar nie sprinkane nie, kry ons “army worm” of een of ander plaag of pes.” SANA A/34/6: J.C.G Kemp Collection, Speeches and Bills, Speech to open Agricultural Show, c. 1930.

<sup>66</sup> “Dit was ‘n tyd van Depressie, Droogtes en Sprinkaanverwoesting” SANA A/34/3: Letter from Aberdeen Farmers Union to General Kemp on his resignation. 18 January 1935.

The state was aware of this appropriation of the farm environment in shaping identity, and this influenced its relationship with farmers. This was commented upon by an Australian tour group:

“It would seem that farming in South Africa has a very strong sentimental appeal. The Government, and people not specifically or directly concerned, have a tolerance and sympathy that is very largely inspired by a traditional sentiment which is an integral part of life in South Africa.”<sup>67</sup>

The issue of soil and identity is not just one of ephemeral sentimentality though. The Agricultural Reconstruction Committee saw this as a more universal characteristic, one that could be harnessed:

“It is almost a universal fact that the personal relationship of a farmer to his land is of supreme importance, and that usually the best farmers, that is the farmers who maintain and even improve the fertility of land, are those with an almost sentimental attachment to the soil.”<sup>68</sup>

In the communities itself, the way drought and soil was absorbed into discourses of identity manifested most clearly in the *plaasroman*. In the *plaasroman*, land equalled identity and identity equalled meaning. Nature was closely described, with a humanising effect.<sup>69</sup> Soil for the Afrikaner was indelibly linked to drought, literally and figuratively, and through losing the soil to drought, part of the identity will be lost as the land would not be kept for the sons, a central theme in many of the novels. The most classic examples are found in the works of C.M. van den Heever. He started out as a journalist for the *Landbouweekblad*<sup>70</sup> and won the prestigious Hertzog prize twice for *Somer* (1935)<sup>71</sup> and *Laat Vrugte* (1939)<sup>72</sup>. In Van den Heever’s work, Afrikaner identity and culture was closely intertwined with the milieu of the farm. In his work *Droogte* (1930), there are five brothers, who all represented the demoralising effect of drought. They were all heirs to a farm that has been subdivided, and throughout the novel the main conflict was to hold onto the soil – in which none of them succeeded.

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<sup>67</sup> A.R. Callaghan, *Impressions of Some Rural Enterprises in South Africa*. Department of Agriculture of South Australia, Bulletin 324 (Adelaide: Government Printer, 1939), 12.

<sup>68</sup> [G.P.-S – 1943-4], 41.

<sup>69</sup> A. Coetzee, *‘n Hele Os vir ‘n Ou Broodmes: Grond en die Plaasnarratief sedert 1595* (Cape Town: Van Schaik, Human Rousseau, 2000), 17.

<sup>70</sup> N. Nieman, “Toer gaan op Spoor van C.M. van den Heever,” *Volksblad* (16 May 2002): 2.

<sup>71</sup> C.M. van den Heever, *Somer* (Pretoria: J.L van Schaick, 1935).

<sup>72</sup> C.M. van den Heever, *Laat Vrugte* (Pretoria: J.L van Schaick, 1939).

Moral dilemmas that were linked to drought, both as a literal external phenomenon as well as an internal state of being, included, amongst other things, incest and fratricide. Drought, in this novel, was a deeply personal experience: “Inside him and his brothers were a greater drought than here on the plains; they were empty without the abundant rain of the goodness of God to enrich them from inside.”<sup>73</sup> The only character to come through relatively unscathed also lost a part of his self-worth that he could still hang onto – his belief in his own racial superiority. This is strikingly portrayed in a scene where he, working on the railroad (where poor whites were frequently employed) was passed by a train full of black Africans, who literally looked down upon him and the other workers, stuck out their tongues and threw a piece of dry bread at him. He was humiliated: “Powerless, eyes flaming ... the erstwhile farm owner looked for words: ‘Black scurf, just your luck...’”<sup>74</sup>

It was not just in such canonised works that the links between drought, soil and identity were explored, but it was also a theme in popular literature of a more fleeting nature. An example of this is *Op die Walle van die Vaal* (1934) where the opening scene recounts a father, who, on his deathbed, makes his son promise to make sure that the farm will not fall into foreign hands. Then he gives his son the following advice after relating that neither the “murderous Kaffers” nor the “Hottentot and Bushmen vagrants and thieves”, nor the “imperial government” nor the entreaties of his dearest friends could tear him from his farm:

“but one thing, just one, could triumph over me ... drought! Our land is good ... enough grazing for our stock, fertile lands for gardening. Just one thing is lacking. Write it on your innards, my son, Water, *water*, WATER!”<sup>75</sup>

Experiences of drought, even when seen as something ‘natural’ to the South African environment, were the interface where some of the most visceral and traumatised interaction between Afrikaner farmers, state agricultural institutions and nature took

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<sup>73</sup> “Binne hom en sy broers was ‘n groter droogte as hier op die vlaktes was; hulle was leeg sonder dat die landreën van die goedheid van God hulle binne ryk gemaak het.” C.M. van den Heever, *Droogte* (Pretoria: J.L. van Schaick, 1954), 209.

<sup>74</sup> “Magteloos vlam sy oë...en sluk-sluk die vroeër plaasbesitter na sy woorde: ‘Swarte nerf, dis jou geluk...!’” Van den Heever, *Droogte*, 200.

<sup>75</sup> “Net een ding het my oorwin, net een ding ... droogte! ... Ons land is goed: ruim weiveld vir vee, geil tuinlande. Net een ding ontbreek. Skryf dit op jou ingewande, my seun: Water, *water*, WATER!” N. Hofmeyr *Op die Walle van die Vaal* (Kaapstad, Bloemfontein, Pretoria: Nasionale Pers 1934), 2.

place. Although drought, as opposed to an ecological condition of aridity, may be constructed – being a reality for humans because of their interpretation of it, its impact cannot be ironed out, or made insignificant. The Afrikaner farmers were not unique in having perceptions of drought as one of the binding threads in their relationship with nature. In the context of this thesis, it remains an important element as the primary condition that added gravity to ‘agricultural banes’ such as erosion and locust plagues in the setting of South Africa.



## CONCLUSION

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When looking at agricultural history since industrialisation it is easy to regard ‘nature’ as a variable and a resource with which farmers had to deal. Mostly, ‘natural resources’ feature as an external object with two roles: it is an object of struggle between those who are in the business of generating food and in forces such as drought or pests where it is a risk factor– another of the obstacles in the race to superior capital and power.<sup>1</sup> Nature as subject, intangible, permeating and integral part of history, is usually preserved for the realm of the aesthetic – the game parks, ‘wilderness’ debates or, paradoxically, urban landscapes.<sup>2</sup> The relationship between the farmer – also the white farmer – and nature can also be explored beyond the ‘nature as resource’ paradigm. This adds another dimension to the study of the environment in history. When tracing the history of the relationship between the state, farmers and nature it can add nuance to why farmers reacted to certain state policies and attempts to control in the manner that they did. It shows that the relationship between farmers and nature were more complex than the ownership of or authority over a useful resource. One of the conclusions drawn in this work is that, with the commercialisation of agriculture, the increasing industrialisation, the expert and the state started to move in as middle-men – negotiators between farmer and nature. This was not sudden, precipitous development that was meekly accepted by the farmers, but an active site of ongoing conflict. Looking at the relationship between Afrikaner farmers, nature and state in this way also problematises assumed relationships between Afrikaners as “farmer-settlers” and nature itself. As much as one cannot presume a relationship of tranquil symbioses between ‘indigenous peoples’ and the environment, one cannot suppose that the settler-nature relationship is one of absolute

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<sup>1</sup> A random selection would be for instance: P.J van der Merwe, *Die noortwaartse beweging van die Boere voor die Groot Trek (1770-1842)* (Den Haag, 1938); F. Wilson, “Farming 1866 - 1966,” M. Wilson and L. Thompson, eds. *The Oxford History of South Africa*. Vol II, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971). C. Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* (London: Heinemann, 1979); T.J. Keegan, “The Transformation of Agrarian Society and Economy in Industrialising South Africa: The Orange Free State Grain Belt in the Early twentieth Century,” D.Phil diss. (University of London, 1981).; W. Beinart, P. Delius and S. Trapido, S. eds. *Putting a Plough to the Ground: Accumulation and Dispossession in Rural South Africa 1850-1930* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> Such as T.Ranger “Whose Heritage? The Case of Matoba National Park,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 15 (1989) or J. Carruthers, *The Kruger National Park: a Social and Political History* (Durban: University of Natal Press, 1995).

exploitation and subjugation. The Afrikaner farmers, and other settlers, can also be studied within their environment. This will serve to demythologise, without becoming a Manichean dichotomy between either a Whiggish exoneration or declensionist condemnation.

To make inroads in addressing nature in Afrikaner agriculture, this thesis had set out to explore aspects of Afrikaner agriculture in the first half of the twentieth century within the framework of socio-environmental history. Using sources that might be unconventional, such as popular farming magazines, added the necessary cultural inflection. This was integrated with scientific and archival data, grounding the findings.

When exploring what can be seen as the supposed ‘stumbling blocks’ that nature throws in the path of agriculture, such as soil erosion, that the farmer and the state grappled with, one realises that it carved deeper and wider than merely the donga. It was incorporated into debates about education, modernisation the increasing intervention in agriculture by the state, becoming “subject to laws of power and the preservation of authority.”<sup>3</sup> Most vividly, perhaps, it was taken up in discourses of nationalism. The environment might have influenced Union politics, the economy, and the role of science in agriculture as well as the culture and identity of these farmers. It was, however, not a linear or deterministic process. Politics, economy, culture and identity, fluid categories in themselves, also influenced how people related to nature.

Nature, where it is so intimately linked with livelihood, is also present in the private, personal sphere of farmers lived experiences, especially in the realms of fear and self-preservation. This was illuminated when a very visceral scourge with Biblical resonances, the locust plagues, was explored. In the context of South African history, it is also through this plague that the obvious absence of black Africans in this thesis can be explored, their being notably absent from official and popular texts dealing with white agriculture, except in labour-related context. One must keep in mind, of course, that texts such as the *Landbouweekblad* were intended for an Afrikaans

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<sup>3</sup> Radkau, *Nature and Power: A Global History of the Environment* (Washington D.C.: German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 2008), 9.

readership and would therefore not necessarily focus on Africans except in direct relation to whites – as in, for instance, labour issues. Where Africans are mentioned though, both with regards to soil erosion and locusts, they were taken as part of the African environment, part of the ‘natural’ – and threatening – landscape that needed patrolling and controlling. This was, however, not always the case. On a practical, logistical level, black cooperation as fellow agriculturalists was necessary and this merely added to the myriad ambiguities of race relations in South Africa.

The relationship with the environment has, however, not just meaning within the private sphere, of one individual farmer, his or her state and their reciprocal relationship mediated through nature, but it is also part of much larger discourses. To use Radkau’s formulation, environmental history:

“...is invariably shaped by the formation of ever larger political and more expansive economic entities, and by the growing interconnectedness of the world. The geographic dimension of certain problems increases and the competency to deal with them is claimed by higher political levels: territories, nation-states and supranational institutions.”<sup>4</sup>

Owing to perceived ecological and historical similarities, and also because of trends in global politics, the United States emerged as one of the most influential of these nation-states, especially with regards to knowledge exchange systems.

During the course of the research and writing of the thesis, several lacunae in the historiography were addressed. In the process, other potential subjects and methods were also identified. Other topics that might prove useful to explore in the framework of a socio-environmental history of commercial agriculture include looking at some of the other major ‘environmental crises’ that drove debates in agriculture. Some of these, like livestock diseases, invasive plants and feral animals have been discussed to some extent, but there remain some gaps in the literature.<sup>5</sup> Other topics that received

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<sup>4</sup> Radkau, *Nature and Power*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> A sample could include works like the following: P. Phoofolo, “Epidemics and Revolutions: The Rinderpest Epidemic in late Nineteenth-Century South Africa,” *Past and Present* 138 (February 1993):112-143; W. Beinart, “The Night of the Jackal: Sheep, Pastures and Predators at the Cape,” *Past and Present* 158 (1998):172-206; L. Van Sittert, “ ‘Our irrepressible fellow colonist’: The Biological Invasion of the Prickly Pear (*Opuntia ficus-Indica*) in the Eastern Cape, c. 1890-0 c. 1910,” R. Edgecombe and B. Guest eds. *South Africa’s Environmental History: Cases and Comparisons*. (Athens: Ohio University Press, Series in Ecology and History and Cape Town: David Phillip, 2002, 2003).

publicity in the likes of *Boerdery in Suid-Afrika* and the *Landbouweekblad* and could still be even more fruitfully discussed in this particular context, are deforestation and irrigation (also related to erosion and drought)<sup>6</sup>, and other agricultural pests such as the army worm, that shared some of the notoriety of a locust plague. Moving away from ‘environmental crises’ as a barometer for measuring the relationship between state, farmer and nature in the agricultural sphere, topics that could be delved into are socio-environmental histories of mechanisation and urbanisation. On a methodological level, sources that could also be consulted include radio programmes, like *Boerebelange* and *Landbouradio Roep die Landman*, as radio was a powerful medium of knowledge dissemination, especially from the 1930s. It would also be interesting to do a comparative study of the *Landbouweekblad* and the *Farmer’s Weekly*, in order to gauge to what extent the issues as discussed in this thesis was specific to Afrikaners and what, if measurable, were the differences between Afrikaans and English perceptions of what should be essentially the same environment.

Something that warrants further exploration beyond the scope of this thesis, was the absence in the *Landbouweekblad* and also in the *Huisgenoot* of any ideological reflection whatsoever on the right to white ownership of land and white superiority in rural hierarchy. The relationship between blacks and whites also received little attention beyond the sphere of farmer/ farmwife and labourer. In general, the glaring absence of black Africans from the pages of these magazines requires deeper elucidation.

The various themes and processes explored in this thesis changed over time as paradigms shifted and contexts were rebuilt. As ‘issues,’ land management, agriculture as an international venture, and pest management, are still part of the contemporary agricultural landscape in South Africa. Perhaps some of the current socio-environmental questions and problems will be better understood if aspects of their historical trajectories are traced, something to which this thesis ventures to

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<sup>6</sup>See, for example, e.g. J. Templehoff, “Time and the River: Observations on the Vaal River as Source of Water to the Witwatersrand 1903-1924,” *Historia* 46 (May 2001): 247-70; K. Brown, “The Conservation and Utilisation of the Natural World: Silviculture in the Cape Colony, c.1902-1910,” *Environment and History* 7 (2001):427-48.

contribute. Even though South Africa today is an urbanised state<sup>7</sup> and agriculture contributes less than 3 per cent to the country's total gross domestic product (GDP),<sup>8</sup> it remains a highly politicised sector, where debates are often of an intense personal nature.

With the food crises early in 2008, debates around increased agricultural production, the sustainability of agriculture and food security have intensified. Recently, the African National Congress (ANC) imposed a temporary ban on the sale of state land for the purposes of golf courses and game farms, arguing that they are unproductive ways to use land: that should rather be used for agricultural purposes in order to make South Africa less reliant on food imports.<sup>9</sup> The government also called for an increase in wheat production – a crop that can only be cultivated in a very small area in South Africa, and for which sufficient water resources are lacking.<sup>10</sup> Where food security is concerned, the tension between the state, farmers (both small farmers and commercial farmers) and the environment has since been compounded by the entrance of large agribusiness on the scene, leading farmers and consumers to re-negotiate their relationship with an environment that is neither urban, where 'nature' is replaced by concrete nor 'wilderness,' a space to where people can 'escape', but where the environment is tangible

Land restitution and re-distribution is one of the most explosive and personal questions South Africa is faced with. Not only are people's livelihoods at stake (about 70 per cent of South Africa's poor live in rural areas)<sup>11</sup>, but also because the soil and the land are so closely intertwined with identity politics amongst white and black Africans alike. 'The environment' is not a mute backdrop to agriculture, not on a macro-level of state and policy and certainly not on the micro-level of communities

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<sup>7</sup> 47,47 per cent of black Africans; 86,78 per cent of coloured; 97, 49 per cent of Asian Indians and 89,87 per cent of whites are urbanized, bringing the South African urbanisation average to 56, 27 per cent. P.Kok and M. Collinson. "Migration and Urbanisation in South Africa," *Report no. 03-04-02 (2006)* (Pretoria: Statistics SA, 2006), 19.

<sup>8</sup> The Federation of International Trade Associations (FITA), "South Africa," <<http://fita.org/countries/safrica.html>>, last updated January 2008, (Accessed 20 October 2008).

<sup>9</sup> E.J. Bottomley, "Shortage of arable land," *Sake 24* (21 October 2008), <<http://www.fin24.com/articles/default/displayarticle.aspx?Nav=ns&ArticleID=1518-252413124>>

<sup>10</sup> Personal communication, E.J Bottomley, Economic journalist at *Beeld*. If the country's water is insufficient for wheat, it certainly is so for golf courses, a debate in itself that lays bare fissures along class and culture lines in South Africa.

<sup>11</sup> <<http://www.nda.agric.za/docs/sectorplan/sectorplanE.htm>. > (2001), (Accessed on 20 October 2008).

and individuals. It is consciously and subconsciously absorbed into and changed by processes of cultural mythmaking and the dynamics of power and control – also in the private sphere.

In the light of the increasingly urgent discourse on climate change and global climate change, the factors contributing to it as well as the human responses in dealing with it, the relevance of and interest in socio-environmental history – the need for a better understanding of the multifaceted picture as it developed through history on global, national, but also local level – could only intensify.

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- 1.2 South African National Archives, Pretoria (SANA)
- 1.3 Onderstepoort Archive (OA)
- 1.4 Agricultural Research Council, Plant Protection Institute (ARC-PPI)

### **2. Published Primary Sources**

- 2.1 Books, Bulletins and Journal Articles
- 2.2 Official Reports
- 2.3 Miscellaneous Governmental Publications
- 2.4 Magazines.

### **3. Secondary Sources**

- 3.1 Selected Books
- 3.2 Selected Articles and Chapters in Books
- 3.3 Theses
- 3.4 Commemorative Annuals
- 3.5 Reports

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