

Grahamstown 1914-1918: four wartime themes

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HISTORIANS LOOKING BEYOND South Africa's military involvement in World War I and the Boer rebellion which it provoked, have examined a number of themes.¹ Wartime Grahamstown was affected by at least four of those themes.

ANTI-GERMAN SENTIMENT

A first such theme, directly consequent on the outbreak of war, was a rising tide of anti-German sentiment which, as in other South African centres and overseas,² reached a climax in the wake of the sinking on 7 May 1915 of the Cunard passenger liner *Lusitania* by German torpedoes, claiming many innocent British lives.

In Grahamstown, as in a suitably comparative community like pro-British Natal,³ much of the groundwork for a public explosion of such sentiment had been laid by hostile anti-German press reports. From the outbreak of war in August 1914 the local press was filled with Allied war propaganda against the 'Hun'.⁴ The personal embodiment of all the vices of the 'Hun' was the Kaiser — a source of endless, morbid fascination, speculation, mirth and abuse.⁵ Home-grown verse that poured scorn on the German, together with propaganda from abroad, was published *ad nauseam* in local papers. Understandably, outbursts of Germanophobia occurred most noticeably in the first Christmas season of the war. Perhaps the most noted such occasion was the address given by school council chairman, the Rev. James Robb, later president-designate of the Methodist Conference. He was speaking at the annual prize-giving of Kingswood College and used the day of the occasion — 16 December, the anniversary of Blood River — to tell his applauding audience that 'German aims and purposes', however well concealed, bore 'all the essential elements of a barbarian that even a Tshaka or an Din-Dinga'an (sic) would not have despised'.⁶

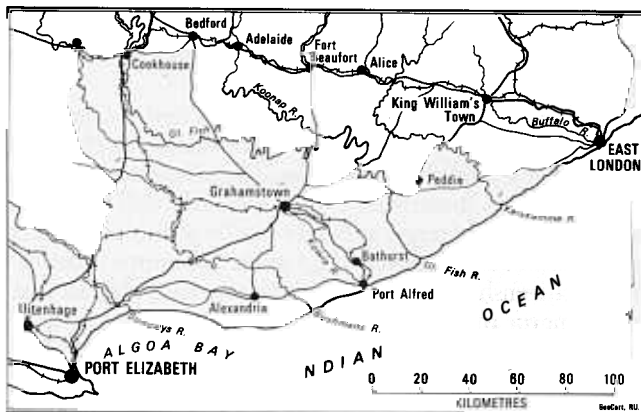
At the level of Grahamstown's wider based civic life, this strong anti-German sentiment singled out a few individuals, chiefly Dr Selmar Schönland, a noted botanist, curator, and later director of the Albany Museum and first professor of his discipline at Rhodes University College, 1905-1925.⁷ He had only just been elected to the City Council, but because he was not a naturalized British subject, he was forced to resign.⁸



Rev. James Robb.

PHOTOGRAPH: CORY LIBRARY, RHODES UNIVERSITY

Then came the sinking of the *Lusitania*. Five days later (on 12 May 1915) anti-German riots broke out in Johannes-



Map of the Eastern Cape showing Grahamstown in the context of its neighbourhood.

MAP: DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY, RHODES UNIVERSITY

¹ Accounts devoted to those more conventional 'main stream' themes include N.G. Ganson, 'South Africa and World War I', in N. Hillmer and P. Wigley, (eds), *The first British Commonwealth: essays in honour of Nicholas Mansergh* (London, 1980), and G.D. Scholtz, *Die Rebellie, 1914-1915* (Johannesburg, 1942). The newer themes are covered in works such as P. Walsh, *The rise of African nationalism in South Africa: the African National Congress, 1912-1952* (London, 1970); A.J. Hughes, 'Anti-German riots in Cape Town, 1915' (B.A. Hons essay, UCT, 1980); G.G. Bruss, 'The impact of the First World War on the German communities in Natal (M.A., UN (Durban), 1981); A. Grundlingh, *Fighting their own war: South African blacks and the First World War* (Johannesburg, 1987); W. Beinart and C. Bundy (eds), *Hidden struggles in rural South Africa: politics and popular movements in the Transkei and Eastern Cape, 1890-1930* (Johannesburg, 1987); H. Phillips, 'South Africa's worst demographic disaster: the Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918', *South African Historical Journal* 20, November 1988, pp.57-74.

² South African newspapers carries press reports of anti-German riots as far apart as Liverpool and British Columbia, the destruction and rioting of German business premises in London, and Germans being set on by a crowd in New York. See *Cape Times*, 11 and 14.5.1915; *Cape Argus*, 12-13.5.1915 (quoted in Hughes, 'Anti-German riots in Cape Town, 1915'); or *Natal Mercury*, 10.5.1915 (quoted in Bruss, 'Impact of First World War in Natal', p.176). A recent, complementary analysis of the anti-German demonstrations overseas can be found in P. Panayi, 'Anti-German riots in London during the First World War', *German history: the Journal of the German Historical Society* 17(2)1989, pp. 184-203.

³ For Natal see Bruss, 'Impact of First World War in Natal', pp. 163-167.

⁴ In rough chronological order they proceeded as follows: 'Deliberate Huns'; 'The Immaculate Huns'; 'The Humour of the Hun'; 'The Savage Hun'; 'Denouncing the Hun', and 'Inhuman Hun'.

⁵ See e.g. *Grahamstown Journal*, 13.2.1915 (feature headed 'Movement of the Kaiser: a ramble through the zoo'). The Dr F.A. Saunders Collection in the Albany Museum includes a collected work, 'The Hohenzollerns through German eyes' (London, 1917), which represents a collection of Kaiser cartoons by the German satirical journal, *Simplicissimus*, founded in 1896.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.12.1914.

⁷ W.J. de Kock (ed.), *Dictionary of South African Biography I* (Cape Town, 1968), pp. 695-696.

⁸ N.D. Southey, 'A period of transition: a history of Grahamstown 1902-1918' (M.A., RhU, 1984), p. 347 (quoting from *Grahamstown Journal*, 15.10.1914 and *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 16.10.1914).

burg. The ripple effect quickly spread to other centres when already the next day violence flared in Durban, Pietermaritzburg, Pretoria, Bloemfontein, Kimberley, Port Elizabeth, East London and Cape Town.⁹ Grahamstown, though the jingoistic equal of any one of those communities, was not a big enough English-speaking urban centre nor did it have even the nucleus of a concentrated German community in its midst to stage more than a public protest meeting. As regard the latter characteristic, Grahamstown differed markedly even from the more distant of its two closer neighbours. This was East London, centre of a German community dating back to the later 1850s.¹⁰ There an outburst of anti-German feeling dated back even to the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) when the focus of hostile attention was the German consul, Hermann Malcomess, a German who had emigrated to East London in the mid-1860s and wasted no time in building up a family fortune.¹¹

Lacking such concentrated combustible tinder, Grahamstown's most public anti-German demonstration in 1915 took the form of a public meeting, staged significantly somewhat later than the disturbances that had affected the larger centres. The chief target as before was Dr Schönland — this time presumably because he had in the meantime taken out British citizenship papers (and notwithstanding the fact that, as the mayor pleaded on his behalf, he was married to an English woman). Others singled out were two persons with remoter German connections. First of these was Dr Hermann Francis Becker, another very prominent local personality who had been a British subject for 50 years. He was a German-trained medical practitioner who had come to South Africa in 1868, worked as district surgeon of Bathurst and Alexandria until 1875 when he went into general practice in Grahamstown where he lived until his death on his 79th birthday in 1917. In 1885 he had been one of the founder members of the Eastern Cape branch of the parent South African Medical Association (founded in Cape Town in 1883); he also was president of the local fine arts association, a member of the local museum board of trustees and its chairman from 1898-1905, a freemason, a man who was considered an able doctor and a warm and generous person.¹²



Dr Selmar Schönland.
PHOTOGRAPH: CORY LIBRARY, RHODES UNIVERSITY



Dr Hermann Francis Becker.
PHOTOGRAPH: ALBANY MUSEUM, GRAHAMSTOWN

The other, a British citizen for 30 years, was Mr B. Moser (1877-1938) of 3 Bathurst Street, who was born in Freiburg, Germany, but had been brought up by an uncle in England. Moser, by profession a jeweller (appointed royal jeweller in 1907), was a much-respected local man.¹³ Schönland and Moser had gone to the extent of writing publicly to the mayor, deploring the tragedy.¹⁴ At the public meeting held

on the evening of 17 May a certain Mr Laid had insisted that Schönland should not have been invited to a luncheon in honour of Lord Buxton's first visit to Grahamstown as governor-general, scheduled for 2 June.¹⁵ 'Official' Grahamstown did not, however, bow to the clamour to have the names of Becker and Schonland (as he had now become) removed from the list of invited guests. The latter, the prime target of the witch-hunt, was, nevertheless, conspicuous by his absence.¹⁶

Hate, or a feeling certainly akin to it, surfaced also at this time at a baser level. It affected Neville Hariton McDermott, an Irishman, born of a mother who was of German extraction. He was a watchmaker, working for a firm in Bathurst Street, which bore the German name of Ritter & Co. McDermott was the accuser in a celebrated legal battle which had resulted from his having been called a hypocrite by one of the town's best-known grocers, Ernest Henry Palmer Abbott. This had happened as the latter walked past Ritter's shop front just as the former was putting up the bunting to greet the return from the German South West Africa campaign of the local military contingent, the 1st Eastern Rifles. What transpired during the hearing, was that the two had been provoking each other for a long time, and what had especially rankled the local grocer was an earlier taunting by McDermott that the British were just as capable of treachery as any German.¹⁷

After 1915 such incidents abated, as did the intensity of anti-German sentiment. In the last stages of the war, heralded by the major Allied offensive of 8 August 1918, press reports in Grahamstown which matched a new ardency in demands for anti-German measures in Natal¹⁸ assumed a new level of stridency, reflecting this time a sense of first muted, then unrestrained hope of victory. But even beyond the note of triumph, the local club saw fit to stress the defeat of Germany by passing a motion that bordered on vindictiveness. The occasion was the annual general meeting held on 26th November 1919 which adopted a minute for which the Cape Town club had set the precedent:

No person who is, or has been, a subject of a Country with which Great Britain was at war at anytime between August 1914 and November 1918, or who has been such a subject and was not naturalised as a British subject prior to August 1914, shall be eligible as a candidate for election to membership and that no such person be permitted to enter the club as a visitor.¹⁹

So Grahamstown's anti-German 'wave' displayed many of the characteristics which scholars have shown, analysing the same phenomenon in other centres. There was the same

⁹ Hughes, 'Anti-German riots in Cape Town, 1915', p.iii.

¹⁰ E.L.G. Schnell, *For men must work: an account of German immigration to the Cape with special reference to the German military settlers of 1857 and the German immigrants of 1858* (Cape Town, 1954).

¹¹ K.P.T. Tankard, 'East London, 1870-1914' (Ph.D, RhU, draft).

¹² L.G. Couch, *A short medical history of Grahamstown* (no place, no date), pp. 53 and 56; Albany Museum, Grahamstown: Information off photograph catalogue cards for S(ettler)M(useum) PIC(tures) 331 and 1076.

¹³ Oral evidence from Miss K. Moser, his daughter.

¹⁴ Southey, 'Period of transition', p.348, n.134 (reference to *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 19.5.1915). Also oral evidence from Miss K. Moser.

¹⁵ *Grahamstown Journal*, 18.5.1915.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.6.1915.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, and 12.6.1915.

¹⁸ Bruss, 'Impact of First World War in Natal', p. 190.

¹⁹ R. Griffiths, *The Grahamstown Club 1886-1986* (Grahamstown, 1986), pp. 40-41.



Bathurst Street, Grahamstown, 1883-1906, showing one of the grocery stores and chemists, Abbott's, that still operated in the war years.

PHOTOGRAPH: ALBANY MUSEUM, GRAHAMSTOWN

exaggerated sense of British patriotism, even jingoism, as generated by the war, finding corporate public expression after the loss of the *Lusitania*. Yet there were also differences. There was no actual violence, rioting or damage to property as in the larger, more German-concentrated centres of the Union.²⁰ On the other hand, some of its other features, especially the witch-hunt²¹ and the opportunity that wartime feelings afford to use patriotism as a means of feeding personal grudges and neighbourhood feuds,²² were probably more pronounced in Grahamstown precisely because of its smaller parochial character.

WHITE POVERTY

Less highly profiled but touching local men, women and children at the level of their everyday existence, was the economic impact of the war. This saw a rise in the cost of living, some unemployment and the failure of wages to keep pace with rising costs.²³ The inflationary spiral at a time of some shrinking employment and static wages was felt most acutely — as also in neighbouring Port Elizabeth²⁴ — by the lower income groups.

Partly cause as well as partly effect of these conditions in Grahamstown was the collapse of the ostrich feather trade in August 1914. That trade had become 'a major feature of the Grahamstown market' and grown spectacularly after 1906. Peak years were 1910 to 1913. But when ostrich feathers lost their appeal as a ladies' fashion accessory just at the time when war broke out and that event stimulated a demand for rather more utilitarian fabrics like wool and cotton, the market and price of feathers declined sharply. Predictably, at the time, the causes of the eclipse were much debated locally. One lobby argued that war had triggered it and therefore held out the prospect of recovery. Those who on the contrary saw the cause in a decisive shift in feminine fashions were proved right. The industry and with it Grahamstown as a marketing centre 'was not to revive'.²⁵ That was part of the background as to how poverty, unemployment and therefore the need for poor relief among white

citizens became prominent features of Grahamstown's wartime existence.

But what also helps to explain the deteriorating economic aspect of wartime Grahamstown was the recession in another area of economic activity which had witnessed a singular spurt at the same time as the boom in ostrich feathers. During 1913 (and continuing into 1914) there had been 'an unprecedented amount of building activity in Grahamstown, in both the public and private spheres', including extension and improvements to the Eastern Districts court, post office, university college, private schools, hospitals and churches. So even as late as June 1914 Pretoria was informed that Albany was a district unaffected by white unemployment.²⁶

Three months later, however, matters were looking rather different. By then, as one local newspaper reported, there were at least 50 men out of work who were citizens of the reliable sort with dependents. The following month the unemployment figure rose to 68. Those affected were chiefly artisans connected with the building trade. Coinciding with the publication of these statistics, the City Council, urged on by a church body, launched a public employment scheme which earned a maximum of 30 people a daily wage of 3s.²⁷

²⁰ For the details of those manifestations in the Johannesburg and Cape Town situation, see Hughes, 'Anti-German riots in Cape Town, 1915', pp. 5 and 15-28; in Pietermaritzburg and Durban, see Bruss, 'Impact of First World War in Natal', pp. 179-182.

²¹ This manifestation of the 'anti-German' movement is analysed by Hughes, 'Anti-German riots in Cape Town, 1915', pp. 59-60.

²² This aspect is examined by Bruss, 'Impact of First World War in Natal', p. xii.

²³ *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 3.11.1916. See also Cory Library, Rhodes University, PR 2855: 'Outline history of the Ladies' Benevolent Society' (unpublished typescript by J.M. Berning), p. 6.

²⁴ G.F. Baines, 'The Port Elizabeth disturbances of October 1920' (M.A., RhU, 1988), p. 21.

²⁵ See especially Southey, 'Period of transition', p. 36.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 80 and 143.

²⁷ *Grahamstown Journal*, 24.9.1914 and 15.10.1914; also *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 16.10.1914, showing that of the 68 affected 23 were painters, 17 were either masons or bricklayers and 12 carpenters.

This in turn elicited a sharp response. Leading the criticism was William Miller MacMillan (1885-1974), later one of South Africa's most noted historians, who at the time was lecturer in history and economics at Rhodes University College. Out of his growing concern for the deteriorating local situation there emerged the first systematic analyses of Grahamstown's economic problems.²⁸ His findings, as he presented them to a society of Anglican church-goers in September 1915,²⁹ revealed a problem of poverty among white Grahamstonians that went much deeper and further back in time than the onset of war and the slump in ostrich feathers. He showed one third of the city's white population to be affected, chiefly in three categories: the skilled artisans who had to contend with seasonal and irregular employment; the unskilled workers who were also plagued by fluctuating labour opportunities and had to contend with competition from blacks; numerically the largest group were widows, single girls and incapacitated men supporting family for whose labour there was little demand in a community of so little economic diversity as Grahamstown'. In such circumstances, hinted MacMillan darkly, especially as regards the latter category of severely under-utilized human resources, 'social problems like prostitution were well established in Grahamstown'. Not that the published survey offered much by way of concrete remedies; it advocated education, the extension of public works, and more immediately, the establishment of a local labour exchange.³⁰

Characteristic of Grahamstown, the response came from within the community itself. The local Anglican bishop, Francis R. Phelps, took the lead in organizing the formation of a social welfare league.³¹ The body, when established at the end of 1915, was quickly invited to co-ordinate its efforts with a welfare organization 48 years its senior — the Ladies' Benevolent Society.³² Highlighting the local effort was the community chest organized at Christmas-time by the local newspaper, *Grocott's Penny Mail*. By this agency the undertaking of the Ladies' Benevolent Society to support 50 needy families at Christmas-time in 1915 was greatly facilitated as the sum raised that year was £90.3s.6d, representing the largest sum collected in a full war year.³³

Of particular importance was the employment bureau founded by the Social Welfare League, and the role it played

²⁸ K.M. Donaldson(ed.), *South African who's who* (Pretoria, 1954), p. 405; C.J. Beyers(ed.), *Dictionary of South African Biography V* (Pretoria, 1987); p.484; Southey 'Period of transition', p.81.

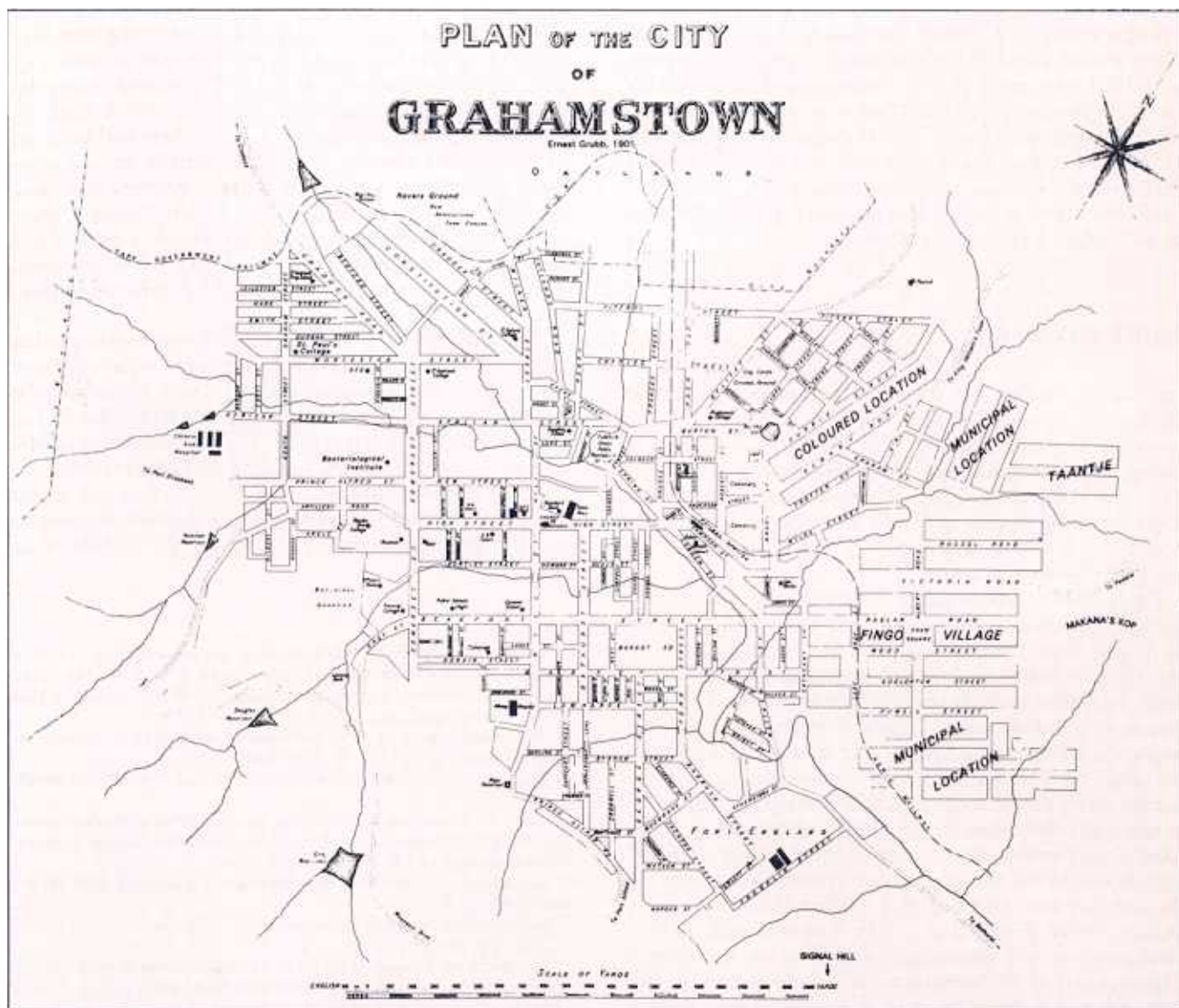
²⁹ W.M. MacMillan, *Economic conditions in a non-industrial South African town: a preliminary study* (Grahamstown, 1915).

³⁰ Southey, 'Period of transition', p.82.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Cory Library, Rhodes University, PR 2855: 'Ladies' Benevolent Society' (J.M. Berning).

³³ *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 29.12.1915 and 7.7.1916. The totals for the other war years were as follows: 1914 — £86.13s.3d; 1916 — £80.17s.6d.; 1917 — £82.10s.9d.; 1918 — £91.3s.6d.



in monitoring salaries and wages. By its initiative the municipal authorities were persuaded to set up a special committee to investigate the wages paid to their own unskilled labourers. It recommended that white gangers, carters and labourers should earn an extra 1s. and black labourers an extra 3d. a day as a war bonus.³⁴ When this memorandum came before the City Council, the increase for whites was sanctioned, but not the proposed 3d. per day for blacks.³⁵

BLACK DEPRIVATION AND PROTEST

Such blatantly differential treatment throws light on yet another domestic theme that linked Grahamstown to other centres in South Africa during the war years. This was the still greater suffering of blacks than even hard pressed whites under the impact of the adverse economic trends during wartime, especially the rising cost of living allied to static wages. Like the plight of the most vulnerable elements of white society, that of black residents stemmed from the fundamental fact of Grahamstown's existence, that once it had outlived its initial purpose as a military headquarters it generated insufficient economic activity to employ a population which even before the war was estimated at about 14 000 (over a third of whom were estimated to be blacks).³⁶

But for black Grahamstonians there was yet another dimension to their plight. This was their local experience of the general trends in 'native policy' under the first Union government before the war. This policy, as S.B. Spies had written, 'was [too] often determined by white economic demands (particularly those relating to labour and to land), by white fears and prejudices, rather than by black needs'. Translated into legislation, it had produced skilled job reservation for whites on the mines in 1911 and other labour restrictive measures including the pass laws. Culminating such legislation was the Native Land Act of 1913 which 'provoked the most profound black reaction'.³⁷

That background provides the 'national' setting for a spate of black unrest as it had broken out even before the war and continued into wartime. Most of it occurred in mining areas, such as the black mine-workers' strike on the Witwatersrand in July 1913, as well as sporadic strikes on gold mines throughout the war period and a strike for higher wages by black sanitary workers in June 1918.³⁸ But as Gary Baines has cautioned in a recent study re-examining and reinterpreting the October 1920 black disturbances in Port Elizabeth:

While it is an assumption ... that a study of a particular community aids the understanding of the wider social process, there can be no substitute for the indepth analysis of local conditions. The historical experiences of South African towns suggest that social stratification and relations to power at local level cannot be "simply reduced or equated with those occurring at national level".³⁹

The experiences at the national and local level form an integrated whole as was the case of the two days of mass protest of black location residents that erupted in Grahamstown on 23 April 1917. That was an event that would be difficult to imagine happening in an environment other than the jingo-charged atmosphere of wartime Grahamstown. On the other hand, its deeper causes, however much locally rooted, also represent part of a wider process. So the resentment of black location residents in Grahamstown as it spilled over into protest in April 1917, stemmed fundamentally also from their own version of some not uncommon South African experiences: the ad hoc fashion in which their own urban areas had sprung up as elsewhere in South Africa, essentially

subordinate to the needs of the economy of the white urban neighbourhood;⁴⁰ how under the impact of the general legislative and administrative thrust between 1890 and 1913 to clear white farming areas of 'black spots' of peasant squatters,⁴¹ Grahamstown locations felt the impact of the resultant influx of the displaced in their midst. But so did the white-controlled municipal authority which, sensitive to an electorate which feared black competition and encroachment, and, in any case, lacking the resources to cope with the influx, stepped up its efforts to establish a uniform, cohesive, tough code of location control.⁴²

In the attempt to enforce the principle, two such control measures sparked off the unrest. The first of these was a set of regulations, gazetted in January 1913, which imposed a differential limitation on the numbers of livestock that residents of Grahamstown's three black locations were allowed to graze on the commonage and included the provision of a £5 fine or one month's imprisonment for those contravening the regulations. Municipal location residents resented the imposition on erf lessees of a blanket limit of three head of cattle or eight sheep as compared with ten head of cattle or 20 sheep allowed to white city dwellers and a sliding scale calculated in accordance with value of property available to occupiers of erven in the government-controlled 'Fingo' and 'Hottentot' locations. No sooner had those regulations been promulgated when a further set of regulations was proposed which, after following a protest meeting and some ensuing legal action, and even when slightly modified, proved a running sore of discontent. Gazetted in August 1914, those regulations tightened up considerably on existing leasing arrangements. This applied especially to three provisions: that any lease entered into would be in written form for the first time; that such a lease was subject to a month's notice on either side; that the existing rent of 16s. per annum, though confirmed, was to be rendered in four quarterly instalments, payable in advance.⁴³

Not surprisingly, it was in the most neglected of the non-white 'townships', the municipal location, that the resentment eventually boiled over especially when resistance to sign the leases led to the eviction of black erf holders in that location. But there was another issue. This was a feeling which transcended location boundaries and for the reason — as later noted by the commissioner who inquired into the disturbance after it had happened⁴⁴ — was used by the leaders of the protest in the municipal location to rally wider support from fellow blacks.

³⁴ Southey, 'Period of transition', p.83; Cape Archives Depot, Cape Town, Archives of the Grahamstown Municipality 3/AY 1/3/1/1/5: Special Committee Minutes., 25.4.1917.

³⁵ *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 27.4.1917.

³⁶ Southey, 'Period of transition', p.352 (table of population statistics drawn from Cape Parliamentary Papers, G.19-1905, p.12; U.G.32-1912, pp.86-87, U.G.15-1923, p.48). See also Southey, 'Local government and African resistance in Grahamstown during the First World War', *Kleio* 22, 1990, pp.4-23.

³⁷ T. Cameron and S.B. Spies (eds), *An illustrated history of South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1986), p. 234.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 242; also T.R.H. Davenport, *South Africa: a modern history* (London and Basingstoke, 1977), p. 179.

³⁹ Baines, 'Port Elizabeth disturbances of October 1920', pp. 5-6.

⁴⁰ Southey, 'Period of transition', pp.198 and 230-231; T.R.H. Davenport, *Black Grahamstown: the agony of a community* (Johannesburg, 1980), p.4.

⁴¹ C. Bundy, *The rise and fall of the South African peasantry* (London, 1979), pp.134-140.

⁴² Southey, 'Period of transition', pp.193, 229-231, 235 and 238-246.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 242-244.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.192 and 244. Also *Grahamstown Journal*, 26.4.1917 (editorial).

They expressed a sense of grievance dating back even as far as an incident which had occurred at the beginning of the Second Anglo-Boer War when a black man had been killed at the Drostdy in an accident involving a miniature rifle. Since then and culminating in a series of recent shootings of blacks by police constables in neighbouring rural areas,⁴⁵ the feeling had developed that trigger-happy whites could literally get away with the murder of blacks. The fact that such incidents happened in wartime would not have passed unnoticed. Wartime conditions tended to emphasize the omnipotence enjoyed by whites and the impotence felt by blacks. The events of the disturbance as it developed emphasized still further the discrepancy that white power was at no time threatened or even challenged. Hence at first glance it seems surprising how white Grahamstown vastly exaggerated the threat posed by the 'mob' action of its black location neighbours. But what helps to explain why it did so, is the peculiarly frenetic atmosphere pervading a community that was roused to a high-pitched level of jingoistic fervour.

The black point of view, though admittedly a retrospective and therefore perhaps a more reflective one that prevailed at the time of the disturbance, was best put by a government location man, Samuel Danga, when he addressed the resident magistrate on the occasion that the contents of the report by the commissioner of inquiry into the disturbance was conveyed to black local residents. Commended for his 'most sensible utterance' by the chief magistrate, Danga had said that

if there had been any mistake in the manner in which the natives had demonstrated ... then they had acted through ignorance. There never was any intention of rebelling against the Government. It was impossible for us to rebel against the Government at the present time. They had their brothers and sons dying in the sea ... Why should their sons and brothers assist the Government if they wanted to rebel against the Government? And they were still ready to assist the Government. The Government should wipe away from their minds all suspicion that the natives wanted to rebel. Let the Government overlook the little mistake which the natives made now and then ... What was done in Grahamstown [the disturbance] was not done intentionally. The main object was to ask questions and [not] to rebel against the Government. If the natives made a mistake it was in their manner of going up to the Court House. (Applause).⁴⁶

The latter was a reference to the incident with which the two days of upheaval started. This was the convergence of a crowd of about 400 blacks — armed with sticks and kerries, some carrying knives — on the resident magistrate's court on 23 April 1917, a Monday morning. The march might have been avoided if the magistrate had availed himself of the opportunity afforded him the previous Saturday afternoon when he was asked to listen to a deputation backed by a smaller, more conciliatory, unarmed crowd outside his residence in the Drostdy.⁴⁷ Or, as a local newspaper editorial was later to surmise, if all along there had been 'some person in whom they had confidence' to explain to municipal location residents the purpose of the more formal lease agreements replacing the previous very similar but much less regimented arrangements, 'the possibility is that the events of April 23rd and 24th would never have occurred'.⁴⁸

By Monday morning (23 April 1917) a combination of rhetoric and liquor had turned Saturday afternoon's gathering into something that resembled a defiant, ugly mob.⁴⁹ By more general standards of crowd behaviour, however,

Monday's assembly was probably no more threatening than a body of men going on strike. This is how the lawyer defending the ringleaders described the scene in an effort to get the presiding police officer, Colonel M. du Toit, to admit that he had exaggerated in describing the nature of the crowd on that day. A penetrating question that he put to the same police officer also hammered home the point: 'Do you think the natives were so infatuated as to believe they stood a ghost of a chance against magazine rifles?'⁵⁰

White Grahamstown had indeed over-reacted. Or as the Prime Minister, Louis Botha, put it when pressed in Parliament to make a statement on what had happened in Grahamstown: 'I do not want now to go into the whole matter as I don't know enough about it, but it appears to me that the people are making a mountain out of a molehill'.⁵¹ One clue to why it happened is provided by a local press report which put the events into their historical and contemporary context. That report invoked the spirit of 1846 which had seen the start of the Seventh Frontier War and that of 1914 when Marshal Joffre's call to his fellow-countrymen had mobilized every available taxi to check the German advance on Paris.⁵² Consequently Grahamstown's deeply entrenched historical memory of recurring racial conflict on its frontier blended with its current fierce sense of commitment to the Allied cause in World War I. It was a very potent blend out of which was engendered the almost total mobilization of the white community for three days.

The first of these was the Monday (23 April 1917) when, after the crowd of blacks which had invaded the centre of the city had marched back to their side of town to consider the magistrate's offer of meeting an unarmed deputation, white Grahamstown geared itself for a tense night. Two public meetings were called by the mayor in the city hall. The first, convened at noon, led to the formation of an emergency committee of thirteen men to arrange for the construction of a civic guard. It was also decided to close local business premises and bars for the rest of the day. The first batch of special constables, numbering about 100, were sworn in by the magistrate at 14:15. A second civic meeting at 16:00 mustered men already in possession of firearms as a relief guard. Meantime other organizations swung into action. The Boy Scouts prepared for ambulance and messenger work. Soup kitchens to feed the troops were set up by a hastily organized chain of volunteer ladies. School cadet corps were assigned specific premises and areas for patrolling. 'By night-fall the whole of the outskirts of the city, especially the localities contiguous to the location, were thoroughly picketed by armed men'. Any black person abroad in the precincts of the city that night was greatly at risk. There were three reported incidents, including one fatal shooting of a male

⁴⁵ *Grahamstown Journal*, 24.4.1917 (Magistrate's interview with deputation of twelve location residents). See also *ibid.*, 4.5.1917. Library of Parliament, Cape Town: A.H. Stanford — Secretary for Native Affairs (SNA), 3.5.1917 and 11.5.1917; E. Dower (SNA) — Magistrate, Grahamstown, 22.5.1917. Cape Archives Depot, Cape Town: Dower — Magistrate, Peddie, 6.6.1917; Magistrate, Peddie — Superintendent of Natives, Peddie, 13.6.1917 (photocopies lent to me by Miss Ruth Hall).

⁴⁶ *Grahamstown Journal*, 15.6.1917.

⁴⁷ *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 23.4.1917.

⁴⁸ *Grahamstown Journal*, 5.6.1917.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.5.1917 (N. Nyaluza — Editor, 25.4.1917); also *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 23.4.1917.

⁵⁰ *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 18.5.1917 (trial of 19 accused; Mr Smit cross-examining Colonel Du Toit).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 27.4.1917 (Cape Town parliamentary report of 26.4.1917).

⁵² *Grahamstown Journal*, 24.4.1917.



24 April 1917: the militarized column marching down High Street, Grahamstown, to crush locations' disturbance.

PHOTOGRAPH: CORY LIBRARY (C.O. CORY COLLECTION), RHODES UNIVERSITY

domestic who had tried to break through the security cordon in circumstances variably reported⁵³ which ought to have been avoided.⁵⁴

Tuesday's events started with the resident magistrate meeting with an unarmed deputation of ten or twelve location residents,⁵⁵ which in return for being given an assurance that their complaints would be investigated, agreed to try and arrange for the armed crowd in the location to disperse by 13:00. Even before the deadline arrived, a full-scale military operation to break up the defiant crowd was launched. The significance of the fact that the last stand, clearly visible from vantage points all over the town, was at Makana's Kop, the scene of the battle of Grahamstown of 1819, was not lost on whites.⁵⁶

The prolonged ringing of the fire-bell set in motion a military column, consisting of between 900 and 1 000 personnel. At the head of it was a cavalry contingent, followed by a strong force of foot police, including reinforcements from Port Elizabeth. Then followed a strongly-armed town guard, and a motorized column brought up the rear. When Makana's Kop was reached the forces were quickly deployed. The foot police were ordered to advance on the wooded summit in skirmish order. The cavalry and motorcade stayed some distance behind so as to encircle the kop. The ringleaders, clearly in anticipation of the effectiveness of the military action taken against them, had started to escape across the flats behind the kop and were hunted down. As they were overwhelmed they did not give up without a show of resistance and so ensued the only skirmishing of this 'second battle of Grahamstown'. It consisted mainly of 'some tussles' and the attack on a district sergeant (Reynolds) by one of the ringleaders wielding an axe until the former was rescued by a contingent of 27 Kowie volunteers.⁵⁷ A few shots were fired and then a sharp and heavy downpour of

rain brought the action to a close. By 17:00 eight ringleaders in handcuffs, and 50 others were being marched into the city, to the accompanying cheers of a vast throng. Follow-up operations continued into the night during which other ringleaders who had fled beyond the confines of the location were apprehended and taken to police headquarters.⁵⁸ Flushed with victory, some of the hotheads, including farmers who had come into town in response to the call to arms, turned Wednesday (25 April 1917) into their own day of protest. It started with a deputation of farmers to the magistrate, led by Major Saunders, head of the volunteers, to protest that the measures of the previous two days had not been tough enough. It was a very rowdy meeting,⁵⁹ for which the chairman set the tone when he exhorted his audience that

the Britisher was not afraid of anybody or anything, and they were out for plain-speaking. They wanted no weak-kneed policy [but] straight-forward dealing, straight speaking and absolute firmness of policy. We have to show the native that the white man is top dog.

A tough resolution to match his words was adopted. It urged that

⁵³ See *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 25.4.1917 and 30.4.1917 (inquest report).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.4.1917. See also *Grahamstown Journal*, 24.4.1917.

⁵⁵ Report in *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 25.4.1917, gives figures as ten. *Grahamstown Journal*, 24.4.1917, mentions the figure as twelve in two places.

⁵⁶ *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 25.4.1917 (report).

⁵⁷ *Grahamstown Journal*, 26.4.1917 (report).

⁵⁸ *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 25.4.1917. See also *Grahamstown Journal*, 26.4.1917.

⁵⁹ *Grahamstown Journal*, 26.4.1917 (report).

the ringleaders be treated with the utmost vigour of the law in punishment for their misdeeds, that we deplore, if a weak-kneed policy should be adopted, and that we are not satisfied that a strong enough attitude has been taken in the past, and that if the Ethiopian Church [widely suspected⁶⁰] has been preaching sedition it be investigated by the Government.

But there had also been voices of moderation, not least among the farmers themselves, one of whom urged the meeting to 'look at both sides of the question' and to remember that the magistrate had not acted as a free agent. He 'was surely acting under instructions,' he reminded his audience. The strongest dissent with the whole tenor and character of the meeting came from Grahamstown's first citizen. Henry Fitchat, owner of perhaps Grahamstown's most prosperous business house at this time.⁶¹ Amidst strong and repeated heckling, he let it be known that as far as he was concerned the meeting had no official standing. It was not a properly convened meeting of Grahamstown citizens. Nor did he take the easy way out. When Major Saunders offered to vacate the chair of the meeting in his favour, he declined the invitation with a strong affirmation of the rule of law, pointing out that

it was against all British principles to condemn men before a trial. They were charging these men, in their resolution with sedition. No such charge has been formulated. And he did not think that they should cast aspersions on the Magistrate in the manner indicated in the resolution, demanding that he should not try cases.⁶²

The sequel came at a City Council meeting later that day when the mayor had to defend his 'quibbling' action at the public meeting against a fellow councillor. He stood his ground, and it won him strong backing.⁶³ But even that was not the end of it, because on Saturday morning (28 April) of the same eventful week, the mayor called a special council meeting to defend his 'dignity'. It met in view of a packed public gallery. What was at issue was the mayor's decision which had been repudiated by a meeting of joint committees of the City Council, to countermand the dismissal by the city engineer's and sanitary inspector's departments of those of their black employees who had stayed away from work during the two days of the disturbance. This time the mayor did not carry the council with him. Fellow councillors stopped short of passing a motion of censure on him but they left him in no doubt that they disagreed with him, and passed a resolution giving the two respective departmental heads full discretion in regard to the employees affected. They in turn acted on this discretion by reinstating 23 black employees who could furnish proof that they had been intimidated into staying away from work. The cases of 25 others were left suspended, pending further investigation.⁶⁴ So ended a tumultuous local week.

Little was altered in the wake of it. Despite an optimistic report by the government commissioner, A.H. Stanford, published on 3 May 1917,⁶⁵ black resistance to signing the leases continued unabated. It eventually forced the City Council to modify the regulations considerably, including the promise of an extra two head of cattle or two sheep on the commonage, and additionally permission to any tenant requiring a large number of stock to run such stock on payment of 2s.6d. per annum.⁶⁶ Those new regulations, the only major concession to come out of the upheaval, quietened things down in the locations. It was the lull before another — though very different — storm.



A street scene, Fingo Village, modern Grahamstown.

PHOTOGRAPH: EASTERN PROVINCE HERALD

THE SPANISH INFLUENZA EPIDEMIC

This time the disturbance was no respecter of race, status or location; though as elsewhere, the world-wide Spanish influenza epidemic which reached Grahamstown at the beginning of October 1918 affected men (as influenza epidemics generally do) rather than women. But unlike other influenza epidemics, that of 1918 left the usually vulnerable age groups — the very young, the adolescent and the very old — relatively unscathed. The most affected age group and those that suffered the most fatalities during the second and lethal phase of the epidemic were the people between the ages of 15 and 40.⁶⁷

Predictably perhaps, the epidemic began in the locations and from there spread to the rest of the city. By 9 October about 100 blacks had caught the virus, and the first deaths were reported two days later. By the middle of the month, about 3 000 blacks were down with the disease, and in the week or two that followed when the epidemic was at its height an average of between 20 and 34 blacks died daily. The total number of deaths among black people was 473.⁶⁸ The comparative figures for the other population groups were 65 whites, 68 coloureds and 4 Asiatics.⁶⁹ The total fatality tally was the equivalent of double the number of local war casualties, and among whites alone the number of registered deaths was the equivalent of roughly a third of the number lost to Grahamstown in the four years of global warfare.

The emergency measures to combat the epidemic were co-ordinated by a specially appointed executive committee, headed by the mayor. But even before it was appointed, the city hall had been converted into a central medical depot, a building was mounted to house a visitation programme

⁶⁰ See also *ibid.* (editorial).

⁶¹ Southey, 'Period of transition', p.355.

⁶² Grahamstown Journal, 26.4.1917 (report).

⁶³ *Ibid.* (editorial).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.5.1917; also *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 27.4.1917 and 31.4.1917.

⁶⁵ Southey, 'Period of transition', p. 192. See also Library of Parliament, Cape Town: A.H. Stanford — Secretary for Native Affairs, 3.5.1917 (photocopy lent to me by Miss Ruth Hall); text in *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 4.6.1917.

⁶⁶ Southey, 'Period of transition', p.254.

⁶⁷ Phillips, 'South Africa's worst demographic disaster', pp.57- 74. See also D.J. Potgieter *et al.* (eds), *Standard encyclopaedia of Southern Africa* 6 (Cape Town, 1972), p.95.

⁶⁸ Southey, 'Period of transition', pp.210-211.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.211 (figures based on Albany Museum, Grahamstown, Mayoral minute, 1919, pp.53-62, report of Sanitary Inspector, 26.1.1918, p.62).

also for the locations) to ascertain the requirements of residents, and a campaign of inoculations undertaken. At the height of the epidemic there were seven emergency hospital depots in all, including one in the coloured area and two in the locations.⁷⁰

Voluntary organizations and their workers (as in present-day Grahamstown⁷¹) bore an inordinate share of the responsibilities of coping with the emergency. This included the establishment of a soup kitchen at the location office and of a portable feeding service to carry meal, rice, sugar and soup to victims.⁷²

The chief co-ordinator of these voluntary services was Mrs L.L. Giddy, president of the local War Sufferers' Aid Society. The co-ordinator and mainstay of a house-to-house and area-to-area canvass was another public-spirited individual, J.J. Jackson-Brownlee, and a team of 34 Rhodes University College students.⁷³ Many such individuals, both voluntary and state service workers, were among the fatal casualties. They included one of the student canvassers, Andries C. van Gorkom, son of a prominent Johannesburg lawyer.⁷⁴ Another was the local telegraph clerk A.H. ('Bobbie') Purdon who had volunteered for duty at the post office in neighbouring Port Alfred when their postmaster took ill, and who himself succumbed and died on 26 October.⁷⁵ Another public servant who lived up to that name was police sergeant Edward William Henderson, a member also of St John Ambulance, who died while nursing patients in one of the city's emergency hospital depots.⁷⁶

The passing of some other local individuals touches a note of quite exceptional poignancy. One was Mrs M.A. Anderson, wife of the Cathedral verger, the first 'listed' fatality of the epidemic.⁷⁷ Another was the local printer, William Watkins, who mistook a dose of sheep dip for an influenza remedy and died, leaving a wife and large family, because, owing to the great pressure of the epidemic on medical resources and personnel, he could not obtain treatment.⁷⁸ And no sooner had he died when Ruby, his 16-year old daughter, also expired.⁷⁹ Then there was the death of a 9-month old infant, Ivy Scarcott,⁸⁰ or that of the only white schoolchild to lose his life in the city. This was the St Andrew's scholar, Arthur Wendly van der Riet, son of the MP for Albany.⁸¹ A more senior fatality was the head student of Rhodes, Arthur Kolbe Dugmore.⁸² There was also the double bereavement suffered by the Rev. W. Wilkinson, Anglican rector of Graaff-Reinet, who, having lost a son in the war, soon after buried his daughter, a Rhodes student, Natalie Miram, an influenza victim.⁸³

Another fatality was Miss Agnes Burt, the city's own 'Florence Nightingale' and twin sister of Mrs Van Heijst, secretary of the Ladies' Benevolent Society.⁸⁴ Burt was a London graduate, whose career included the principalship of the Diocesan School for Girls in Grahamstown. She was a member of the local school board, lay worker in the Anglican diocese, railway missionary and social worker in numerous organizations. She had been one of the first on the scene to risk her own life nursing the patients in No. 1 Locations Hospital. She died on 24 October 1918 — one of the earliest victims.⁸⁵ Such self-sacrifice in the grim conditions of black Grahamstown was matched by the location's 'native' constable, Manasseh Nyalusa, whose devotion to duty survives as a legend, and at the time it earned his memory a singular mark of respect when the mayor attended his funeral.⁸⁶

The sacrifice of Burt and Nyalusa symbolized a restoration of some harmony in the strained relations between black and white which had surfaced in the disturbance of the previous year. As so often in human affairs, it needed a levelling experience like the shared tragedy of the 1918 influenza

epidemic to bring out the best in people. The notable and noticeable assistance given to location residents by whites on this occasion was but a forerunner of the many-sided white assistance schemes available to an even more deprived black community to-day⁸⁷ than it was in 1918.

THE RETURN TO PEACE

Almost as suddenly as it had arrived, the epidemic abated, and coincidentally, almost simultaneously with its termination, came the news of the armistice. Those reached Grahamstown precisely at 14:50 on Monday, 11 November 1918; and so, under the impact of a double deliverance — from scourge of war and pestilence — the local citizens released their feelings in what triggered off perhaps the most spontaneous celebrations ever seen in Grahamstown, reaching a climax with an impromptu mass meeting on Church Square. Later on, the night sky was lit up by bonfires on the heights overlooking the city, Signal Hill and Makana's Kop. According to a local newspaper 'Everything else was submerged in the welter of rejoicing. Natives rode in on horseback to learn the truth. Holiday or no holiday the populace took French leave'.⁸⁸

But by Christmas, the euphoria had long abated. The dominant mood was one of thankfulness and thanksgiving. The city was also counting its losses and licking its wounds. One editorial spoke of 'vacant chairs that will never again be filled.' It continued that the 'recent influenza epidemic has taken the sunshine out of many a home and the shadow of war still hangs over many a household.'⁸⁹ On Christmas Eve there was little of the usual bustle; 'things were quiet all round' and exuberant festivity was conspicuous by its absence. Those who could get away, were particularly glad to remove to the seaside: 'The popularity of the Kowie has never been more strongly emphasised than at this season.'⁹⁰

People wanted to have done with the war and its attendant problems. □

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.181. See also *Grahamstown Journal*, 10.7.1918, 7.11.1918, 22.11.1918 and 29.11.1918.

⁷¹ Cf. T.M. Henderson, *Directory of welfare, religious and service organisations, social and sporting clubs and other societies, organisations and councils in Grahamstown* (Grahamstown, 1985).

⁷² *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 16.10.1918.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 14.10.1918; also *Grahamstown Journal*, 19.10.1918.

⁷⁴ *Grahamstown Journal*, 26.10.1918 and 14.11.1918; *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 28.10.1918.

⁷⁵ *Grahamstown Journal*, 31.10.1918; *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 28.10.1918.

⁷⁶ *Grahamstown Journal*, 31.10.1918 and 14.11.1918; *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 30.10.1918.

⁷⁷ *Grahamstown Journal*, 15.10.1918.

⁷⁸ *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 21.10.1918.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.10.1918; *Grahamstown Journal*, 22.10.1918.

⁸⁰ *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 25.10.1918; *Grahamstown Journal*, 26.10.1918.

⁸¹ *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 23.10.1918.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 1.11.1918.

⁸³ *Grahamstown Journal*, 22.10.1910; *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 23.10.1918.

⁸⁴ Mrs Van Heijst had served as honorary secretary for seventeen years when she resigned in October 1929, but continued her association with the organization, serving as vice-president till October 1931. See Cory Library, Rhodes University, PR 2855: 'Ladies' Benevolent Society' (J.M. Berning), pp. 7 and 9.

⁸⁵ *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 25.10.1918; *Grahamstown Journal*, 14.11.1918.

⁸⁶ *Grahamstown Journal*, 14.11.1918; *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 28.10.1918.

⁸⁷ For conditions obtaining in modern Grahamstown, see Davenport, *Black Grahamstown*, and for the range of white assistance schemes, see especially n.71 *supra*.

⁸⁸ *Grahamstown Journal*, 12.11.1918. See also *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 13.11.1918, and Southey, 'Period of transition', pp. 349-350.

⁸⁹ *Grahamstown Journal*, 24.12.1918.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.12.1918.