

THE MONTH OF AUGUST — AN *ANNALES* APPROACH TO THE HISTORY OF THE KOWIE: AUGUST 1881 TO AUGUST 1914*

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Any community under the magnifying glass of the historian has a "unity and coherence" that is uniquely its own. It "answers" to a certain "rhythm".¹ Therewith the purpose of this article. It is to re-enact some of the essence of the rhythm of the historical life of the Eastern Cape coastal community of Port Alfred, whose indigenous name is the Kowie.² This is the story of the fluctuating fortunes of that community as reflected in a study of how the month of August affected it over a period of thirty-three years. That time span is, admittedly, a limited one, but it is a period which is sandwiched between two important landmarks: 3 March 1881³ — the first date of issue of the Kowie's first (and all too short-lived) newspaper, *The Port Alfred Budget and Shipping Register*, which lasted for six years⁴ — and 4 August 1914 — the day on which Great Britain and her overseas dominions, including South Africa, became embroiled in the Great War. Once under way that event soon shattered what had until then survived as an apparently well ordered world. Men of affairs had often talked about the prospect of such a war but had done so seemingly because none had seriously believed that it could happen.⁵ In due course the world of yesteryear was lost in the trenches.

But that awesome realisation only came later. To begin with, all was jubilation and enormous patriotic fervour, though not even that in the case of a community as remote from the centre of the international stage as Port Alfred was in August 1914.

With that observation I touch on the definition of my task in this essay, which is to determine whether so small and remote a community as pre-World War I Port Alfred is really the stuff that history is made of and more especially when I impose upon this arguably insignificant historical entity my own contrived limitation — to look just at one month in an arbitrarily chosen time period of a very local community's historical experience.

This is an undertaking which would have been thought highly unconventional before 1914 when historians invariably concentrated on those events which occupied the centre of the international stage, or so-called "conspicuous history" — which, in the words of Fernand Braudel, "holds our attention by its continual and dramatic changes."⁶

But fortunately for the enrichment of our discipline, not least historians themselves — or some historians at the very least — learnt the lesson of the Great War, and none learnt it better than the French. It was in France that the interwar years witnessed the establishment of the *Annales School* of historians of whom one scholar, Fernand Braudel, became perhaps the greatest exponent still living.⁷ This is not the setting for a full-scale exposition of the *Annales School*, except to mention that they seek to accommodate what Braudel sees as the antidote to "conspicuous history". He calls it "submerged history" and defines it as the history that "is almost silent and always discreet, virtually unsuspected by its observers or participants"⁸ (in contrast to the "conspicuous" mass murder of the trench warfare of World War I!). What matters in history for Braudel is not just the great event or the outstanding individual, or necessarily the great metropolis, but also the small fringe community situated off the beaten track, far removed from any great international or even national highway. For him "small is also beautiful" and even the minutest human detail not irrelevant. He pictures history as the product of both "stray particulars" and "all sorts of general notions". He seizes on any idea that comes his way. And to a Braudel what comes along is an absolute abundance. His research is wonderfully rich and intensive and he then "looks at it a while, applies his enormous knowledge to it, and makes something of it".⁹ So it is by courtesy of Braudel and his

Annales "company" that I have attempted to weave a great many seemingly "stray particulars" in the historical life of the Kowie into a kind of network, and end up — hopefully — conveying what the *Annales* historians call *mentalité*. This is a community's set of mind: its spirit, attitudes, and ethos.¹⁰

PHYSICAL ELEMENTS AND MENTALITÉ

Braudel would be the first to acknowledge that any community's *mentalité* is shaped primarily by that most elemental fact of its existence: its physical environment — including its pattern of weather. Nothing could be truer of the Kowie, where a combination of the elements of unpredictable wind and current and of shifting, blocking sands seemed always to frustrate its efforts to become a thriving port. This is exemplified in the great succession of natural disasters which in 1840 struck down the ambitious harbour works of William Cock. He was the "father" of the Kowie port scheme, an 1820 settler, a man of great energy and enter-

* I make no apologies for using local newspaper material as my chief source for this article. I make reference to Professor D. M. Moore's paper, entitled 'The local historian and the press' delivered to the 10th biannual conference of the South African Historical Society, University of Cape Town, 15-18 January 1985, in which he quoted the following extract of an address by C. L. Weicht to the Minnesota Historical Society in 1932 (*Minnesota History* 13, 1932, p. 47): "Whether all local historians are sufficiently experienced to make the best use of the press as a source may be questioned. That newspapers would contain exhaustive historical material on every subject is not to be expected. Yet surely they are worthy of examination, for they yield not only historical data of a definite character but also, to use the words of a member of the staff of this society, of 'the type of record invaluable in piecing together the story of the normal life of the past.'"

¹ See F. BRAUDEL, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II* (London, 1972), p. 13.

² See C. PETTMAN, *South African place names, past and present* (Queenstown, 1931), p. 26.

³ C. THORPE, Port Alfred 1881-1885, *Toposcope* 13, 1982, p. 10.

⁴ *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 8.8.1887; *An address by William Rose on the development of Port Alfred 1874 to 1923* (Grahamstown, 1923), p. 9.

⁵ D. READ, *England 1868-1914: the age of urban democracy* (London, 1979), p. 512; K. ROBBINS, *The eclipse of a Great Power: modern Britain 1870-1975* (London, 1983), p. 91.

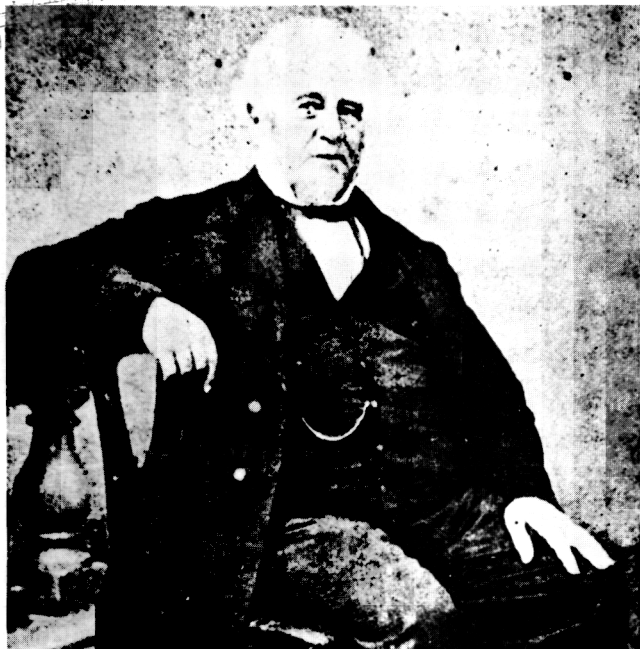
⁶ Quoted by J. H. HEXTER, *On historians* (London, 1979), p. 134.

⁷ See especially F. BRAUDEL, *On history* (London, 1980).

⁸ BRAUDEL, *The Mediterranean*, . . . , p. 16. Also quoted by HEXTER, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

⁹ HEXTER, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 62.



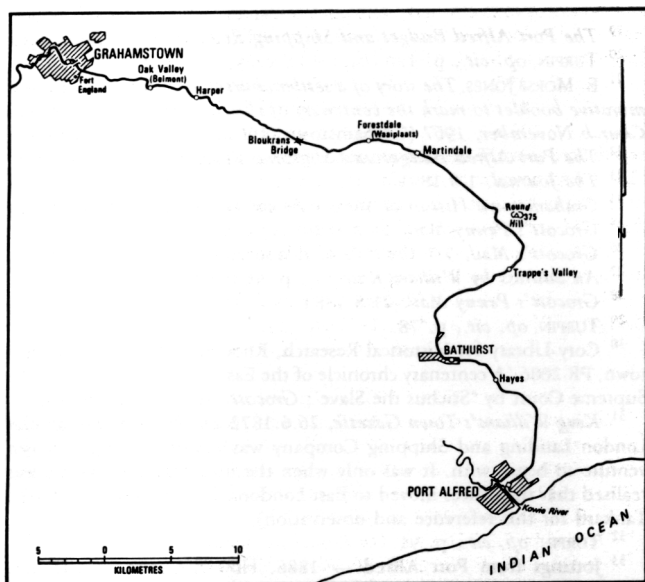
The Hon. William Cock (1794-1876), "father" of the Kowie harbour project.

PHOTOGRAPH: CORY LIBRARY (PIC 458), RHODES UNIVERSITY, GRAHAMSTOWN

prise, but "notoriously self-interested" and "ill-tempered".¹¹ First came the exceptionally high tide of 31 May which severely damaged the laboriously constructed embankment of the altered river course. It was followed by the late spring-tides of December, through which the new harbour entrance was so choked with sand that the river once again forged its own passage to the sea above the man-made works.¹²

Disasters like these gave rise to that aspect of the Kowie's *mentalité* which was characterised by a strong sense of destined failure. As the month of August is rather bleak weather-wise, even in the best of years, it highlights that aspect, and accentuates it still further when bad weather coincided, as it did during the years under discussion, with a period of business recession and other misfortunes.

Friday 10 August 1883 serves as the first example: this was an evening scheduled for the local Bathurst divisional council to meet, but there was no quorum. The *Budget*



Port Alfred in relation to its railway connection with its nearest metropolitan neighbour, Grahamstown.

CARTOGRAPHIC UNIT, GEOGRAPHY DEPARTMENT, RHODES UNIVERSITY, GRAHAMSTOWN

surmised that "the inclemency of the weather"¹³ must have had a part to play in the lack of support, though the main reason seemed rather the absence of a worthwhile agenda. Or, as the *Budget* concluded rather tersely in its report, "there was no particular business we believe to be discussed".¹⁴ Such lack of business in the affairs of the local divisional council symbolised the state of doldrums which (apart from the advent of the railway that finally opened to traffic on 1 October 1884¹⁵) affected the Kowie in the 1880s.¹⁶

The elements, certainly, added their own dimension to this state of affairs. The bad weather which had kept divisional councillors at home on that Friday had set in on the previous day: it had started raining, and the rain persisted until Saturday, by when 67.3 mm had been registered. "But", added the *Budget*, "it is years since we have had such cold boisterous weather as that. . . . At times the air was almost cold enough for snow". Fears were expressed that the cattle would suffer "from the excessively cold rains" which turned to snow in neighbouring Grahamstown, and there was every prospect of more rain. Rain of that quantity prompted a comment often repeated in the Eastern Cape. It was hoped that the drought would break in the wake of it.¹⁷

Three weeks later, or thereabouts, the boisterous elements associated with the month of August manifested themselves in what the contemporary report described as a "tidal wave of unusual heaviness" which struck the river at "about 10 p.m. on Monday night 27 August. The noise it created was noticed by several persons; and the pont gear [of the pontoon across the as yet unbridged Kowie River dating back to 1876¹⁸] was carried away; a heavy piece of iron chain being broken, allowing the pont to swing up the stream.



Pontoon on the Kowie River upstream of the present Putt Bridge. It operated from 1876 to 1908. This photograph was taken during the Second Anglo-Boer War with stacks of hay for horse fodder dominating the activity on the wharfside.

PHOTOGRAPH: ALBANY MUSEUM, GRAHAMSTOWN

¹¹ B.A. LE CORDEUR, *The politics of Eastern Cape separatism 1820-1854* (Cape Town, 1981), p. 197.

¹² E.W. TURPIN, *Basket work harbour: the story of the Kowie* (Cape Town, 1983), p. 18.

¹³ *The Port Alfred Budget and Shipping Register*, 16.8.1883.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *An address by William Rose. . .*, pp. 7-8; N. DEVITT, The vicissitudes of a private railway: notes on the early days of the Port Alfred-Grahamstown line, *South African Railways and Harbours Magazine*, March 1940, pp. 321-323.

¹⁶ TURPIN, *op. cit.*, pp. 106, 110 and 125; H.C. HUMMEL, Various perspectives of the Kowie scene 100 years ago, *Toposcope* 12, 1981, p. 50; THORPE, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁷ *The Port Alfred Budget and Shipping Register*, 16.8.1883.

¹⁸ TURPIN, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

It was seen coming by the pontoon keeper (Mr Van der Volk), who was fishing near the ferry. The height of the wave was between 3 and 4 feet, and broke over the pont, removing heavy stones near the approaches. There seemed to be a very general marine disturbance on Monday, the tide being very irregular, at one time rising over two feet in a few minutes."¹⁹

All in all the month of August provided a variety of disturbed weather conditions symbolic of the trials and tribulations which had beset the 1820 settlers and more particularly afflicted Port Alfred during its "century-old struggle to make the Kowie river a flourishing harbour".²⁰ One August, as in 1883, the drought would be broken. The following year (1884), the drought was back again, prompting the Wesleyans to take the lead in arranging what was advertised as a "Day of Humiliation for Rain", to be held at the historic settler church of Clumber, near by, which dated back to 1825.²¹ In true Victorian fashion, there were no half measures when it came to matters of "worship": the service took the form of "fasting and humiliation" starting at 10h30 and ending at about 16h00.²²

Seven years later — in August 1891 — the weather pattern was quite the reverse. *The Journal's* sometimes weekly, and sometimes monthly, 'Port Alfred notes', gave the details: "We have had more winter this month than last, cold rains and winds have been frequent; the farmers are beginning to fear too much rain, but wheat crops are not sufficient [sic] forward yet to suffer from rust."²³

AN EARLY INCIDENCE OF SERIOUS DROUGHT

The next time the month of August registered a slice of a pattern of too little or too much rain was right at the end of the chosen time-span — August 1914. This time it was the *Grocott's Penny Mail* (founded in Grahamstown as *Grocott's Free Press* in 1870²⁴) which carried the appropriate report that on 21 August "glorious rain" which measured 49,5 mm had fallen at the Kowie after a prolonged drought.²⁵ That drought (not unlike this coastal community's recent experience when the town's regular supply had all but dried up by the beginning of July 1983²⁶ had been so serious that the Port Alfred municipality had had to ask for water to be railed from Grahamstown, 68 km away; it had to be in sufficient quantities to keep at least the local mental asylum (founded in 1889²⁷) supplied.

The whole issue made for considerable debate in the town's municipal council, and Councillor D. Knight spoke to the problem in terms that have an almost uncannily modern ring about them: "There was no doubt", he argued, "that Port Alfred was about to go ahead. The Government was going to boom [sic] it and there would be a vast increase of visitors. If they did not provide a good water supply", he warned, "it would stand in the way of Port Alfred's advancement." He concluded his remarks by urging its inhabitants "to look around and see if they could not find a good supply of water."²⁸

Councillor Knight's projection of the Kowie as a mecca for tourists was part of a vision which towards the end of our period began to leave behind the gloom and despondency of the community; these people, as E. W. Turpin was so right in pointing out, had clung far too obstinately to the idea that the Kowie would one day become the emporium of the Eastern Province.²⁹ In 1914 that long-protracted vision was at last fading. But there were many more reverses still to come before it finally did fade.



The last of the Kowie tugs, the BUFFALO, which sank on 19 July 1889.
PHOTOGRAPH: ALBANY MUSEUM, GRAHAMSTOWN, AND KOWIE MUSEUM, PORT ALFRED

A SERIES OF REVERSES

The month of August in history serves as a constant reminder of how cruelly Port Alfred was served by the physical elements. The records of the proceedings on 10 August 1886 of the Eastern Districts Court, sited in Grahamstown and dating back to 1865,³⁰ serve as an example. The plaintiff — the East London Landing and Shipping Company founded in 1872³¹ — was suing its Kowie equivalent (popularly known as the Boating Company)³² for, inter alia, failing to pay the costs of the East London Company's attempts to salvage the wreck of the *Welcombe*. This was a steamer which, when travelling from East London to Port Elizabeth with a cargo of 3 000 bales of wool, sank in the vicinity of the Fish River mouth near Port Alfred amid scenes of great excitement and high drama.³³

Another even more spectacular reminder was provided by the findings of the inquest also held in Grahamstown into the causes of the sinking of the "last of the Kowie tugs", the *Buffalo*, on 19 July 1889. In this something in the Kowie's *mentalité* which is characteristically human is revealed, especially to places like the Kowie where men will always be tempted to pit themselves against the odds of the sea. For that is what the master of the *Buffalo* had done when he crossed the notorious bar across the mouth of the

¹⁹ *The Port Alfred Budget and Shipping Register*, 30.8.1883.

²⁰ TURPIN, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

²¹ E. MORSE JONES, *The story of a settler church, 1825-1867. A commemorative booklet to mark the centenary of the third Clumber Methodist Church November, 1967* (Grahamstown, 1967), p. 9.

²² *The Port Alfred Budget and Shipping Register*, 20.8.1884.

²³ *The Journal*, 1.9.1891.

²⁴ *Grahamstown Historical Society Annals* 3(4), 1982, pp. 64-65.

²⁵ *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 21.8.1884.

²⁶ *Grocott's Mail*, 5.7.1983: Coastal news.

²⁷ *An address by William Rose*, p. 10.

²⁸ *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 21.8.1884.

²⁹ TURPIN, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

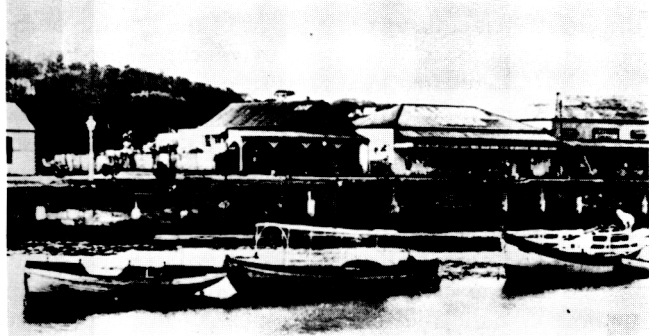
³⁰ Cory Library for Historical Research, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, PR 2086 'A centenary chronicle of the Eastern Cape Division of the Supreme Court by 'Stichus the Slave'; *Grocott's Daily Mail*, 28.7.1964.

³¹ *King William's Town Gazette*, 26.6.1872 and 24.7.1872. The East London Landing and Shipping Company was a King William's Town venture to begin with. It was only when the inconvenience of this was realised that the offices moved to East London. (I am indebted to Mr K. Tankard for this reference and observation).

³² TURPIN, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

³³ Jottings from Port Alfred — 1886. How the men on the S.S. "Wellcome" were rescued, *Toposcope* 4, 1973, pp. 44-45, except that this gives the impression that this shipwreck occurred in 1886. The exact date as recorded in *The Journal* was 19.11.1885. See also *The Journal*, 20 and 21.11.1885.

Kowie River knowing there was not sufficient clearance to do so without risk.³⁴ Fatal also — this time to five human lives (three Whites and two blacks) — was a lesser known incident: it was a fishing-boat tragedy which occurred many years later on Sunday 16 August 1903. Dawn that morning had broken on a deceptively calm scene, but the experienced port captain, Mr Peterson, was not fooled. His barometer was falling and so he strongly advised the two fishing-boats wanting to put out to sea that day to remain at their moorings. One of them did, the other did not. Sure enough! In the course of the morning “a breeze came up from the west” which “afterwards veer [ed] round to the south-west, and increase [d]” to such velocity that a signal went out to the boat not to attempt to navigate the river mouth but to try and find refuge in a cove to the east of the river. In the captain’s efforts to do so the “boiling surf” claimed all but two of the lives of the crew. Also to blame was the very bad state of repair of the official lifeboat, the *Maggie*, to which attention had been drawn when the commissioner of public works (A. Douglas, MLA) had visited neighbouring Grahamstown three months before. Three months later nothing had been done about it. There was a great deal of popular indignation which was fully justified. It was a case of official neglect compounding the recklessness of one seafaring individual.³⁵



Three boats off the Quay on Wharf Street, Port Alfred, with *MAGGIE*, the harbour's lifeboat, on extreme right, c. 1928.

PHOTOGRAPH: KOWIE MUSEUM, PORT ALFRED

Thus far the emphasis has been on the elements. Always unpredictable, often serving as a kind of backdrop to Kowie life, they highlighted harsh realities, often economically determined. Such was the history of the Kowie railway, much of which was also enacted in and around the month of August. Much of the railway’s formative stages occupied the latter half of 1880: the necessary enabling legislation passed on 23 July,³⁶ the formation of an organising committee on 9 August,³⁷ and the authorisation of an updated survey (in August) which was completed in June 1881.³⁸ A year later the first official test run along three kilometres of rail out of Port Alfred was conducted.³⁹ The greatest engineering feat on the line, the construction of a steel bridge (built on the cantilever principle) across the quite spectacular Blaauwkrantz River gorge, 21,5 km from Grahamstown, was completed two years later in August 1884.⁴⁰

But the optimism generated by the technical completion of the line soon faded. In February 1886, less than two years after the first official train had travelled the whole length of the line from Port Alfred to Grahamstown, the parent enterprise — the Grahamstown and Port Alfred Railway Company Limited — went into liquidation.⁴¹ A new syndicate formed by ten Grahamstown residents took over⁴² but also ran into difficulties quite quickly, as indicated by the announcement that as from 9 August 1889 the daily



Blaauwkrantz bridge on the Grahamstown to Port Alfred railway line under construction.

PHOTOGRAPH: CORY LIBRARY, RHODES UNIVERSITY, GRAHAMSTOWN

service would be reduced to four days a week, with Tuesdays and Thursdays out of the schedule.⁴³

GENERAL GLOOM

Generally speaking, also — not just in connection with matters railroad — the news became worse rather than better, and each time it was the month of August that bore the brunt. The reason is not hard to find. August under the Cape colonial political dispensation was the month that parliament wound up its business, and as it did so the Kowie’s customary lament was to the effect that its pleas for economic development and financial support had not been heeded.

August 1889 turned out to be particularly gloomy. A bill in favour of purchasing the railway line came tantalisingly close to being adopted; but that it failed nonetheless and that this happened so soon after the *Buffalo* disaster (19 July 1889) and the decision of her owners, Messrs F. Olivier and Sons of Port Elizabeth, to pull out of operations at the Kowie in the wake of the disaster, reduced the coastal community to its lowest ebb of confidence. An editorial in Grahamstown’s *Grocott’s Penny Mail* summed up the feeling: “The Kowie has surely touched bottom in her present disappointments and disheartening reverses. No place or port has ever had a worse run of ill luck than that which has befallen Port Alfred.”⁴⁴

The year 1889, however, was not altogether unique. The manifestation of economic recession had long pre-dated it. Perhaps the clearest evidence of that was provided as early as August 1887 when J.A. Guest, proprietor and editor of the *Budget*, was forced to shut down the paper and left the Kowie for Johannesburg.⁴⁵ Similar was the evidence that

³⁴ TURPIN, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

³⁵ *The Journal*, 18 and 22.8.1903; *Grocott’s Penny Mail*, 19.8.1903.

³⁶ *The Journal*, 23.7.1880.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.8.1880.

³⁸ G.D.R. DODS, *Nineteenth century communication in the Zuurveld* (M.Sc., Rhodes University, 1960), p. 217.

³⁹ *The Port Alfred Budget and Shipping Register*, 3.8.1882, TURPIN, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

⁴⁰ TURPIN, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *The Journal*, 5.8.1884.

⁴⁴ *Grocott’s Penny Mail*, 12.8.1889.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.8.1889.

Guest never came to reopen the paper's offices as he promised (at his farewell function) provided economic circumstances improved. The fact was that they did not improve for a long time. In so far as this affected the history of newspapers at the Kowie, a successor to the Budget, the *Kowie Announcer* (still extant), made its appearance only in 1934.

Other areas of the Kowie's well-being also suffered decline. What was left of the harbour works by 1891 was in the process of still further dismantlement, or as *The Journal* reported on 8 August: "The entire harbour premises present a most forlorn aspect compared to the bustle and activity which used to prevail there."

Almost a year later (on 6 August 1892) the same newspaper reported the departure of Harry Swan, head of W.H. Swan and Co., the leading retail business in the town dating back to 1856. The shop itself did not close down. It was to be operated by other members of the family, but, as *The Journal* commented: "In the present reduced state of our community, we can ill afford to lose Mr Swan, whose active interest as both divisional councillor and town councillor in all matters affecting the welfare of Port Alfred has always been conspicuous".

Given this background, it was no wonder that press reports about the Kowie in the 1890s vied with one another to find the most appropriate adjective to describe the atmosphere of stagnation prevailing at the town. *The Journal's Port Alfred News* of 6 August 1892 spoke of "our despised little port". On 10 September of the same year there was reference to "our forlorn little port" and readers of *Grocott's Penny Mail*, who were treated to a description of Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee celebrations at Port Alfred on 22 June 1897, were challenged to shed their image of the Kowie as "the extinct port", if only for that special day.⁴⁶

PUTTING A BRAVE FACE ON IT

That the Kowie forgot its troubles just for a day touched on yet another characteristic of its *mentalité*. It could put a brave face on misfortune and thereby hopes were kept alive, and best of all for uplifting the spirits — as already indicated — was the celebrations of a royal occasion. But it did not have to be a royal occasion. The departure of prominent citizens, like Guest and Swan, were also opportunities for splendid entertainment consisting of song, recital, much speechifying, handsome gifts, "lavish" suppers, and "God save the Queen".⁴⁷ On such occasions the plight of the port was not forgotten but was made deliberately light of. As happened during Guest's farewell when the after-dinner entertainment featured among other items a solo entitled "Nil Desperandum", rendered by a local worthy. To quote the *Grocott's Penny Mail*: "It was rendered with striking fervour and effect. The song was very much admired, and was evidently the song of the evening, the motto being highly appropriate to the condition of the little port."⁴⁸

At other times attention from the port's plight was distracted by reference to achievements, however modest, in other spheres of the community's life. As was the case of *The Journal's* issue of 6 August 1892 in which the gloom of the departure of Harry Swan was counterbalanced by a report showing "one bright spot" at least — "The success of the local library and reading room." *The Journal* elaborated: "It appears that since the 1st January [1892], 150 volumes have been added to the Library, which now numbers 654 volumes, while the circulation has reached nearly 3,000 per annum. There are 39 half-yearly and 10 monthly

subscriptions. The receipts during the year were [£] 75 3s 7d, and expenditure 72 9s 2d leaving a balance of 4 1s 2d. The Government Grant was 25, which will be increased by 2 13s 2d."

Equally conducive to uplifting the community's spirits — though equally unspectacular by comparison with the bigger issues which had littered the Kowie scene with their spectacular failures — was the appointment of either a new dynamic teacher to the local school (as in August 1890⁴⁹) or of a popular-because-less-austere government schools' inspector (as reported in August 1893⁵⁰). Two years earlier *The Journal* had been glad to report the acquisition of a new football by the local undenominational school.⁵¹ By such threads of good news hung the *esprit de corps* of Kowieites in the rather trying times of the "great depression".

A VERY SINGULAR DIVERSION

Occasionally there was a very singular diversion. One such circumstance represents one of the few instances in which an event of wider than mere local significance impinged directly on the Kowie scene. Mine is not the first reference to the otherwise little known aspect of the Kowie's history. That distinction belongs to Dr Ken Smith, the historian of the Graaff-Reinet district.⁵² It is part of the scenario of the Second Anglo-Boer War, news of which — predictably enough — dominated local press reports in 1899, and did so very matter-of-factly to begin with. So much was this the case that there seemed little to distinguish those reports from the reports four and five years later of the fighting in the Russo-Japanese War. But this was changed when all of a sudden, in the wake of the second Boer invasion during the war into the Cape Colony, launched in December 1900, martial law was extended over most of the Colony.⁵³ Its application to the Midlands town of Graaff-Reinet provided among other things that those of its citizens, including some of its Afrikaner town councillors who were suspected as collaborators with the rebels but could not be indicted, be sent by way of a precaution as "undesirables" to Port Alfred.⁵⁴

This essay's contribution to the reconstruction of this interesting episode is an extract from *The Journal*, dated 22 August 1901, which gives an account by one of the exiles of how they spent their day: "At 9.30 report presence at office; afterwards general gathering at the port and boats, about 25 yards distant from the Public Offices. There are about 25 boats. Some of us go for a row, some for a bathe in the sea. A boat can be obtained for 6s for the day, or 1s an hour, and packed in as many as it will carry, even to 10 persons. The charge for conveyance across the pont is 1/2d per head!"

Next followed a nice contemporary description of the Kowie, followed in turn by a very interesting comment

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.6.1897.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.8.1887; *The Journal*, 6.8.1892.

⁴⁸ *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 8.8.1887.

⁴⁹ *The Journal*, 12.8.1890.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.8.1893.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 15.8.1891.

⁵² K.W. SMITH, *From frontier to midlands: a history of the Graaff-Reinet district, 1786-1910* (Grahamstown, 1976).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 109-111.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

which for English-speaking South Africans touches on a charmingly incongruous aspect of the Afrikaner's mentality still evident today. The contemporary observer in question was J. B. Haarhoff; he was one of the outcasts in a sense — men chiefly, perhaps exclusively — who were part of an armed struggle of republican South Africa against monarchical Britain; yet he was just as eager as other more permanent Kowie folk to catch a glimpse of British royalty: "We get a glimpse of passing ships. Next week the three ships with the Royal party will anchor here for a few hours. It is a pity there is no landing place."

That was the snag: there would have been nowhere even close to the Kowie for the Duke and Duchess of York (later George V and Queen Mary) to disembark. They were the royal personages in question, en route from Durban to Cape Town on the second leg of the first major royal tour in history lasting eight months. It took them 72 000 km in all, via Suez to the Antipodes, and via the southern tip of Africa to Canada.⁵⁵

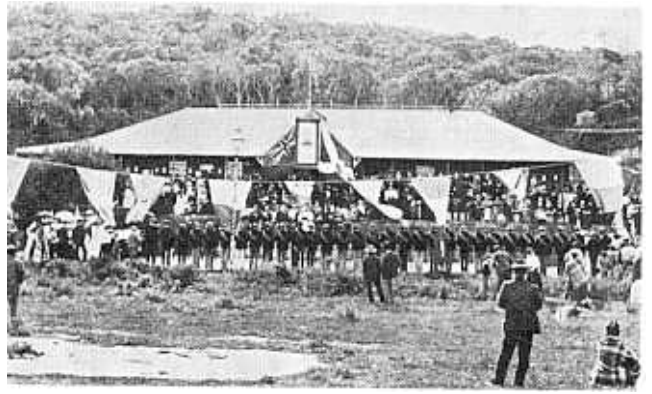
That the Boer exiles actually wanted to see the royals at all indicates how relaxed they felt at the Kowie. They found the people very friendly. The military treated them well. The only harm they might have come to would have been the making of their own inexperience of tricky coastal and adjacent waters. "Most of us had narrow escapes of being drowned", wrote Haarhoff. The real problem — initially — was a shortage of accommodation. "[T]here are so many to be provided for", he lamented. No least remarkable about this almost Braudelian-style episode of the Boer War — three Afrikaner women from the platteland opened boarding establishments at the Kowie to alleviate the shortage. There were two ladies from Graaff-Reinet, Mmes De Klerk and P. Troskie, and Mrs J. S. van Heerden from Craddock.⁵⁶

This whole episode was further proof of what even Haarhoff hinted at — that, truly, only a royal occasion was grand enough to really make everybody at the Kowie forget their troubles. There was the earlier diamond jubilee,⁵⁷ and subsequently King Edward VII's coronation day, 9 August 1902.⁵⁸ This latter occasion provided more than a temporary release of the depressed spirit. In retrospect it was a turning point.

BETTER DAYS AHEAD

Perhaps only coincidentally the celebrations in Port Alfred on that rain-swept Saturday morning, 9 August 1902 (carried over to the following Monday), of the coronation of King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra⁵⁹ marked a turning point in the affairs of the Kowie. Further bad times still lay ahead, especially once the full impact of the post-war depression hit the Cape in 1904⁶⁰ But this time there was no harping in the press as there had been in earlier years on the gloomy aspects of the Kowie. In truth, it was now — in years that lay in the immediate aftermath of the Second Anglo-Boer War — that the Kowie came to terms with itself.

That this was so, is indicated not least by the fact that it was at this juncture (on 13 August 1903, to be exact) that the last harbour feasibility report in the history of the Kowie was published. The details are in Turpin, and as indicated there, the merit of that report by Arthur Cameron Hurtzig, an eminent British marine engineer, was its unmistakable message that the mouth of the Kowie River could be converted into a reasonable harbour. However, to maintain it as such would necessitate a heavy annual cost on top of an



Old school house (now Post Office and temporary premises of Kowie Museum), Port Alfred, flag-bedecked for Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee celebrations on 22 June 1897.

PHOTOGRAPH: ALBANY MUSEUM, GRAHAMSTOWN

initial capital outlay of more than £½ million, which was out of the question.⁶¹

From then onwards, local leaders — such as municipal councillors — and the local chamber of commerce concentrated on those readily attainable improvements. They knew their own mind and cut their coat according to their cloth. An example was the siting of a bridge to link the two sides of the river. Grahamstown property-holders in Port Alfred pressed for the siting of the bridge at the existing pontoon. But the town council held very firm⁶² to its own preferred site (where the bridge still stands today). It was higher up the river and it would save the expense of buying up land on both banks to give access to the bridge. There the approach roads were already in existence.⁶³ So decided, the project went ahead, backed by a government loan of £4 000.⁶⁴ The Governor, Sir Walter Francis Hely-Hutchinson, during an extensive tour of the Eastern Cape in the spring of 1906,⁶⁵ laid the foundation stone on Saturday 1 September. As had become customary by then on such occasions, the trowel he used was the creation of the famous Grahamstown firm of jewellers, Galpin Bros. The celebrations were a grand affair.⁶⁶ The Governor was entertained to lunch in the newly decorated dining room of the recently christened Marine Hotel on the East Bank.⁶⁷ This was the establishment which for a short time had been Macdonald's Family and Commercial Hotel⁶⁸ and before that had been the much better (and longer lasting) Cole's Hotel.⁶⁹ Following the official luncheon, there was a garden party, and afterwards a concert.

Two years later the ceremonial opening of the bridge took place. It was named after Henry Putt, Port Alfred's long-serving first mayor and general manager of the Kowie rail-

⁵⁵ T. ARONSON, *Royal ambassadors: British royalties in Southern Africa, 1861-1947* (Cape Town, 1975), p. 53.

⁵⁶ *The Journal*, 22.8.1901.

⁵⁷ See p. 22.

⁵⁸ *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 18.8.1902.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ E. A. WALKER, *A history of Southern Africa* (London, 1957), p. 579.

⁶¹ TURPIN, *op. cit.*, pp. 127-128.

⁶² *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 2, 11 and 28.8.1905, and 4.10.1905.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 11.8.1905: Letter of W. Rose, secretary of Port Alfred municipal council, to J. Webber Esq., mayor of Grahamstown and chief petitioner on behalf of Grahamstown property-holders in Port Alfred.

⁶⁴ *The Journal*, 11 and 23.8.1906.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.8.1906.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.9.1906.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.8.1906 and 4.9.1906.

⁶⁸ *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 10.8.1904.



Scene at the laying of the foundation stone of the Henry Putt Bridge, Port Alfred, on Saturday 1 September 1906.

PHOTOGRAPH: ALBANY MUSEUM, GRAHAMSTOWN

way. The ceremony which took place at noon on Tuesday 15 September 1908 was performed by the Hon. D.P. de Villiers, MLC (later Sir David de Villiers Graaff). It was an occasion which was separated by only a few weeks from the first session of the National Convention which opened in sweltering Durban heat to begin to draft the Act of Union. Graaff did not miss a splendid opportunity when he told his audience that "Bridges were particularly necessary in South Africa and he hoped to see their number increased (cheers). The Government was about to design a bigger bridge; he meant of course, the closer union of the people of South Africa (cheers)."⁷⁰

A NEW ERA

In other ways too affairs at the Kowie were certainly looking up. The month of August remains my point of reference,

not least for the fact that the August meeting of the municipal council was by tradition the mayoral election. The council which met on 10 August 1911 saw the end of an era. A new mayor, W.H. Vroom, took the place of Councillor Henry Putt.⁷¹

Putt's career needs elaborating. He was a native of Totnes, Devonshire, England. He followed a long West Country tradition⁷² to go to sea. He joined the merchant navy as a boy, transferred to the Royal Navy in 1855, and was appointed to the *Shannon*, a frigate which saw service in Indian waters during the Indian mutiny campaign of 1857-1858. He bought his discharge from the navy in 1860, and at that juncture entered on his 'second' career associated with the Victorian 'miracle', the railway. He was with the Great Western Railway Company from September 1860 until January 1884, stationed at Paddington, where most of the time he was a porter in the goods department. In the latter year he came to South Africa to take up a position as inspector on the Kowie railway. In 1887, when he was appointed the company's general manager,⁷³ Port Alfred had been upgraded from the status of a village management board to full municipal status. Putt was elected first mayor, a position he retained unopposed until his replacement in August 1911. In April that year the Blaauwkrantz bridge disaster

⁶⁹ *The Journal*, 7.8.1906.

⁷⁰ *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 16.9.1908.

⁷¹ *The Journal*, 31.8.1911.

⁷² This is a tradition which goes back at least as far as the famous 'sea dogs' of the Elizabethan age, Sir John Hawkins, his cousin, Sir Francis Drake, and others.

⁷³ *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 1.8.1913.

Group scene on the occasion of the opening of the Henry Putt Bridge, Port Alfred, Tuesday 15 September 1908.

PHOTOGRAPH: ALBANY MUSEUM, GRAHAMSTOWN





Henry Putt, (first) mayor of Port Alfred from 1887 to 1911.

PHOTOGRAPH: FROM GRAHAMSTOWN TO PORT ALFRED: A SOUVENIR OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN EXHIBITION, GRAHAMSTOWN, 1898

occurred, when one of the trucks of a train travelling from Port Alfred became detached from the train, setting up a chain of events that resulted in the death of 28 people and injury to 22 others as their coaches hurtled over the side of the bridge.⁷⁴ There is no doubt that this misfortune affected Putt very badly and that his retirement from public service had something to do with it. Two years later when the Union government took over the Kowie railway, Putt resigned his position as general manager. Grahamstown's *Grocott's Penny Mail* paid him a handsome tribute.⁷⁵

But enough was enough! With due respect, one man so long in one position was bound to become somewhat autocratic. That is the impression which a reading of the minutes of the council in latter years of his mayoralty conveys. On those occasions there was little debate and even less dissent.⁷⁶ From 1911 onwards — after his retirement — there was a remarkable change. A visibly greater quantity and range of business was discussed at council meetings. In 1913 there were actually more candidates than council vacancies, and two of the contestants even addressed a ratepayers' meeting. This was unprecedented and a welcome departure from the tendency in the past (as one of the speakers at that meeting put it) "when it seemed impossible to find candidates for public honours".⁷⁷

A NEW-FOUND CONFIDENCE

Fitfully as yet, a "new spirit" was "developing in Port Alfred"⁷⁸ and this change of mood was born of a new-found confidence. Port Alfred seemed at last to have shed its vision as a port. Now near the end of the chosen timespan of this essay, Port Alfred was both acknowledging itself and being acknowledged as a tourist attraction. In the last months of peace — or thereabouts — the municipal council was having to heed the public demand for improved bathing facilities.⁷⁹ But at the same time it tightened up on public bathing regulations more in keeping with the bygone Victorian age than the post-Edwardian brazen new world. The place was the lagoon on the east side of the river, and he who spelt it out that there should be no "mixed" bathing

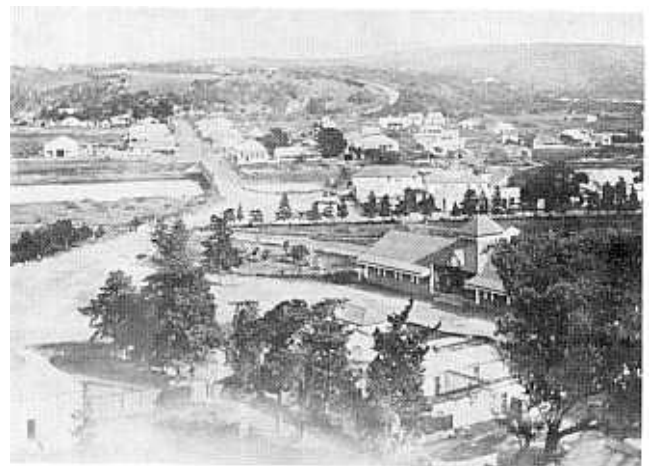
of the sexes between 11h00 and 16h00 was not inappropriately the community's own "eminent Victorian", Henry Putt.⁸⁰ And he perhaps still did know better than anyone else what was good for the Kowie; because those from outside who extolled the virtues of the little place as a haven for travellers, sought to find there a community unspoilt by the vices of the modern world (though they also liked its low prices!).⁸¹

It was indeed in the last months before the outbreak of the First World War that the Kowie was beginning to find favour with visitors (and people seeking retirement) from the Transvaal. This was the unmistakable message of a letter received from the Witwatersrand by a local resident and quoted in *The Journal* of 12 August 1913: ". . . Do you know the old Kowie is drawing a lot of Rand people now? A number of 'big' people from Germiston are there now. So long as the Kowie keeps down its charges, does not try to ape Durban, and remains somewhat primitive in style of living, it will be visited by a good class of people who want a quiet holiday . . . Durban has the reputation of now attracting only the 'snobs' and 'nobs' and 'hot stuff' of the Rand, but it makes them pay heavily for the frolic . . . A cousin of the wife's and his family have just spent two months there; they are quiet folk, but it cost them over [£] 300, and naturally they are disgusted."

A few weeks later came the biggest scoop of all. Vere Stent — one time friend of Cecil John Rhodes, excellent journalist, editor of the *Pretoria News*, and frequent visitor to the Kowie — contributed to *The Journal* his own impression of the Kowie: "To spend a holiday at the Kowie is to apply an antidote — the only antidote to the poison of hard living. The charm of the old world is still upon the Kowie, upon Bathurst, upon the district." He went on to describe a Sunday morning at the Kowie:

Port Alfred (probably during the 1920s) after completion of Putt Bridge, looking from the railway station on the East Bank across the bridge over the river to the West Bank.

PHOTOGRAPH: ALBANY MUSEUM, GRAHAMSTOWN



⁷⁴ K.S. HUNT, *The Blaauwkrantz Bridge*, *Contree* 5, January 1979, pp. 27-32.

⁷⁵ *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 1.8.1913.

⁷⁶ See e.g. *ibid.*, 1.9.1905: Report of municipal council meeting, 17.8.1905; *The Journal*, 18.8.1908: Report of council meeting, 12.8.1908.

⁷⁷ *The Journal*, 26.8.1913.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*: Report of ratepayers' meeting; *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 9.8.1915; Report of municipal council meeting, 22.7.1915.

⁸⁰ *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 9.8.1915.

⁸¹ *The Journal*, 1.8.1914: Letter of a recent Queenstown visitor.



Port Alfred market place, 1892.

PHOTOGRAPH: ALBANY MUSEUM, GRAHAMSTOWN

“The sun breaks over the sand-hills, tinging the semi-tropical wooded slopes amidst which the cottages nestle with a flood of illumination.

The faintest suggestion of a mist rises from the lagoon, the deep-bosomed river ebbs or flows with the tide; the smoke of breakfast fires hovers lazily over the village, the bluish-white of the mimosa flames against the green. Upon the flag staff the ‘Jack’ flies in honour of the day.

They remember

Sunday at the Kowie,

to keep it holy, for in six days the Lord made Heaven and earth and rested the seventh. Clear across the water comes the bell of ‘St Nicholas by the Ferry’, summoning the faithful to the early eucharist.

Out upon the silver beach the sur [sic] beats with measured volt, and the waves thrusting upon the pier intone a soothing hymn.

Everyone goes to one church or another.

There are no raucus [sic] public meetings, no anarchist blasphemy, no socialist processions, no country clubs, no so-called sacred concerts, no excursions, or alarms. The peace of God broods over the lagoon and river, and the hills, and

A Perfect Contentment

Speaks of happiness for the brain-weary [and] problem racked. . .

The Kowie is ideal.

There are no newspapers. We are all rid of that curse. Even the ‘Journal’ only ventures to intrude every other day, and then only with diffidence.

Some people are foolish enough to court disaster by subscribing to the ‘Sunday Post’, or something equally pernicious, such as the ‘Argus Weekly’ but the wise leave their letters at the Poste Restante so long as they dare. They are thankful that the telephone is as yet an uncultivated habit in the district, and accept telegrams under protest.

Oysters are 9d a dozen . . . eggs . . . 9d a dozen . . . , and fowls . . . 1/- each.

There is nothing garish at the Kowie; no second class brass band; no illuminated pier head;

No Foolish Flappers

sufficiently beautiful to distract ones [sic] attention, and sufficiently stupid to bore one on nearer acquaintance. It is just a simple, godly, quiet life.

The impress of the 1820 set[t]lers is still over the land. The Pilgrim Fathers of South Africa have left their mark. People here still roll their blinds up by hand and tie them with tape — they still struggle with para fine [sic] lamps. . .

They still chop wood . . . for the stoves they burn it in;

They still make stamped mealies the staple vegetable at every meal, and the railway is the greatest of all their institutions.

The Kowie is never hurried — except when a train starts for up country. For some reasons, quite inexplicable — quite beyond the lay mind — the train invariably starts at six in the morning.

. . . Everybody walks

and feels the better for it. Only the affluent possess wheel transport — the doctor, one or two prosperous farmers, the milkman, the hotel proprietor.

There are one or two weekly events — the Saturday market for instance, which everybody attends, from the wife of the magistrate down to old ‘Kom Kom’, the ancient coloured man who will do anything for a living but work.

The market-master is a friend of all.

He has his little quips and cranks as market-masters will have, and has a marvellous memory for names.

. . . The bathing arrangements are primitive, especially those on the beach.

On suddenly topping a silver sand-hill one morning I broke upon the meditations of three fair ladies, who, having bathed, and being apparently without towels, were invoking the welcome and astringent rays of the warm sun in that condition of toilette described by Hans Breitman as ‘Mid nodings on’. They seemed less disturbed than I was, for I am by nature a bashful man.

Other things about the Kowie are primitive, but Lord! what a pleasure it is to be primitive. . .

How Ruskin would have loved the Kowie. The railway dare not intrude its ugly smoky presence too far. The rude works of man stand self confessed a failure.

The sea today cries a halt to the pier and the breakwater. Bush, sub-tropical and primeval has covered over the quarries of the eighties, reclaiming them in the name of the great God Pan. Nothing disturbs the Solitude of the River

Banks, except here and there a ruin over grown, silent, and surrendered. . .⁸²

Vere Stent’s ‘Charms of the Kowie’ is a piece of marvellous description — sometimes caricature, in parts lyrical, always evocative. Viewed from the perspective of the holocaust that broke loose a mere ten months later it reads like a final salute to a lost world. It is so beguiling a piece as if almost to insulate the Kowie against the reality of the horror that was to come.

When Britain went to war against Germany on 4 August 1914 no obvious ripple touched the placid surface of the Kowie’s existence. The first sign of the war’s intrusion on the consciousness of the Kowie was a reference on the last day of that fateful August that a commandant of the Union Defence Force had addressed the Kowie Rifle Association, and was taken to task for not having called openly for war volunteers.⁸³ Soon after there was the formation of a local war relief committee with free access to working space in the municipal council chamber every Friday afternoon.⁸⁴ By these tentative links the Kowie was joined willy nilly — Braudel notwithstanding — to the so “conspicuous” event which for the next four years occupied much of the hearts and minds of men and women all over the globe.

In thirty-three years the Kowie had passed from gloom and despondency (and recurring setbacks) to arrive at the threshold of a new age. This was an era marked by a new sense of practical realism on the part of its civic leaders and of greater involvement and buoyancy among its townfolk. It saw the dawning of its tourist industry. But for a time that prospect was dimmed when in the phrase made famous by Britain’s foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, “the lamps [were] going out all over Europe.”⁸⁵

⁸² *Ibid.*, 4.9.1913.

⁸³ *Grocott’s Penny Mail*, 31.8.1914.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.8.1915.

⁸⁵ VISCOUNT GREY OF FALLODEN, *Twenty-five years 1892-1916*, III (London, 1935), p. 223.