

Church Square, Graaff-Reinet, circa 1860, with the headquarters of Mosenthal Brothers prominent in the background.

PHOTO: Dr. C.G. Henning.



SOME NOTES ON REGIONAL HISTORY RESEARCH

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ATTITUDE TO REGIONAL HISTORY IN THE U.S.A.

During a tour of the U.S.A., I was particularly impressed with the progress which has been made in regional history. Tourist brochures and information were readily available as were aids to facilitate touring. I was delighted to discover the enthusiastic attempts to preserve the national heritage, not merely by filling the museums, but by preserving local identity. America honours its heroes, and plaques to commemorate them and the places where they lived are regular sights which greet the tourist. Old buildings with special historical significance have been retained, whereas in South Africa old buildings merely appear to invite the bulldozer and the demolisher. The city of San Francisco, for example, is a delight to the eye because of its 19th century domestic architecture.

COMPARISON WITH SOUTH AFRICA

The South African regional tourist industry does not bear comparison with its American counterpart. Take for example Graaff-Reinet, the fourth oldest town in South Africa. Here the tourist will search very hard to discover plaques or buildings dedicated to the memory of our great heroes who pioneered development in South Africa. I mention only a few: Andries Pretorius (there is not even a street named after him in his birthplace, but there is a monument three miles out of town), Gerrit Maritz (there is no plaque which indicates where he practised his craft as a wagon-builder, although in fairness I must mention that only recently a square was named after him). Important national events have passed by unnoticed. The tourist searches in vain for reminders of regional historical events and places, for example a little plaque which might read "This is the spot where Maynier was expelled", or "where the burghers met to proclaim the first 'Republic' in South Africa", or "where the first sale of Angora goats was held in South Africa". The result is that the tourist passes through a town without being remotely aware of its rich historical associations. For this I do not blame the local Publicity Association, but rather the apathy of our citizens, the State and above all the lack of research on regional history. We have allowed

our knowledge of our own cultural heritage to lapse into obscurity. Perhaps Graaff-Reinet has been luckier than most platteland towns in that one of its sons, Dr Anton Rupert, has been able to contribute so much to the restoration of old buildings.

INITIAL DIFFICULTIES IN REGIONAL RESEARCH

The further one goes back into the past, the more difficult it is to establish facts with accuracy, particularly if the field of research commences in the 17th or 18th centuries. Conversely, the nearer the establishment of a particular town to our own period, the easier it is to acquire direct or indirect information.

Every area in South Africa is rich in historical associations, but here a note of warning must be sounded to the prospective regional historian. Each region develops its own character, which in turn is dependent on the circumstances surrounding its establishment. An individual approach is therefore required in most instances. How vastly different are areas such as Johannesburg, Rustenburg, Barberton at the height of its gold-rush, Ladysmith during the Anglo-Boer war, Durban and its growth as a sea-port, the military settlements at Grahamstown and King William's Town, the 18th century frontier outpost at Graaff-Reinet.

RESEARCH ON GRAAFF-REINET (1836—1886)

When I began my research on Graaff-Reinet, it soon became obvious that the development of the town was influenced by certain basic periods. From 1786—1836 it retained its character as a rural Dutch-speaking region; after the Great Trek there was a cosmopolitan influence and the town enjoyed an unprecedented prosperity, becoming the most important inland commercial centre in South Africa. Alas, this economic leadership was short-lived because when gold was discovered on the Witwatersrand (1886) its importance diminished and it became a typical South African “dorp” with rich historical associations.

As a result, the period 1836—1886 provided the richest historical material and the story was particularly interesting when it came to the human element and the clash between the *verligte* and *verkrampte* elements in nearly every sphere of human endeavour. The story of these people is in fact hardly different from that of our present day. They witnessed economic fluctuations; they survived an economic depression, severe droughts and devastating floods; they discussed the state of the veld, the condition of their sheep; they followed their fortunes on the overseas wool-markets; they squabbled over domestic issues such as the introduction of clean water; they made every attempt to improve their children's education; they desired public amenities such as a library, a botanical garden, a hospital, a town hall; they complained bitterly about the poor government administration such as in an inadequate police force, an inefficient postal system; they introduced legislation to combat traffic hazards; there were church disputes; there were social problems; there was intense rivalry between the merchants and the urban agriculturalists; there was a clash between enlightened development and conservatism.

Graaff-Reinet from the west, circa 1870, with the extensive vineyards of the urban-agriculturalists (agterstraters) in the foreground.

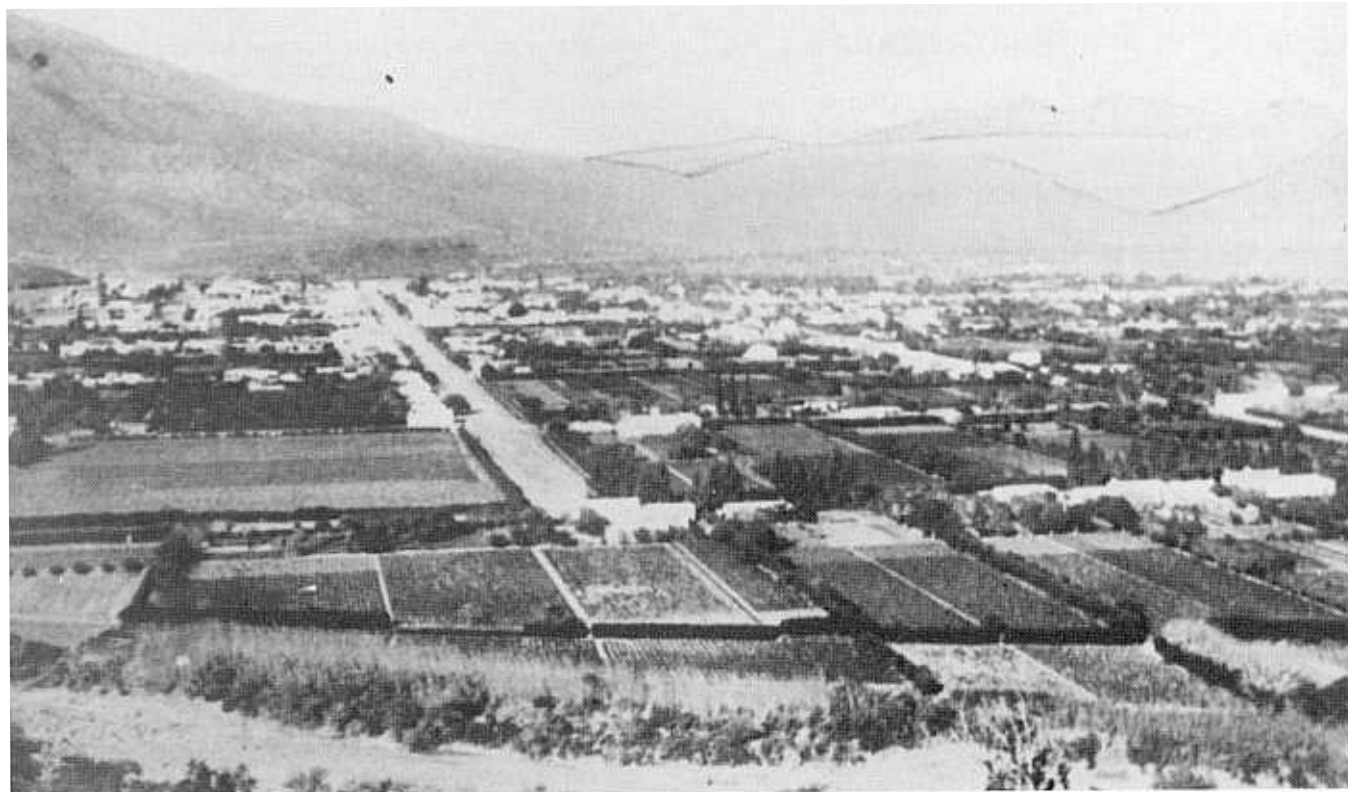
PHOTO: Dr C.G. Henning.

To me, here was a fertile field for regional or local history. Realising the strong human element of conflict and the basic instinct of man to survive and develop his potential, I approached this story as cultural history wherein every facet of local life was recorded.

SUGGESTIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL REGIONAL RESEARCH

There were, however, innumerable difficulties which I had to face throughout my six years of research on this project. In this article I can only provide a guide to younger colleagues and refer to some of the difficulties, of which the following (not listed in order of importance) readily come to mind:

- (i) Treat the writings of the local amateur historian with caution and reservation. When he cites official documents he seldom exercises the discipline of the professional historian.
- (ii) Coupled with (i) is a warning against hearsay information. “My father told me ... ” sounds very romantic and authentic. While this information may contain a grain of truth and add spice to some local incident, the data has to be thoroughly investigated and then interwoven into its correct historical perspective. When the story is within living memory, then it is quite possible to accept it at face value.
- (iii) However, interviews with the oldest citizens who relate events of yester-year can often prove confusing. Many do not retain clear memories, and the old-timer's story often jumps from 1880 to 1920. Here it is the duty of the historian to correlate these facts accurately.
- (iv) The historian's best guide lies first and foremost in official documents, such as birth, death and marriage certificates; land transactions; old maps; the local newspapers; the church and state archives; and directories



such as the Cape of Good Hope Almanacs and the Cape of Good Hope Blue Books. A study of these will not merely provide accuracy but also form and supplement the basic framework of the research. In many instances I found that even these sources proved inadequate. I will list three examples:

- (a) Church minutes of the period around the Great Trek are conspicuously lacking in any information on this great historical epic in South African history. The reason is of course that because the Scottish ministers were loyal to the crown they scrupulously avoided any references to the political undercurrents of the time. I found I was unable to establish how many people left Graaff-Reinet, but found a reasonable answer in the revenue (i.e. income-tax) statistics of the Colony.
- (b) The destruction of old records of immense Africana value is characteristic and adds to the many problems facing the researcher. Records pertaining to private schools, charitable organizations, smaller denominations and certain societies were unobtainable. Recourse to the press of the day can often solve these problems.
- (c) On the whole I found newspaper reporting in the Victorian era to be reasonably good. Where there are more newspapers than one, the researcher must beware of "mud-slinging" between the contemporary (rival) newspapers. Often the editors took sides in domestic issues. In Graaff-Reinet, reporting was often one-sided because it was only from about 1881 that there was a pure Dutch newspaper. In local controversies, the historian must be as objective as possible. He must observe the local differences at a distance as an interested but impartial spectator.
- (v) In the absence of old records, the safest procedure is to obtain information from second-hand sources. For example, the Midland Seminary (1876—1921) was burnt down and nearly fifty years of educational records were destroyed. Visits to old scholars brought to light important information. Confronted with the question "What can you tell me of the Seminary?" many elderly ladies would hesitate to answer. However, I recommend a more positive approach — have a list of teachers (however inadequate) and other known data, and use this as a starting point for discussion.
- (vi) Pictorial records such as photographs are invaluable to help reconstruct the physical appearance of a town or to provide information on important public functions. The architecture of bygone years should be faithfully recorded. It goes without saying that many old buildings disappear but this problem is augmented by the modern tendencies of demolition and modernisation in the name of "progress".
- (vii) The key to all facets of community development can be found in the economic development. Communal facilities such as banks, schools, churches, entertainment, administration, the arts, are determined in proportion to the economic development.
- (viii) Throughout my research I found it useful to maintain a card-index of all residents and to record their

professions, places of business, their families, in fact any available information. While only a small fraction of this information made its way into my published research, I found this little "archive" invaluable. Where possible, lists of shareholders of the various banks, a list of shopkeepers, officials, urban agriculturalists were scrupulously and painstakingly compiled and included in the index. The men and women who contributed to regional history are equally as important as the events and developments which took place. Genealogists have subsequently found my lists invaluable. There is also a sense of family pride in having positive proof of one's ancestors. Recently I received a letter from a lady in England (who was formerly a Miss Meintjes) in this connection. The Meintjes "clan" played a prominent rôle in the development of Graaff-Reinet. However, I may add that when the present biography of S.J. Meintjes (Snr.) came to be compiled for the *Dictionary of South African biography III* it was discovered that there was no known early information on this man who originally purchased the land on which the present Union Buildings were built. Here is a perfect example of the contribution which regional history can make.

REGIONAL RESEARCH AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The regional historian must be able to evaluate his research. Will it make a significant contribution to our knowledge of local history or, ultimately, to national historical research? My own research on Graaff-Reinet succeeded in both these respects. Many national activities had their origin in this town. For example, the introduction of the merino sheep and the angora goat, the development of a commerce from which radiated a commercial empire following in the wake of the Voortrekkers, the agitation for a railway, the notorious religious controversies within the Ring of Graaff-Reinet. Finally the influence of Graaff-Reinet, which produced four presidents and some of the great Voortrekker leaders, permeates South African history.

Surveying the theme retrospectively, my own interpretation is that the story of the domestic controversies which I described in detail e.g. rivalry between the merchants (the *voordorpers*, or the well-educated, progressive German and English-speaking immigrants) and the urban agriculturalists (the *agterstraaters*, or the poorly-educated, conservative Dutch-speaking group), is repeated half a century later with the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War. This social conflict is still a feature of South African life, having passed through its agricultural, mining and now industrial phase. It will probably always remain with us and people will continue to display progressive or conservative tendencies. However, I believe that the second half-century of Graaff-Reinet's history is a perfect example of how all these nationalities and men from different walks of life merged their identities when it came to building a town — in their own way they contributed to the development of the South African nation. They brought civilization and development to an inhospitable area and transformed it into a veritable "Gem of the Desert".

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