

The burden of empathy

E. Dommisse, *Sir David Pieter de Villiers Graaff: First Baronet of De Grendel*

Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2011

366 pp

ISBN 978-0-624-05304-0

R250.00

In this biography Ebbe Dommisse investigates the life of Sir David Graaff, a poor, barely educated Afrikaner who became one of South Africa's richest people and an influential politician. Graaff was the sixth of nine children, born on 30 March 1859 on a farm in the Overberg in the Cape Colony. At the age of eleven years he left his impoverished parental home when an affluent and childless great-uncle took him to Cape Town to work in his butchery. Within a few years Graaff was in charge of the butchery and developed into a dynamic businessman and entrepreneur, turning this small enterprise into a prosperous company. As a pioneer of cold storage in South Africa, he developed an extensive distribution network of frozen products, making himself a fortune.

Graaff's wealth made it possible for him to enter politics. As a 23-year old he became a Cape Town city councillor. Between 1890 and 1892 he was the mayor of the city. In September 1891 he was elected to the legislative council, the upper house of the Cape parliament, but his growing business obligations led to his retirement from politics in 1897. He returned to parliament in 1908 as a member of John X. Merriman's government. With the unification of South Africa in 1910, he served in the cabinet of General Louis Botha in various portfolios. Because of ill health he retired from the cabinet in 1913, but returned as the minister of finance in 1915. Health problems led to his resignation in 1916, but he remained a member of parliament until 1920. In this period he was a confidant of Prime Minister Botha and of his successor Jan Smuts. After leaving parliament he devoted his full attention to his business interests. Despite the ravages of the Great Depression of the late 1920s he died a rich man on 13 April 1931. His son De Villiers inherited the baronetcy and became a prominent South African parliamentarian and leader of the United Party. The present baronet, Sir David, also a former parliamentarian, lives on the family farm of De Grendel.

Dommisse tells a spellbinding story, portraying Graaff as a philanthropic businessman with integrity and a strong sense of public duty. As Cape Town's mayor he played a leading role in modernising the city, while as a member of Botha's cabinet he broke the stranglehold of the Shipping Ring, a cartel of British shipping lines, which through collusion set unfair tariffs between Britain and South Africa, restricting trade in the process. Graaff was also a generous benefactor – financing the school in his old hometown of Villiersdorp. And yet, as a result of Dommisse's admiration and subsequent lack of rigour in questioning Graaff's motives and actions, *Sir David Pieter de Villiers Graaff* encourages a perception that the first baronet of De Grendel was not the man he admires, but a ruthless and calculating person who trimmed his sails to prevailing political winds for personal gain. This is especially evident in his highly profitable meat contracts with the British army during the South African War of 1899–1902.

The South African War presented an exceptional business opportunity for Graaff's South African Supply & Cold Storage Company. Between July 1899 and June 1900 the company's profit amounted to £462 874 while a year later it was £1 071 169. Yet Dommisse claims that the contracts meant a difficult political choice for Graaff

because his sympathies lay on the Boer side. Yet as a British subject he had, of necessity, to do business with the British military. According to Dommissie, Graaff had no choice because the military could nationalise his business in terms of martial law if he refused to co-operate. This argument makes no sense because martial law was only proclaimed in Cape Town on 18 October 1901. By then Graaff had already renewed two one-year contracts with the British army. From his correspondence, quoted by Dommissie, it is clear that Graaff worked hard to retain these contracts. His joy on signing a new contract on 24 January 1900, and his optimism that the contract would be renewed in 1902 (it was not), does not reflect a man tortured by doing business with the British army, but one motivated by the pursuit of profit. As a result of his profitable dealings with British imperialism, Graaff became the wealthiest Afrikaner in South Africa. At the same time, however, he emerged from the trauma of the South African War with a reputation as a Boer sympathiser by donating money for medical assistance to women and children in the concentration camps. Indeed, in 1911, his baronetcy was recommended by Botha for his relief work in the camps.

Graaff's standing amongst Afrikaners was also bolstered by stories that because of his Boer sympathies, he was "in effect under house arrest" by the British on his farm, and that he had corresponded with Botha and Smuts during the war. Dommissie argues that although there is no evidence of the alleged "house arrest" this was possible. (In the introduction, however, he states categorically that Graaff was indeed placed under house arrest (p 13).) Dommissie's stance makes no sense because Graaff's "house arrest" would have been splashed in the press; nor does he ask why the house arrests of Marie Koopmans-De Wet and Merriman are recorded while Graaff's is not. Dommissie is more doubtful about the family legend that Graaff corresponded with Botha and Smuts during the war, but does not reject it. How would it have been possible for Graaff to correspond with Boer generals during the guerilla phase of the war? Despite the efforts to place Graaff in a positive light, the impression is created that he was eager to make a profit from British imperialism, while at the same time playing his cards in such a way as not to alienate Afrikaners. In his conclusion Dommissie points out that Graaff realised at an early stage of his career how important good media relations were, and that he ensured that he was portrayed favourably in the press. To use modern day political parlance, Graaff seems to have been a master of "spin".

The perception of Graaff as a calculating businessman making use of prevailing political winds to his own advantage is bolstered by his behaviour after the war. With the pro-imperial Progressive Party in power in the Cape Colony he remained outside of party politics. According to Dommissie, he abstained from politics out of sympathy with the Cape rebels who had lost their franchise, and because he wanted to pay more attention to his business interests. But would sympathy with the rebels not have been a motivating factor to enter politics to defend the rights of Cape Afrikaners? (He returned to politics in 1908 when an Afrikaner Bond victory was beyond doubt.) It is furthermore odd that while he was too busy to enter politics in the Cape Colony, this did not apply to the Transvaal. He found the time to campaign on behalf of Botha's victorious Het Volk party in the parliamentary election of 1907. Was it not possible that Graaff abstained from politics in the Cape because he did not want to do anything that could harm his business interests with the Progressives in power, while Botha was an investment in the obvious coming man in South African politics, a future prime minister of a united South Africa? Graaff worked hard to cultivate Botha's friendship, as well as that of Jan Smuts, his right-hand man. In 1905, he paid a visit of three to four months to Botha in the Transvaal, while he accompanied the newly elected Transvaal prime minister on his visit

to Britain in 1907. Until Botha's death he would be lavishly hosted and entertained by Graaff. As a result, the ultra-sensitive Botha, struggling to cope with the rough and tumble of party politics, became dependant on Graaff.

Dommissie portrays Graaff as a close friend and confidant of Botha without any ulterior motives, but his *Sir David Pieter de Villiers Graaff* can be read as proof that Graaff's friendship with the prime minister was an investment which paid dividends. Botha's recommendation secured him his much-cherished baronetcy, as well as his post in the first South African cabinet, because Graaff was a minor member of the Merriman government with no obvious claim to such an elevated position. His close relationship also possibly secured a cabinet post for Senator Jacobus Graaff, his younger brother, business associate and, it must be said, a political non-entity. It is baffling that Dommissie quotes Governor-General Lord Buxton as saying that "Botha dislikes him [Jacobus Graaff] extremely and does not trust him, nor does anyone else. He is very different to his brother" (p 219), yet makes no attempt to explain why he was given a cabinet post, or why, in addition, Jacobus was awarded a knighthood in 1917.

The Botha connection certainly had financial benefits for Graaff. In 1918 he accompanied the prime minister to attend the Versailles peace summit. While other statesmen attempted to create a new world order at the peace summit in Versailles, Graaff used his influence with Botha to negotiate the takeover of German diamond interests by South Africans in the former German colony of South West Africa. His own company, The Graaff's Trust, played a leading and lucrative role in the process. Dommissie describes the takeover in detail, but makes no judgment or evaluation of Graaff's behaviour. Nor does he investigate what possible role Graaff's close ties with Smuts played in securing a contract with the government which provided Imperial Cold Storage, of which he was the chairman, a monopoly to transport frozen meat for fifteen years from the mandated territory in South West Africa. In 1928, Graaff paid for Smuts's daughter Cato, to study at Cambridge University. Was this perhaps a case of reciprocating for a past favour, an investment for future use if Smuts should return to power? Or was it simply a helping hand to a friend with a cash flow problem?

Sir David Graaff was a larger than life figure with some admirable qualities, but it is doubtful that he was the idealised figure presented in *Sir David Pieter De Villiers Graaff*. Most biographers struggle to cope with their empathy for their subjects, and it is obvious that Dommissie's admiration for the first baronet of De Grendel has overwhelmed him, making it difficult to see Graaff's frailties.

F.A. Mouton
University of South Africa