

THE EUROPEAN CONCEPT OF A FARM IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

If the Portuguese settlements in Mocambique are excluded, the first permanent European settlement in southern Africa was the one established by Jan van Riebeeck at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652. The primary purpose of the settlement was to establish a garden which could supply fresh fruit and vegetables between the Netherlands and the East Indies. Although the purpose of the settlement was agricultural, it was not the intention of the Company to establish a colony of settlement similar to those on the coasts of the Americas. However, settlement took place and subsequently grew.

The immediate problem in South Africa in so far as settled agriculture was concerned, was the difference in the physical environment between north-west Europe and the Cape of Good Hope. The realisation of the differences in the climate in particular was slow. Incorrect appraisals and too great a reliance on the experience of European agriculture continued for 250 years after the initial settlement.

The South African climate is characterised by comparatively low and uncertain rainfall, particularly in the western and central parts of the country (Fig. 1). The contrast with Europe is marked. Cape Town has an average rainfall of 25 inches per annum, Graaff-Reinet 14 inches, Clanwilliam 8 inches and Pretoria 20 inches. Only near the east coast do rainfall figures exceed 30 inches (Durban 45 inches).

The totals in many places are not dissimilar to those of Europe but the high evaporation rates make the rainfall less effective. The seasonal distribution is different from that of the north-west of Europe with summer drought near Cape Town and winter drought elsewhere. The environment is characterised by a comparative lack of surface water in quantities sufficient for agriculture on the European model, although it is evident that the conditions of today show a marked deterioration on those noted even a hundred years ago.

There was thus a constant clash of ideas between the European inhabitants of South Africa and the pre-Union, Dutch and British, officials on how much land a man needed to support himself and his family. Similar disagreements have characterised the settlement of areas such as the central United States and Australia or even South West Africa under the Germans. The agricultural backgrounds of the officials of the Netherlands and Great Britain included the idea of small farms engaged in arable farming, often with associated livestock. Even the livestock farms in Europe were small (under 500 acres), and the arable farms frequently less than 5 acres in extent. Official thinking on the size of farms was conditioned by experience in Europe. It was impossible for an official in Amsterdam or London to realise that the settlers in the Cape were realistic in a demand for a farm of 6000 acres.¹ On

1. English acres and Cape morgen are used in southern Africa. 1 Cape morgen is equivalent to 2.11654 acres. Thus 3000 morgen equals 6350 acres.

the other hand settlers could be enticed to South Africa with offers of farms of 20 acres which was a large farm by the standards of nineteenth century Europe. The gap between European experience and African reality was wide, and often unbridgeable for farmer and official alike. Thus unsuccessful land grant policies, and disastrous settlement schemes ensued to the detriment of the future of the sub-continent.

The initial farms were granted to servants of the Dutch East India Company close to Cape Town. The first were made in 1657 and they continued afterwards for small areas which were intended for vegetable

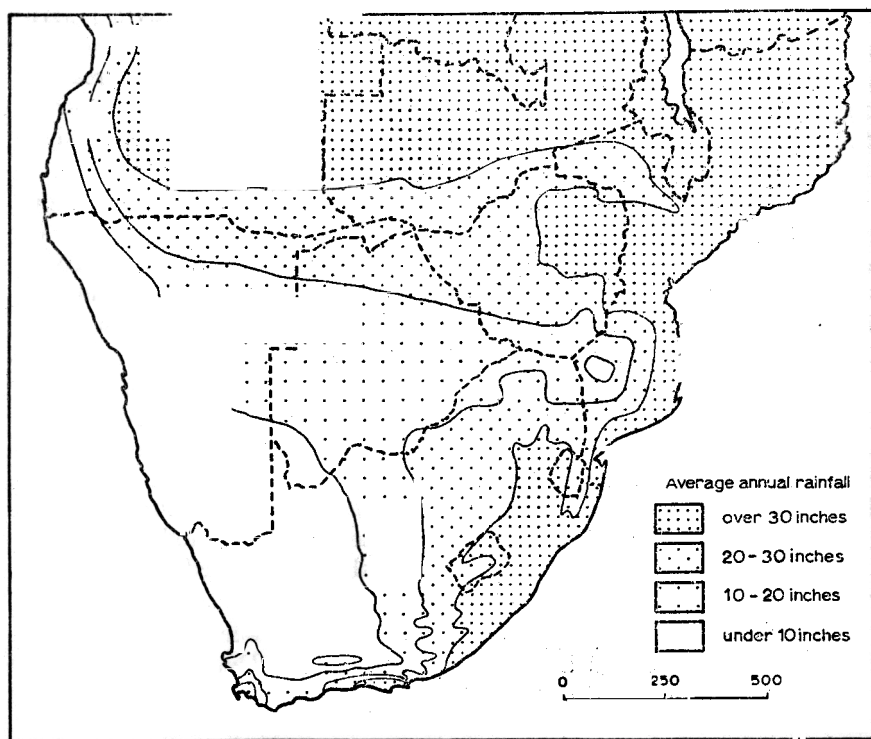


Fig. 1. Mean Annual Rainfall in Southern Africa.

growing. However, small grants were inadequate and the size of grant was increased as settlement spread into the interior of the Cape Province in the second half of the seventeenth century; and a drier more arid environment was encountered. The new environment was such that without clearly marked physical features and an absence of surveyors, farms had to be determined as best they could. Thus the use of an 'Ordonnantie' was introduced. The Ordonnantie was a local feature such as a spring or conspicuous rock or sometimes just a planted stone.

From this the farmer measured his farm by walking his horse in various directions for half an hour (Fig. 2). Thus the farm was circular in outline and subsequently it was declared that half an hour's ride was equivalent to 750 roods or approximately a mile and three quarters by present standards. The new farm was not allowed to overlap any other farm and consequently a new land claimant usually chose his Ordon-

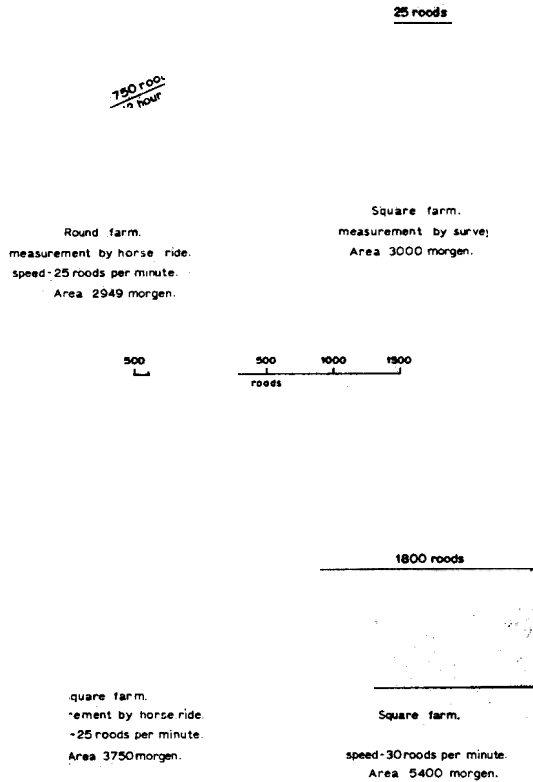


Fig. 2. The Development of a Farm in Southern Africa.

nantie at not less than one hour's ride from any neighbouring one. The farm was theoretically 2949 Cape morgen in extent.

In 1732 the farms granted were allowed to be converted to secure quit rent tenure at an extent of 3000 morgen. This was elaborated in 1813 when grants had to be surveyed and the survey enabled the shape to be square. The old circular farms naturally meant that considerable spaces were left between farms which were too small to be utilized. The 3000 morgen farm was a feature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and as such had a profound effect upon the layout of many

parts of southern Africa from the Cape Province to Zambia. The Voortrekkers when they moved into the Orange Free State, Transvaal and Natal took the idea of 3000 morgen as the size of a farm with them. Reference to the Laws of the three Republics makes it clear that a farm represented 3000 morgen.

However, the Voortrekkers in their expansion in the 1830's and 1840's failed to introduce regular survey, similar to that in the Cape Colony. They therefore resorted once more to the horse riding. The idea of the square farm rather than the circular farm was accepted and the new areas of northern and central South Africa were laid out by means of measurement by horse riding to the extent that the farm appeared to be 3000 morgen. In the Transvaal the position was regularised by Land Commissions who allowed the applicant for land to ride across his farm for an hour, and then at right angles to the original ride for an hour. The farm was then squared off and the resulting area should have been 3750 morgen. Transvaal legislation accepted this increase over the nominal 3000 morgen figure. However, horses could be walked at different rates. It had been assumed that the walking pace of a horse was 25 roods per minute, but many went at 30 roods, on average which provided the applicant with a farm of 5400 morgen, which was sanctioned in the Republics up to the 1890's. Faster speeds were often reached so that farms of up to 10,000 morgen were claimed. The lack of surveyors meant that the authorities were unable to detect the discrepancies and the proprietors remained in possession of areas which they had only a vague claim to.

The Voortrekker concept of a farm was taken beyond the initial area of the Republics. New areas were opened up from the 1860's onwards and the original figure had to be adapted. In 1866 the "Conquered Territory" acquired by the Orange Free State from Lesotho was divided into "small holdings" of 1500 to 1800 morgen.

The concept of the 3000 morgen farm, however, persisted. The ephemeral republics established in the 1880's maintained the custom. The republics of Stellaland and Goshen were laid out in 3000 morgen farms for the members of the commandos who took part in the fighting which preceded their establishment. The Government of the New Republic in Zululand, similarly attempted to create 3000 morgen farms but found that there was not enough land in Zululand to satisfy its requirements. Consequently the citizens of the Republic had to be content with 1700 morgen farms. This was a symptom of land scarcity which was beginning to be felt in southern Africa.

In 1890 the British South Africa Company occupied Mashonaland. The expedition was of a different character from those which had led to the establishment of the Boer Republics from Natal to Zululand. It was primarily a commercial venture. Each member of the pioneer column was entitled to a farm grant of 1500 morgen and the right to 15 gold reef claims. The expectation of most members of the pioneer

column was that the wealth of Mashonaland lay in its gold reserves and not in agriculture. The 1500 morgen claim was purely incidental to the main object of the expedition, which was the mining of gold in a country which was thought to be richer than the Transvaal. Over half the pioneer claims were sold to speculators and land companies, often before the pioneer even reached Mashonaland. Thus farming was not the aim of the expedition and it seems doubtful whether the occupation of Mashonaland can be rightly included in the evolution of southern African land settlement developments.

In 1893 the disillusionment with the gold potential of Mashonaland led to the occupation of Matabeleland by the British South Africa Company. It was hoped that this province possessed the gold which had eluded the prospects in Mashonaland. Each member of the forces which occupied Matabeleland was entitled to a 3000 morgen farm and 15 reef gold claims and 5 alluvial gold claims. The increase in farm size to the traditional 3000 morgen is significant as Matabeleland was recognised to be more arid than its western neighbour.

The occupation of Rhodesia was out of character in the context of southern Africa land settlement, as land was regarded more as an investment for the future, than a commodity to be used immediately. Non-occupation clauses were not enforced and indeed were not even included in most of the pioneer and military grants. In the period between 1890 and 1896 when Dr. Jameson was in effective control of land policy, some 15 million acres was alienated, of which 9 million acres fell into the hands of land companies and speculators. Land trading exhibited some of the worst features of contemporary colonies of settlement until Milton in 1896 attempted to put a halt to wholesale alienation of land. Grants of up to 300,000 morgen were made to speculators who only gave vague undertakings to develop the land and consequently little actual agricultural or pastoral development took place.

The introduction of large scale speculation effectively rendered the concept of a pastoral farm inoperative and the cash economy which developed in southern Africa in the nineteenth century made previous values inappropriate. The discovery of gold ended the purely pastoral phases in the sub continent's history and with it terminated the concept that a farm was a certain size, providing certain needs for a rural community. The breakdown occurred earlier in the territories under British control than in the South African Republics.

The Cape concept of a pastoral farm travelled a long way but it had to contend with another, that of the agricultural farm. Most of the major colonization movements which took place in the nineteenth century, were based on the agricultural settler who ploughed his land and sowed crops. The area which was needed to gain a livelihood was small. The estimated size ranged from 20 acres in New Zealand to 160 acres in the United States of America. In 1832 the British Government adopted the ideas of the 'Colonial Reformers' who wished to

see the settlement of small land owners throughout the British Empire on terms similar to those in operation in the United States. In South Africa the approach of introducing agricultural settlers had been tried in 1820 in the Eastern Province with comparatively little success. Renewed efforts followed in Natal in the period 1848-1851, when farms of 20 to 50 acres were granted. Once more there was little success from an agricultural point of view.

The agricultural settlement was largely a failure in the nineteenth century owing to the arid nature of the land and the firmly established

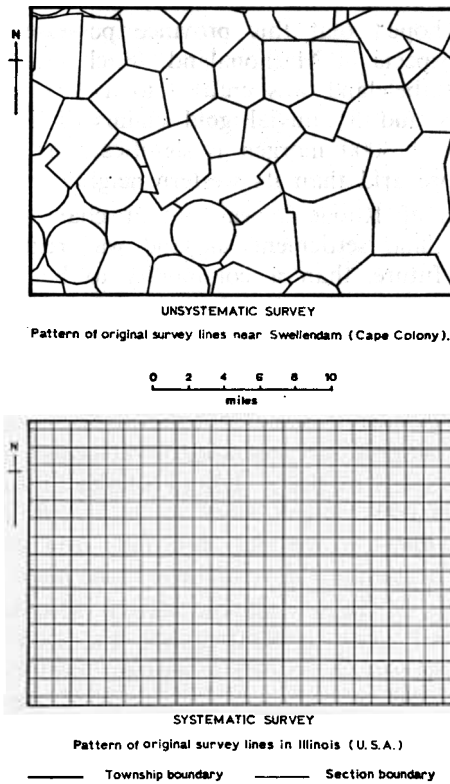


Fig. 3. The Contrast between Systematic and Unsystematic Survey.

position of the pastoralist. The Cape Colony realised this and in 1860 abandoned the British approach and reverted to extensive land grants on low rentals. However, unlike the Transvaal or Orange Free State, no size was attached to the grants or price per acre. The Cape Colony therefore first introduced the flexible approach to land settlement which is characteristic of today's land legislation. Some grants reached 60,000

acres in extent in the dry interior of South Africa, while small agricultural lots continued to be sold in areas which were suitable, such as planned irrigation settlements. In Natal planned settlement schemes only commenced at a later stage and land continued to be sold in comparatively small lots (under 2000 acres) until Union.

It is no longer possible to quote a figure for the size of a farm as such. The complexity of modern farming is such that the simple man, land, animal ratios of a hundred years ago are invalid. However, the past influence of these ratios remains, as the land grants are geared to a period when they were considered valid. The changing concepts of European farm size are present in the landscape and on the maps of today, and so constitute a reminder of previous periods.

The concept of the large pastoral farm had an important effect upon the landscape. The method of survey was such that there was little regularity of pattern and consequently the survey system produced farms of irregular shape. The effect of this was a firm imprint upon the lands' surface. Regular or systematic survey similar to that of the United States Rectangular system was never contemplated in southern Africa (Fig. 3). The extensive pastoral farms were of such a nature that the right of passage and even outspanning was guaranteed to all travellers across them. Roads as a rigid network were not planned as they were in the United States where they ran along each of the section boundaries. Roads in southern Africa consequently have a notable disregard for farm boundaries. The landscape of today, therefore, to some extent, reflects the pattern of an earlier more settled era when a farm represented a definite area.

A. J. Christopher
(University College of Rhodesia).