

lifting the veil

Aninka Claassen's anecdotes explode the myth of 'country life' to give us a glimpse of what still occurs on the South African platteland in the late 20th Century. These are only extracts. Her conference paper is essential reading for us all.

Parts of the South Eastern Transvaal, heading towards Natal and Swaziland are very beautiful. One drives through rolling grasslands, through rock kloofs and along mountainsides with panoramic views stretching to the foothills of the Drakensberg. Every now and again one passes men on horseback who are herding cattle, a cluster of mud huts, a field of mealies and established white farm houses surrounded by out-buildings. The area seems wide and empty and predominantly peaceful; as though mankind has not imposed much on the land and people don't particularly interfere with each other.

An old man from Driefontein, which is a 'black spot' in this area, once started to point out landmarks as we drove through the white farms towards his home. What I had noticed as a clump of trees on the hillside, he told me, was the ruins of 30 huts. Two extended families had lived and farmed there for generations. In the mid-1970s they had been told that their labour tenant contracts were illegal and they must leave. They had ignored this instruction and continued ploughing. Finally 'the whites' had set fire to their houses. Virtually all their possessions were burnt in the blaze. The families had gathered the remnants together and taken the children and the cattle and the sheep and trekked off to the reserves.

He told me that at that time some people were braver than others. We passed a big hill called the Ngwempisi mountain. He described how many families had lived on its slopes and had their fields at its base. They had ignored all warnings to leave, and when they were evicted they had come back and settled on the mountain again. They were re-evicted by various methods: fire, bulldozer, arrest, and in the end their cattle were impounded and sold. As we drove further he pointed out where these families live now, some are just opposite their old homes, some are a few farms away.

Four years ago, a young widow, Aslieta Mavimbela, came to ask the Driefontein committee for help after the death of her husband, Mandla.



Cedric Nunn

She explained how one day the police had arrived at her homestead and asked where her husband was. She answered that he had left the previous day on horseback to look for another farm to which the family could move. They opened the van and showed her the dead body of her husband. Then they put her in the back of the van with him and took her to the Wakkerstroom police station. There they explained that a farmer, Andries Delpport, had shot her husband and his horse. The reason he gave was that Mandla must have ridden across his property to reach the public road. Delpport said the Mavimbela didn't answer when he called to him, thus he fired two shots to warn him. Mavimbela and his horse, both shot in the back, died outright. Delpport was acquitted on all charges in the Volksrust Regional Court on the basis that he stumbled as he fired the shots.

I asked Mrs Mavimbela questions so that we could assist her with a claim against Delpport. She told us that Delpport had paid for her husband's funeral, but his mother had refused her request that Delpport come and plough the family fields. She had said: 'What if your husband had been killed by lightning? Would you expect lightning to plough your fields?' The issue of ploughing the fields was very important because Mavimbela had not earned wages on the farm; he worked for access to land. In other words, he was a labour tenant.

Mrs Mavimbela sat looking down and nursing her tiny baby as she answered our questions. The only time she looked up was when I asked her whether she and her seven children were her husband's only dependents, or if he had another wife. Then she sat back and looked straight in my eyes and said 'he loved only me'.

Most of the farmworker deaths that we hear about take place in the Dirkiesdorp police station. Four of these have been the result of torture during interrogation into alleged stock-theft. Last year a group of young men who had been detained on another charge told us of a group of farmworkers who were systematically tortured by the police. The subject of the interrogation

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Paul Weinberg

Above left: Mrs Judith Nchumu outside her house that was destroyed just before she and other tenant farmers were served with eviction notices on a farm in Natal.

Right: Ploughing the fields.

was the theft of certain sheep. Finally they were taken to court. One of them, Krans Mlangeni, was carried in a blanket as he could no longer walk. The case was dismissed because of lack of evidence and Mlangeni was left lying semi-conscious outside the court. The other farmworkers arranged to hire a vehicle to take him home, but he died within two days.

In the course of assisting his father to prepare a damages claim, we needed further information. We asked the committee of KwaThandeka township to find witnesses from the area where he had worked. They found three groups of people and we proceeded to take statements from them. Their information was utterly confusing until we realised that only one group was talking about the same man as we were. The other two were talking about other Mlangenis who had been killed by whites; one by a road worker and the other by a farmer.

There are many types of violence apart from murder and physical assault. There is also the violence of exhaustion and hunger. Petros Ngwenya and Aaron Zwane from farms in the Panbult area describe how they work from before it is light until after sunset, six days a week. There is no annual leave, either for them or for any farmworker I have ever met in the South Eastern Transvaal. If you miss work because of taking a sick child to hospital there is a deduction from your wages. In Zwane's case his wages are R10 per month for six months and R20 per month for the other six months of the year. He is thin with a dark, lined face and hands that shake; he has bitter, burning eyes. His family has always lived in the Panbult area, although not always on the same farm. They have been evicted, moved away, moved back, been evicted, moved next door and came back again. The Zwanes used to have large herds of cattle, now the farmer has said they cannot keep more than six. Zwane is dismissive about the 'wage' he earns. He calls it 'tobacco money'. He asked me why whites are so selfish, and what they feel when they see hungry children.

Another kind of violence is what happens to farmworkers who are crippled as a result of accidents at work. Again and again they and their families are evicted from the farms and left entirely to their own fate. An example is provided by the case of Timothy Hlatshwayo who worked for a farmer, Mr E Paul, in the Piet Retief district. He and 24 other workers were being transported on the back of a small bakkie when the bakkie over-turned. Hlatshwayo broke his neck and is now paralysed from the neck down. He spent 18 months in hospital in Johannesburg and was then sent back to Paul who refused to assist him in any way. Hlatshwayo's wife's brother helped the family to move to Driefontein where they live in a crumbling mud hut.

I was taken to meet him at night and found him and his children sitting in darkness. When we arrived they made a show of looking for a candle, but it was obvious that there wasn't such a thing in the house. They were waiting for his wife to return from her job in a forestry plantation. She earns R30 per month. We were to assist Hlatshwayo to get Workmen's Compensation money and a Disability Pension. His own efforts had been thwarted because when Hlatshwayo had hired a vehicle to be taken to the District Surgeon in Wakkerstroom 50 kms away, the District Surgeon had told him that he had run out of application forms for Disability Pensions.

Another serious problem for farmworker families is the education of their children. Often children walk for four hours, getting to school and back. Sometimes small schools have been established on the farms. A few years ago a farmer, Gillespie, acquired the farm Heyshope. He found an established, registered school operating on his property. He went to the headmaster, Mr Nxumalo, and insisted that he close the school. Nxumalo refused, Gillespie responded by arriving at his house at night and firing at it. Luckily he missed Nxumalo, the bullets lodged in the wall of the house next to where Nxumalo had been standing. The police identified these bullets as having come from Gillespie's gun. Nxumalo laid a charge of attempted murder. Gillespie then arrived at his house, apologised and offered to let the school continue operating. On this basis, Nxumalo withdrew the charge of attempted murder and life continued as usual.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to record examples of all the abuses taking place on the farms in the four South Eastern Transvaal magisterial districts where we work. Suffice to say that these include child labour, physical assault, debt to the farmers and impounding of cattle.

The nightmare quality of the situation does not lie in the detail of events. Somehow, these are familiar to us from stories of the Italian countryside 100 years ago, or of the Deep South, or of feudal England. The real horror lies in the fact that these things are happening now, everyday, and that they form the parameters of life for hundreds of thousands of farmworkers. □