



# **‘Fighting their battles o’er again’: the springbok Hunt in Graaff-Reinet, 1860-1908\***

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The emergence of springbok hunting and the Hunt in Graaff-Reinet over the latter half of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century is essentially a story of European utilisation of a natural resource and the changing attitudes towards that resource in relation to local economic cycles, agricultural development and the dramatic decline of larger wild mammal species. Old residents harking back to “*den oude tyd*” commented that hunting parties focused on big game as “*springbokken warne er toen in zulk een overvloed dat het onnoodig scheen zulks jachten te maken.*”<sup>1</sup> This perception is in stark contrast to the high regard in which the sport provided by springbok was held in the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the transformation is akin to that experienced in British fox hunting in relation to the prohibitively scarce stag in Britain two centuries prior.<sup>2</sup>

By the late 1850s species such as black wildebeest, quagga and blesbuck, not to mention the larger, ‘nobler’ sorts of game, were no longer found in the vicinity of Graaff-Reinet and the game or hunting frontier had been pushed back by the exploits of adventurers, naturalists and, perhaps most importantly, the farmer-hunters of the day. This scarcity and the increasing development and size of Graaff-Reinet laid the foundation for the emergence of a Hunt culture that owed more to ritual and entertainment than to subsistence. The image of a lone farmer inspecting his sheep and randomly taking the opportunity to shoot at springbok, or of small expeditions organised to take advantage of sporadic influxes of large springbok herds, slowly came to be replaced by that of celebrated social gatherings where the men engaged in organised and ritualised ‘campaigns’ against the springbok and enjoyed lavish meals and the company of the ladies thereafter.

Henning examined the emergence of cultural pursuits in Graaff-Reinet in relation to three clear economic phases, viz. the boom of the 1850s, depression of the 1860s and unprecedented economic growth between 1870 and 1886, and argued that economic development is ‘the cornerstone of the foundation for the cultural development which follows.’<sup>3</sup> His argument can be extended to sport hunting and the Hunt – a phase that is partly excluded by Henning’s period of analysis – and the attitude of the Graaff-Reinet community towards springbok and the emergence of the springbok Hunt can indeed be linked to these economic stages.

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\* My sincere thanks to both Lance van Sittert and Andrew Bank for generous advice.

1. ‘The old days’; ‘springbok at that time occurred in such abundance that it was unnecessary to organise hunts of them.’ [Here and elsewhere the translations from the Dutch are my own.] *De Graaff Reinetter*, 19 December 1901.
2. R. Carr, *English Fox Hunting: A History* (London, 1976), chapter 2.
3. C.G. Henning, ‘A Cultural History of Graaff-Reinet, 1786-1886’ (D.Phil thesis, University of Pretoria, 1971), 107-179, 200.



**Figure 1:** ‘A long shot at springbok’

This sketch depicts the utilitarian springbok shooting that occurred throughout the period but which was characteristic of the earlier stages. Worthy of note here is the flat open terrain that, in springbok hunting, necessitated either the kind of ambush or stalk portrayed here or the kinds of drives described later.

(National Library of South Africa - Special Collections.)

In a sense it is also a process that affirms MacKenzie’s periodisation of European utilisation of game in central and southern Africa.<sup>4</sup> The first two stages or phases of this periodisation - game as an impetus to expansion and game as a subsidy to settlement - played themselves out in varying degrees and at different times in a variety of sites across the Cape Colony. The early Dutch settlement at the Cape for example experienced both as early as the late 1600s and early 1700s when illegal movement beyond the settlement borders occurred because of a trio of pull factors - trade with the Khoikhoi, additional pasture and ‘incomparable hunting opportunities.’ These initially speculative expeditions were soon being consolidated with more permanent settlement that relied on cheaply obtained game meat for both master and servant.<sup>5</sup> Van der Merwe considered this trio of factors to be closely connected and concluded that ‘undoubtedly the hunter, the livestock traders, and the stock farmer were more often than not the same person.’<sup>6</sup> Graaff-Reinet, founded in 1786, was no different with Boers seeking both grazing and game and attempting trade with the San of the Tarka, Nieuweveld and Seacow River almost immediately.<sup>7</sup>

4. J.M. MacKenzie, *The Empire of Nature: Hunting, Conservation and British Imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).

5. L.Guelke, ‘The white settlers, 1652-1780’ in R. Elphick and H. Giliomee, eds., *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1820* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1979).

6. P.J. van der Merwe (translated by Roger B Beck), *The Migrant Farmer in the History of the Cape Colony, 1657-1842* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1995), 29-35.

7. K.W. Smith, *From Frontier to Midlands: A History of the Graaff-Reinet District, 1786-1910* (Occasional Paper Number 20, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, 1976), 19-22. See also: Cape Archives, 1/GR 14/127: ‘Game, Trading and Wagon Licences 1970-1839’. This was also a time of significant conflict between Boer and San. For an examination of the relationship between the two groups over this period, see S.Newton-King, *Masters and Servants on the Cape Eastern Frontier, 1760-1803* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century the game frontier had been pushed back to the most remote areas of the Cape Colony and beyond, although some large game remained in the eastern Cape.<sup>8</sup> Both buffalo and elephant remained in sufficient numbers to be occasionally hunted, but as they were highly localised, inhabited relatively inaccessible areas and were dangerous, they remained the preserve of only the most highly committed or opportunistic hunters.<sup>9</sup> Rather it was with two other kinds of hunts that the region became associated. In the districts along the coastal plain such as Uitenhage, Alexandria and Albany the bushbuck was the ‘king of the forest,’<sup>10</sup> while inland ‘from the sportsman’s point of view the chief attraction ... [was] springbok shooting.’<sup>11</sup> By this stage Graaff-Reinet was characterised by a well-defined culture and hierarchy of the Hunt that took place primarily on private land in the district; a progression that was particularly pronounced from the mid-1870s and which, as a social event, evolved in tandem with the town’s economic development.

### **From protein to pleasure - a gradual evolution, 1851-1875**

For the most part the focus of springbok hunting during the 1850s was on the acquisition of food. An expedition wishing to take advantage of what appears to have been a localised influx of springbok in 1856, for example, emphasised the good condition of the carcasses and the fact that despite the difficult conditions in transporting the meat ‘nothing, however, was left behind or lost.’<sup>12</sup> The prosperity of the period did, however, see the emergence of new hunting practises and culminated in the formation of the Graaff-Reinet Buck-Hound Club in 1860, an event that was greeted with some fanfare by the town’s English newspaper, the *Graaff Reinet Herald*, and which may be symbolically associated with the birth of a new local Hunt culture. At the club’s first meet ‘the huntsmen were all properly attired in velvet coats, jockey caps, cord breeches, and top-boots’ but nonetheless missed their intended springbok quarry and had to make do with a steenbok which gave the huntsmen, their horses and hounds a ‘regular burster.’<sup>13</sup> While some hunts were reported with a certain economy of language,<sup>14</sup> this period also sees the first news-

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8. See C.J. Skead, *Historical Mammal Incidence in the Cape Province, Volume 2: The Eastern Half of the Cape Province, including the Ciskei, Transkei and East Griqualand* (Cape Town: Department of Nature and Environmental Conservation, 1987); I. Plug and C.G. Sampson, ‘European and Bushman impacts on Karoo fauna in the nineteenth century: an archaeological perspective’, *South African Archaeological Bulletin*, vol. 51, 1996, 26-31; D.E. Neville, ‘European Impacts on the Seacow River Valley and its hunter-gatherer, AD 1770-1900’ (MA thesis in Archaeology, University of Cape Town, 1996).
  9. For a discussion on the elephants of the nineteenth and early twentieth century Eastern Province, see C. Roche, ‘“The Elephants at Knysna” and “The Knysna Elephants” - From exploitation to conservation: man and elephants at Knysna 1856-1920’ (BA Hons. thesis, University of Cape Town, 1996); T. Hoffman, ‘Major PJ Pretorius and the decimation of the Addo elephant herd in 1919-1920: important reassessments’, *Koedoe*, vol. 36(2), 1993, 23-44.
  10. For an examination of Eastern Province bushbuck hunts in the nineteenth century, see L. van Sittert, ‘Class and Canicide in Little Bess; The 1893 Port Elizabeth Rabies Epidemic’, *South African Historical Journal*, vol. 48, 2003; 207-234; C.J. Skead, *Historical Mammal Incidence*, 946-69.
  11. J.G. Millais, *A Breath from the Veld* (Alberton: Galago, 1986 facsimile reprint of 1899 work), 12.
  12. *Graaff Reinet Herald*, 26 July 1856.
  13. *Graaff Reinet Herald*, 28 April 1860.
  14. See for example *Graaff Reinet Herald*, 24 October 1857; 7 August 1858. ‘Last week a party of sportsmen, namely Mr P Naude and his son, Mr F Botha and Carel Coetzee went out for a little shooting on Mr Meintjes farm at Koel Hoek, and in four days hunting they shot 103 springboks and 3 wildebeests.’

paper report of the kind of affair that could accompany and characterise springbok hunting. In 1861 an organised hunt for a party of nine gentlemen returned as conquering heroes to the farm 'Wheatlands' where they:

found a grand arch thrown over the square decorated with flowers and flags, to show how glad the ladies were to receive back those 'horrid men.' A volley was fired as the party dashed under the arch, and another in the square. On the day following (Saturday) a grand dinner was given, and the party broke up, leaving for their respective homes, and thus ended one of our annual hunts.<sup>15</sup>

This kind of celebration and the splendour of the Buck-Hound Club were short-lived however, no doubt affected by the depression of the 1860s. Although the hunting of springbok continued, it was no longer celebrated in the press and it is likely that the emergence of the Hunt in place of hunting was forestalled with springbok being relegated again to a source of protein rather than social entertainment and indulgence. In nearby Aberdeen for example, the species was seen as a last resort in times of drought when 'no meat [was] to be had except springboks'<sup>16</sup> and in Hanover the migration of springbok from the district left 'many of the poorer classes frequently without meat.'<sup>17</sup> Springbok skins were not valued as a source of leather, featuring only very irregularly on the Port Elizabeth bi-weekly produce sales, but perhaps predictably, in light of the depression and the colonial obsession with 'improvement' and the utilisation of every natural resource, the 1860s saw calls for the productive use of springbok skins. The *Herald* for example felt that the skins made 'excellent ... soft, strong, and remarkably elastic' leather, 'admirably adapted' for the manufacture of women's and children's shoes and urged the public to 'turn them to good account.'<sup>18</sup>

The changed economic environment of the 1870s brought about a change in attitudes to springbok in Graaff-Reinet. They continued to be hunted without pomp and ceremony during the course of normal farm activities and were utilised as both biltong and venison of course,<sup>19</sup> but the species nonetheless came to provide more than just meat to the residents and farmers of Graaff-Reinet. Elsewhere, in typical MacKenzie fashion, the species became an important subsidy to subsistence, such as on the diamond fields, where in the early part of the decade springbok carcasses were sold for between 2s and 10s.<sup>20</sup> In the 'back country' north of Fraserburg springbok were even fed to starving ostriches.<sup>21</sup>

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15. *Graaff Reinet Herald*, 14 August 1861.

16. *Graaff Reinet Herald*, 23 July 1859.

17. *Graaff Reinet Herald*, 31 January 1863.

18. *Graaff Reinet Herald*, 6 October 1866.

19. See 'Wellwood Journal from September 1876 to December 1892.'

20. *Graaff Reinet Herald*, 24 July 1872.

21. *Graaff Reinet Herald*, 25 July 1877.

## The culture of the Hunt emerges, 1875-1885

From the mid-1870s the annual springbok hunt on ‘good old Queen Victoria’s birthday’ became a ‘very important item in the yearly routine happenings at Wellwood,’<sup>22</sup> a well known farm north of Graaff-Reinet. These popular annual hunts, ‘a privilege granted to neighbours and some customers but ... later on ... very much abused, the sons growing up, daughters getting married, sons in law [all insisting on an invitation],’<sup>23</sup> are also noteworthy for including a fine for those who had shot springbok ewes during the hunt. This amount was then pooled and competed for in a shooting competition by the day’s participants after the hunt.<sup>24</sup> ‘Wellwood’ journal entries describing the event were essentially factual:

The usual celebration of Her Majesty’s birthday took place to the serious cost of the unfortunate ‘Springbucks.’ The sportsmen mustering pretty strong, the following is the score of bucks shot. JG le Roux 1; G Murray 6; H Meintjes 2; J Judd 4; J Meintjes 3; W Brook 3; J d l Harpe 3; RM Bowker 1; A Thornton 3; JW McCabe 2; J McCabe 2; A Sheabler 2; J Loots 3; H Meintjes 2; J Meintjes 2; G Murray 2; H Marriott 2; G Marriott 1; J Rubidge 2. Making in all 47 killed.<sup>25</sup>

Accounts of the ‘Wellwood’ Hunt did not appear in the local press, but by 1882 much of its ethos and a foretaste of later local hunt etiquette and custom was in evidence in a report of a springbok hunt in the *Herald*:

A party of sportsmen proceeded to the farms of Messrs C Goedhals and John Priest [‘Ordonnantie’ & ‘Shirlands’], by invitation to a springbok hunt last week, and we are informed had capital sport having shot no less than forty-five bucks. Our informant speaks in high terms of the hospitality of Mrs and Mr Goedhals at whose place they were put up.<sup>26</sup>

Although brief in comparison to later reports towards the end of the 1880s, the above passage indicates the crystallising of some important social mores: the privilege of the invitation, which had been so much abused at ‘Wellwood’, and the praise of the host’s benevolence and generosity is already explicit while the entertainment and etiquette of the hunt, as well as the size of the bag, more than hinted at. The same was true of a report of a hunt at ‘Ordonnantie’ the following year when over a hundred guests were present at the party following the hunt and ‘dancing was kept up with in spirit ’till an early hour on Friday.’<sup>27</sup> Despite this crystallisation, the appeal and extent of the Hunt culture in Graaff-Reinet were still fairly limited at this stage and it was to take an agricultural advance that formalised

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22. R. Rubidge, ‘Extracts and Notes from Wellwood Diary, 1845-1890’, unpublished notebook, 1920.

23. *Ibid.*

24. ‘Wellwood Journal from September 1876 to December 1892’, 24 May 1877 and 24 May 1878.

25. ‘Wellwood Journal from September 1876 to December 1892’, 24 May 1877.

26. *Graaff Reinet Herald*, 19 April 1882.

27. *Graaff Reinet Herald*, 30 May 1883.

both property rights and enabled springbok protection and population growth for the Hunt to become the significant social event of the latter half of the 1880s.

### Fencing and fecundity - the effect of enclosure

As a contributor to the *South African Illustrated News* had noted in 1885, much of the open Government ground around Graaff-Reinet had been taken up and substantially fenced in by the mid-1880s, thus restricting access to springbok and springbok hunting largely to 'wealthier proprietors [who] give a hunt, inviting neighbours and friends and treating them liberally with open house.'<sup>28</sup> The enclosure of 'camps' by the erection of stone walls or wire fencing came about largely as a result of ostrich farming in the district that had begun during the difficult years of the 1860s when ostriches provided an alternative to the embattled wool industry. Johan Booyens of 'Klipdrift' had been the first local farmer to experiment with ostriches when he obtained eggs from the northern parts of the Colony in 1862<sup>29</sup> and others, such as Charles Rubidge of 'Wellwood', the Murray family at 'Bloemhof'<sup>30</sup> and John Parkes of 'Wheatlands',<sup>31</sup> soon followed his example. The Midland Ostrich Farming Company with proposed capital of £50,000 had been launched on 'Bloemhof' in 1878.<sup>32</sup> Ostrich incubators were introduced in 1879 and in 1880 H Hudson, the Civil Commissioner, could report that 'ostrich farming appears to be prospering.'<sup>33</sup> These experiments, later combined with the boom in demand for feathers, led to an enormous increase in the domesticated ostrich population of Graaff-Reinet and, as a direct result, the amount of land enclosed with wire fencing.<sup>34</sup> From the humble beginnings of Graaff-Reinet's (and the Eastern Province's) first imported wire and standards in 1862,<sup>35</sup> enclosure increased dramatically, particularly over the 1880s, to stand at 190,276 morgen in 1891. By 1904 this figure had reached 521,268 morgen,<sup>36</sup> and 633,804 morgen in 1911.<sup>37</sup>

Richard Rubidge (son of Charles) later commented that fencing had played a role in decreasing springbok numbers and there is no doubt that enclosure restricted the free movement of springbok into district with the *treks* or influxes of springbok recorded in 1851,<sup>38</sup> 1856<sup>39</sup> and 1857<sup>40</sup> only being repeated locally nearly

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28. *South African Illustrated News*, Vol 2, No 33, 15 August 1885. For an examination of the alienation of Crown land around Graaff-Reinet and Aberdeen during the 1860s and 1870s, see S. Dubow, 'Land, Labour and Merchant Capital in the Pre-industrial Rural Economy of the Cape: The Experience of the Graaff-Reinet District (1852-72)' (BA Hons. thesis, University of Cape Town, 1981). Squatting on Crown Lands was also seen as a cause of the destruction of game by those who would not apply themselves to the improvement of the land. See 'Extracts from Reports of Civil Commissioners, Graaff-Reinet, 1858-1879'.

29. 'Extracts from Reports of Civil Commissioners, Graaff-Reinet, 1869'; G. Reilly, *A Karroo Farmer Looks Back: The Memoirs of AA Kingwill* (Pretoria, 1953), 106.

30. R. Rubidge, 'Extracts and Notes from Wellwood Diary'.

31. M. Parkes, *Wheatlands: The Story of a Family and a Farm* (Graaff-Reinet: M. Parkes, 1979), 24.

32. C.G. Henning, 'A Cultural History of Graaff Reinet', 174-7.

33. 'Extracts from Reports of Civil Commissioners, Graaff-Reinet, 1879 and 1880'.

34. For an analysis of enclosure in the Cape Colony as a whole, see L. van Sittert, 'Holding the Line: The Rural Enclosure Movement in the Cape Colony, c.1865-c.1910', *Journal of African History*, vol. 43, 1992, 95-118.

35. R. Rubidge, 'Extracts and Notes from Wellwood Diary'.

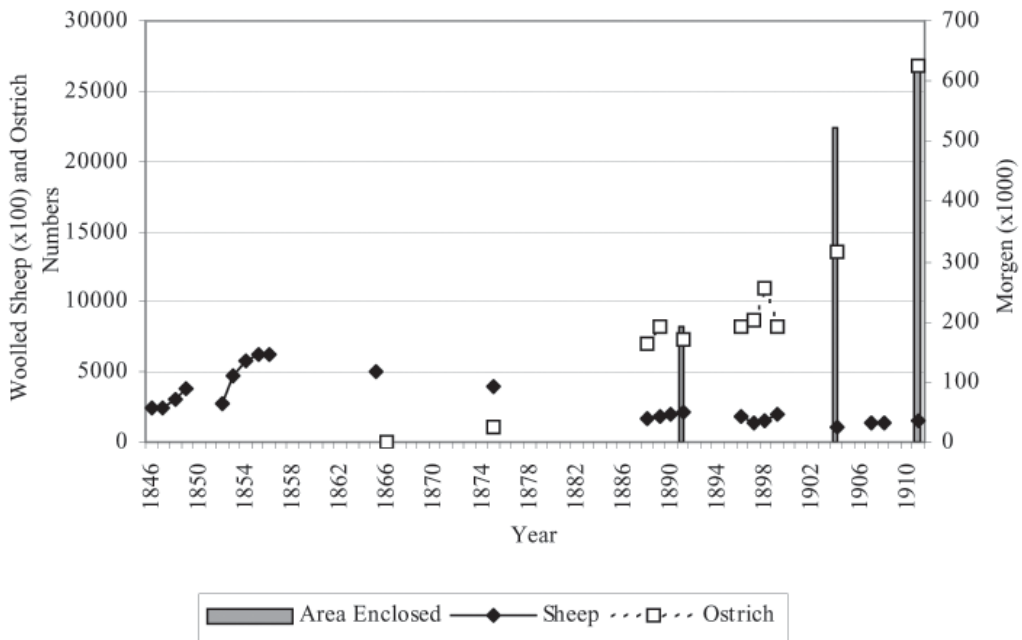
36. *The Statistical Register of the Cape of Good Hope*, 1891, 1904.

37. Census 1911, Annexures to General Report: Part 9, Livestock and Agriculture [UG32h-19912].

38. 'Diary Chas Rubidge from December 1850 - February 1856', 17 May 1851.

39. M. Parkes, *Wheatlands*, 95.

40. *Graaff Reinet Herald*, 24 October 1857.



**Figure 2:** Graaff-Reinet wire fence enclosure, ‘woolled’ sheep (1846-1911), and ostrich (1866-1911) numbers.

(*Statistical Register of the Cape of Good Hope, 1865-1904; Census 1911, Annexures to General Report: Part 9, Livestock and Agriculture [UG32h-19912].*)

fifty years later in 1903, and then in a much reduced form and only on the fringes of the Aberdeen district.<sup>41</sup> Stockenstrom’s earlier prediction that ‘the immigration of the *Trek-bokken* will ... for several generations continue periodically to replenish our flats’<sup>42</sup> was being undone by wire fencing. A hunt on the town commonage in 1893, when hunting had already been prohibited for five years and the game was considered to be increasing, bagged 30 head of game ‘ranging from Dikkop to Steinbuck’ but made no mention of springbok.<sup>43</sup>

Springbok are known to be remarkably fecund, however, and capable of reproducing at a rapid rate.<sup>44</sup> The process of enclosure was a crucial factor in the local development of the Hunt and also in gradually increasing springbok populations, whose ‘vast numbers as are almost incredible’<sup>45</sup> had been ‘dreadfully destroyed’ during the 1870s.<sup>46</sup> For many of the Graaff-Reinet population this necessitated springbok hunting trips (aside from those intended to take specific ad-

41. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 15 May 1903.

42. C.W. Hutton, ed., *The Autobiography of the Late Sir Andries Stockenstrom* (Cape Town: J.C. Juta, 1887), 33.

43. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 16 February 1893.

44. See for example, R.C. Bigalke, ‘The Springbok’, *Natural History*, vol. 75(6), 1966, 20-25; R.C. Bigalke, ‘Observations on Springbok Populations’, *Zoologica Africana*, vol. 5(1), 1970, 59-70; J.D. Skinner, H.M. Dott., R.J. van Aarde, R.A.G. Davies and A.M. Conroy, ‘Observations on a population of springbok *Antidorcas marsupialis* prior to and during a severe drought’, *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Africa*, vol. 46 Part 3, 1987, 191-7.

45. J. Barrow, *An account of travels into the interior of southern Africa in the years 1797 and 1798*, vol. 1 (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, London: Cadell and Davies), 69.

46. R. Rubidge, ‘Extracts and Notes from Wellwood Diary’.



vantage of the sporadic *trekbokken* in the interior districts) into the neighbouring areas around Beaufort West, Richmond and Hanover.<sup>47</sup> Twenty-three years after enclosure, however, the population of springbok on the farm 'Klipfontein' had increased from the initial five animals to five hundred.<sup>48</sup> By the close of the 1880s even outside observers noticed the effect fencing had on 'preserving' springbok and Bryden mentioned Shirlands - where 'within this fence there are now fully a thousand springbok, where formerly only a few remained "harassed and hunted to death by impoverished, lazy squatters"' - as a direct example of this process.<sup>49</sup> A decade later the effect had been so marked that Bryden commented that there were 'probably more of these antelopes to be found south of the Orange River than there were twenty years ago.'<sup>50</sup>

In the early 1880s proprietorial rights over game, defined by law as *res nullis*, were inevitably dogged by conflict between a variety of factions. In one such instance two townfolk coursing antelope on the Town Commonage with a pair of greyhounds came into conflict with the owner of the neighbouring farm. In the course of the chase one of the greyhounds had chased an animal onto the unfenced farm and had immediately been shot by the owner's son in defence of 'his game.' As the dog, a bitch, was valued at £15, and as the farm owner 'had given notice to trespassers on his farm that they would have to put up with the consequences; and indeed [had] been much annoyed from this cause, and his game destroyed and made wild,' the *Herald* considered the case 'not unlikely' to come before the magistrate.<sup>51</sup> In another slightly more complex case, the appearance of an account of the hunt on the Goedhals farm 'Ordonnantie'<sup>52</sup> which had spilled over onto the neighbouring farm provoked response from the owner, John Priest:

Little did I think that they were going to rake up the whole of the country to bring them into my ground and destroy the game that I have been for some years preserving at great trouble and expense. I say destroy, for it was nothing but wanton destruction. I believe there were more bucks rode to death than were shot; it was simple butchery not sport ... Since leaving home I have heard that the above grand hunting party slaughtered about 150 springboks. Taking each buck at 45 lbs, that represents a weight of 2,600 lbs, which is my loss. If things are to go on in that way, how long shall we be able to have any game left in the colony.<sup>53</sup>

The Priest/Goedhals enmity continued over the ensuing years and the two neighbours no longer hosted joint hunts, Priest focusing instead on completing the

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47. At 'Wellwood' for example the decimation of the local springbok herd in the annual hunt of 1879 meant that in July 1880 Henry and Richard Rubidge joined a party of Graaff-Reinet farmers for a hunting trip to Hanover ('Wellwood Journal' from September 1876 to December 1892, 30 July 1880). See also *De Graaff Reinetter*, 14 May 1890; 30 July 1896; 3 August 1896; 13 March 1899.

48. S. Playne, *Cape Colony (Cape Province) - its History, Commerce, Industries, and Resources* (London: Foreign and Colonial Compiling and Publishing for Juta, 1910-11), 339.

49. H.A. Bryden, *Kloof and Karoo: Sport, Legend and Natural History in Cape Colony* (London: Longmans, 1889), 297.

50. H.A. Bryden, *Nature and Sport in South Africa* (London: Longmans, 1897), 297; H.A. Bryden, *Kloof and Karoo*, 336.

51. *Graaff-Reinet Herald*, 31 May 1882.

52. *Graaff-Reinet Herald*, 30 May 1883.

53. *Graaff-Reinet Herald*, 9 June 1883.

perimeter fence of his property in order to prevent 'his' springboks going over onto the Goedhals farm.<sup>54</sup> This perimeter fence was expected to be completed in either 1885 or 1886 and two of the neighbouring farms did the same, John Parkes finishing the external fencing of 'Wheatlands' in 1885<sup>55</sup> and Walter Edwards completing that of 'Klipfontein' by 1887.<sup>56</sup> Thus preserved, springbok 'thrived' in the fenced camps ('Shirlands' held 2000 springbok by 1910 for example)<sup>57</sup> and it was necessary for farmers to restrict their numbers, the need for culling providing additional impetus for grand annual hunts.<sup>58</sup>

Both the above incidents hint at the level of 'protection' being afforded springbok by some landowners and also at the emerging ideas of what constituted 'sport' and 'butchery'. It is also clear that those who had access to springbok and other game valued that access and wanted to defend it and the commercial gains it could bring. A short article that appeared in the *Herald* in 1881 agitated for change and was unambiguous about who, in its opinion, should benefit from new legislation:

It is high time that the game law be placed on a more modern footing than the Proclamation [of 1822]<sup>59</sup> places it. This proclamation was issued when the greater part of the colony was Crown Land; and the pains and penalties were threatened to the then rapidly-increasing population which menaced the game on Crown Land. Now, however, whatever game is left is on private property; and the law should be adapted rather to the protection of private property from trespass, than to the preservation of game.<sup>60</sup>

The right of private landowners to 'shoot on their own properties and in all seasons' was indeed strenuously argued in the House of Assembly and enshrined in the 1886 Game Law Amendment Act.<sup>61</sup> Another central tenet of the House of Assembly debates around the new Act was that of access to land, and therefore game, between those who represented landowner-sportsmen and those who represented town-dwelling sportsmen.<sup>62</sup>

### **'A fine specimen of manhood' - hunt etiquette in the 1880s and 1890s**

From this initial interregnum, however, emerged a Hunt culture based on clearly defined protocols and accessible only to a certain sector of Graaff-Reinet society. For the latter half of the 1880s the apparent figurehead of this culture was John Priest on his estate 'Shirlands', supported to a lesser extent by the nearby farmers Walter Edwards at 'Klipfontein' and Arthur Parkes at 'Wheatlands'. All

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54. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 1 July 1885a, 1 July 1885b.

55. M. Parkes, *Wheatlands*, 26.

56. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 16 May 1887.

57. S. Playne, *Cape Colony (Cape Province) - its History, Commerce, Industries, and Resources*, 364.

58. *South African Illustrated News*, Vol 2, No 33, 15 August 1885; *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 16 May 1887.

59. 'Game Law Proclamation, March 1822'.

60. *Graaff-Reinet Herald*, 30 July 1881.

61. Cape of Good Hope: Debates in the House of Assembly, 26 May 1886; 22 June 1886. 'Game Law Amendment Act – Act No. 36, 6 July 1886'.

62. Cape of Good Hope: Debates in the House of Assembly, 23 June 1886.

held annual or regular springbok hunts on their farms, a verbose and grandiose account of which was invariably submitted to the local press by one of the proud participants.<sup>63</sup> These accounts were the antithesis of the earlier frugal and dully factual reports and were an important means of conveying the general etiquette of the Hunt to both in- and outsiders.

A hunt at Shirlands in June 1885, for example, was covered by different reports in the *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, and another in the *South African Illustrated News*. Authors of all three reports considered themselves fortunate to have participated in ‘the most invigorating and exciting sport’ and, in addition to singing ‘he’s a jolly good fellow’ the evening after the hunt, returned the favour by singing the praises of John Priest and the ‘fine’ Shirlands estate in their published descriptions. Praise was not limited to the host however, and the ‘Captain of the Hunt,’ Jonathon Hobson was described as ‘one who would be chosen anywhere as a leader, a fine specimen of manhood, one who, though half a century of active work on a farm or field has passed over, is still up with the youngest, and to the fore when work or sport is to be done.’<sup>64</sup> This back-slapping and basking in reflective glory continued with a tally of the number of ‘bucks’ shot by each participant and was important in cementing the qualities of a good sportsman and communicating this to a larger audience. The posed photographs of the aftermath by the Graaff-Reinet photographer, Mr William Roe,<sup>65</sup> were represented in the *Illustrated News*<sup>66</sup> and were thought ‘to make interesting views of colonial life,’<sup>67</sup> or at least that of which the colonists were proud.

**(FOLLOWING PAGE) Figure 3:** ‘The Hunt at Shirlands: 1. The Meet - Preparing for the Field, 2. Lunch time - Some of the Game’

This 1885 Shirlands Hunt was photographed by William Roe and later illustrated in *South African Illustrated News*. The first image, ‘Preparing for the Field’, shows a very obvious military element in the commando-like gathering at the farmstead: Bandoliers and masculine attitudes are both apparent, as are the horses essential for such a hunt. The second, ‘Lunch time – Some of the Game’, is interesting in as much as it portrays the celebratory and self-congratulatory nature of the aftermath. Just 11 carcasses are pictured and described only as ‘Some of the Game’. In all 130 springbok were shot by 40 horsemen over a 24-hour period. Neither image appears to have been posed, the fact that they are rendered in cartoon form allowing wider publication and a broader audience.

(*South African Illustrated News*, Volume II, No 33, 15 August 1885)

63. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 1 July 1885a; 1 July 1885b; 16 May 1887a; 16 May 1887b; 27 May 1889; 3 June 1889; *De Graaff Reinetter*, 28 May 1894.

64. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 1 July 1885.

65. William Roe, in later life assisted by his son, was the Graaff-Reinet photographer. He had opened portrait rooms in Graaff-Reinet in 1859 and, aside from visits to the diamond fields and to the Transvaal, remained in Graaff-Reinet until his death in 1916 (M. Bull and J. Denfield, *Secure the Shadow: The story of Cape Photography from its beginnings to the end of 1870* (Cape Town: T. McNally, 1970)). Many of his negatives were destroyed in a fire, and the water used to quell it, at Reinet House after his death.

66. *South African Illustrated News*, Vol 2, No 33, 15 August 1885.

67. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 1 July 1885.



THE HUNT AT SHIRLANDS.

1. The Meet—Preparing for the Field. 2. Lunch time.—Some of the Game.



*Mr. J. Priest*

MORNING COFFEE

*\*\* Father of  
Mr. H*

Before the Hunt



SPRINGBOK HUNT

*Lunch in the Veld*

**(PREVIOUS PAGE ABOVE) Figure 4: 'Morning Coffee: Before the Hunt'**

In contrast to figure 4, this photograph - most likely taken by William Roe in c.1889 before the auction of 'Shirlands' - shows the pre-Hunt gathering taking place in town. Of note are the attire of the subjects and the posed nature of the photograph. In addition the single cross (x) identifies John Priest (seated, top hat and beard, hands on knees): his position in the centre of the ensemble indicating his social status and the fact that this is likely to have been a hunt of which he was the host. The name of the second highlighted individual was obscured in the original copy of this photograph. Three dogs are present in the photograph but do not figure in Hunt accounts of the period and their presence may be incidental.

(Karoo Gallery, Graaff-Reinet)

**(PREVIOUS PAGE BELOW) Figure 5: 'Springbok Hunt: Lunch in the Veld'**

This photograph is most likely of the same day as that above and together with figure 4 shows something of a tradition of capturing the whole event. John Priest is again centrally posed, presiding over 'his' Hunt, and in common with figure 3 there is a sense of celebration with some of the participants toasting each other and others making a show of pouring drinks of some kind. Of significance in this scene is the presence of at least four Xhosa or Khoi *achter ryders* (three on the extreme left and one behind the wagon on the right). All are marginal and to all intents invisible. Also in common with figure 3 is the presence of a white-shirted, neck-tied individual whose purpose is clearly different to the remainder and may have been purely to organise the lunch rendezvous. The possibility of figures 3, 4 and 5 depicting the same Hunt cannot be discounted and in this eventuality raises some interesting questions as to the artistic licence employed in figure 3.

(Source: Karoo Gallery, Graaff-Reinet)

The hunts on the nearby 'Klipfontein' were very similar and involved much the same cast, with Jonathon Hobson, 'expert hunter and prince of good fellows,' also being chosen captain.<sup>68</sup> As always a large party of sportsmen was assembled and organised by the Captain, the fashion typical of the era being for the 'guns' to form a line mounted on horseback across the veld and then to advance on the springbok, driving them towards the fenced boundary of the camp or run 'with a view to getting a double smack at the buck.'<sup>69</sup> As the hunters approached to within a few hundred metres the springbok became uneasy and:

At a given signal we made a final tremendous burst, our little horses 'going all they knew' over the veld, clearing bushes, swerving from ant-heaps, and gaining rapidly all the time on the game. Heavens! What glorious sport that was. The excitement is tremendous, as you feel yourself steadily approaching the fleet-footed creatures. About 150 yards distant we suddenly hauled up, and throwing the reins over our horses' heads jumped down in a trice. Keeling on one knee, there was a momentary pause, and then bang, bang, bang, rang out in quick succession ...<sup>70</sup>

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68. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 16 May 1887a; 16 May 1887b.

69. *South African Sportsman*, 31 March 1893.

70. 'Reminiscences of the Karoo', *South African Sportsman*, 21 April 1893. In the 'intense excitement' when 'many of the shots fired were without consideration of range or sight,' (*Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 16 May 1887) there were inevitable casualties. See for example *De Graaff Reinetter*, 13 August 1896.

Long hours of sport were punctuated by the ladies' provision of 'substantial and abundant fare, and ... colossal piles of provisions' and an end brought to the event by 'a rattling good supper' and 'three tremendous cheers, followed by a rather "unmusical" musical honours for [the host] and the ladies and another hearty three, with harmony, for the popular captain, ... and ... after the tired hunters went to their hard-won rest, to "fight their battles o'er again" and shoot more springbucks in their dreams.'<sup>71</sup> Chief among the masculine attractions of the pursuit were the intense excitement and thrill of the chase, the element of danger inherent in a headlong charge across the uneven karoo plains, a chance to display riding and shooting prowess and the vicarious enjoyment of the 'warlike din' and 'ceaseless rattle of firing [which] somewhat resembled a military fusillade.'<sup>72</sup> 'What,' after all, 'is grander to the ardent sportsman than to be in full chase, with a sound horse, after a "klompje" of wild springbok?'<sup>73</sup>

In contrast to the daylong affairs at 'Wellwood' in the 1870s, Hunts during the 1880s and 1890s lasted two or three days, with guests enjoying the 'genial hospitality' of their hosts or neighbouring farmers, and invariably resulted in a 'bag' of over a hundred springbok of which the sportsmen were usually allowed a share. Those sportsmen who had shot well were usually 'taxed' for the distribution bag which was taken to town by the host who took 'pleasure in sending proceeds of the hunt to old friends, whose hunting days are over, or who have not had the opportunity to join for themselves.'<sup>74</sup> This productive use of the carcasses hinted at the practical side of springbok hunting which continued to be ingrained in both those whose land contained springbok and those who lived in town or whose farms were without such game. Many farmers 'rarely returned from an inspection of the stock, fencing, and a general "bossing-up" of his herds without a buck of some sort, or else a hare, khoran, partridge, or pau strapped on to his saddle.'<sup>75</sup> At 'Wellwood' for example, Richard Rubidge's journal entries over the 1880s and 1890s are filled, in a practical and sparse style, with incidental accounts of springbok shot while out on the farm in one of the ostrich or sheep camps and how later the carcasses were cut up and dried: 'shot buck in my camp' - 'made biltong.'<sup>76</sup> There are also regular mentions of other less fortunate farmers - usually relatives in the extended family - asking permission to hunt springbok on 'Wellwood'.<sup>77</sup> The fact that one of these came specifically to 'shoot a buck for Cape Town'<sup>78</sup> presumably mirrors the underlying reason for John Priest's apparent generosity in distributing springbok in town. Springbok, as a source of both sport and protein, was an important status symbol in the Graaff-Reinet community and Priest's 'generosity' to those who had not partaken in the Hunt served to bolster his status by prolonging the occasion and the social implications of the Hunt.

71. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 16 May 1887a.

72. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 16 May 1887a.

73. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 9 May 1892.

74. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 1 July 1885; 27 May 1889.

75. 'Reminiscences of the Karoo', *South African Sportsman*, 31 March 1893.

76. See for example 'Wellwood Journal from September 1876 to December 1892', 2 February 1885; 28 May 1887; 31 August 1888; 17 June 1891; 16 March 1882; 'Wellwood Journal, 1893-1904', 9 May 1893; 17 May 1895; 22 June 1897; 12 September 1898; 24 September 1899.

77. See for example 'Wellwood Journal from September 1876 to December 1892', 23 August 1888; 26 June 1889; 3 February 1892; 'Wellwood Journal 1893-1904', 24 February 1897; 3 February 1899.

78. 'Wellwood Journal from September 1876 to December 1892', 26 June 1889.

Although hunts involved both English and Dutch speakers - both drinking to and ‘hurrahing’ the Queen<sup>79</sup> - the culture of the Hunt was initially not as celebrated in the Dutch language *De Graaff Reinetter* as it was in the English *Herald* and its replacement the *Advertiser*, this despite the fact that its editor J McCusker himself participated in springbok hunts.<sup>80</sup> Another example of the apparently differing attitudes of the two cultures is that towards the shooting of Cape mountain zebras of which the *Advertiser* asked, ‘Is not a law wanted to prevent the destruction of these harmless and beautiful animals?’ and which by contrast *De Graaff Reinetter* did not condemn when reporting a similar incident four years later, commenting only that ‘*Het vel er van is te zien by hr Human.*’<sup>81</sup> This is a generalisation of course and Mr Jacobus Retief from a farm north of Graaff-Reinet caught, and later displayed, a Cape mountain zebra purely because he had heard that some farmers in the district were planning to shoot it and that this made him ‘mad’.<sup>82</sup> Both this, and the fact that when hunts were reported in Dutch they invariably made use of English terms and phrases such as ‘gentlemen’ and ‘what mark he could make’,<sup>83</sup> are indicative of the fact that this ‘grand tradition’ was based squarely on those operative in other parts of the British Empire.<sup>84</sup>

By the latter half of the 1890s however, more detailed reports of hunts began to appear in *De Graaff Reinetter* and much the same culture that pervaded the celebrated hunts at farms like ‘Shirlands’ and ‘Klipfontein’ was evident. A ten-day hunt to a variety of farms near Beaufort West was led by ‘*kommandant Fanie Du Plessis (de oude held)*’,<sup>85</sup> praised the hospitality of the host the ‘*welbekende gastvrye hr Pieter de Villiers*’ and also included a particular ‘*welbekende springbok schutter.*’<sup>86</sup> Springbok hunting by this stage, whether it took place on a local farm or in a neighbouring district was also valued by town dwellers as a ‘*heerlyk uitstapje*’ that took one away from Graaff-Reinet’s ‘*stoferyge straten, politieke gevechten, zwakke bezigheid-dagen en zoo voorts.*’<sup>87</sup>

### ‘Lairds’ and ‘Johnnies’

As one might expect, the emergence of rules and etiquette led to an emergence of class divisions among the sportsmen, and the wealthy proprietors, while revered as ‘lairds’, ‘bosses’ and ‘bricks’, regarded some of their guests and admirers as ‘Johnnies’, a term that was applied to inexperienced sportsmen who did not fully grasp either the skills or etiquette required.<sup>88</sup> This was essentially a division between landed farmers and town-dwelling merchants and found expression in a

79. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 3 June 1889.

80. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 9 May 1892.

81. ‘The skin can be seen at Mr Human’s.’ *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 14 July 1885; *De Graaff Reinetter*, 30 May 1889.

82. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 28 February 1887.

83. *De Graaff Reinetter*, 3 August 1896; 18 August 1898.

84. See J.M. MacKenzie, *The Empire of Nature*; H. Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987), chapter 6.

85. ‘Commandant Fanie Du Plessis (the old hero).’ *De Graaff Reinetter*, 30 July 1896.

86. ‘The well known, hospitable Pieter de Villers’; ‘well known springbok hunter.’ *De Graaff Reinetter*, 3 August 1896.

87. ‘Splendid outing’; ‘dusty streets, political fights, poor trading days for business and so on.’ *De Graaff Reinetter*, 18 August 1898.

88. See for example *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 27 May 1889; 2 March 1891.



number of Hunt accounts. Such snobbery was bound to draw satire of course and following his invitation to, and participation in, a hunt at ‘Schietfontein’, farm of Pieter Gericke, the editor of the *Advertiser* wrote a tongue in cheek piece, which he signed ‘One who could not shoot.’<sup>89</sup> In this piece the use of heavy irony, and frequent parentheses to emphasize this, as well as more direct self-flagellation and criticism with terms such as ‘pea-shooters’, ‘quasi-sportsmen’ and ‘a nondescript collection of sportsmen’ served to make light of any difference in skill or culture between the two parties. The war-like references and pretensions of earlier commentators were mocked: ‘After looking at the time of day through something which had the faintest suspicion of being a whis-a-a-well a eau-de-cologne bottle, the bugle sounded and a general march was made on the enemy, I mean the beautiful bounding bucks.’ The distinction in performance between the townsfolk with their borrowed rifles and the more practised farmers was emphatic: ‘Results of the chase: Gericke 2, Melville 3, Van der Venter 2, Heugh 2, Howe-Brown 1, Rabie 1. Total 11. Kay 0, McCusker 0, Van Heerden 0, de Villiers 0, Marais 0, Laws 0. Total 0! Grand Record.’ This was a theme that was echoed by a correspondent of *De Graaff Reinetter* whose moniker, ‘Koos Lekkerlach’, left no doubt as to his tone when he has asked of host: ‘*maak voer my springbokken vas, anders skiet ek nooit raak.*’<sup>90</sup>

In contrast to accounts of the Easter Hunt Club’s bushbuck drives in the Alexandria district,<sup>91</sup> the colonial underclass in Graaff-Reinet, in the form of Xhosa and Khoi servants, did not loom large in hunt descriptions. They performed the role of driver or *achter ryder*, but, given the open karoo terrain and the enclosed nature of the camps where the springbok Hunt was staged, their function as drivers was largely superfluous. Instead it was as after riders, whose task it was to collect the spoils of the Hunt, that this segment of society was valued. Largely ignored in Hunt accounts, one of the few descriptions of the colonial Other in the context of the Graaff-Reinet springbok hunt read thus:

Soon the veld was seen alive with troops of bucks careering over the country as only the beautiful springbok can, closely followed or flanked by eager horse[m]en some springing from their saddles and firing as they gained the distance; others firing from their saddles, to turn or check the head-long rush; and now and again achter-riders falling out to secure the slain or finish a wounded buck, and then carry the prize tied behind their saddles, the nearest cut to the wagon rendezvous and return for more.<sup>92</sup>

The attitude of settler hunters to these ‘after riders’ is clear from another rare description: ‘There flies his *achterryder*; off the nigger jumps; to open the buck, pull out the entrails, fling it over the horse, mount and set off again after his *baas* is the work of a moment.’<sup>93</sup>

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89. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 17 May 1894.

90. ‘Tie up springbok for me, otherwise I’ll never shoot accurately.’ *De Graaff Reinetter*, 18 August 1898.

91. See L. van Sittert, ‘Class and Canicide in Little Bess’.

92. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 1 July 1885.

93. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 9 May 1892.



**Figure 6:** ‘Sketches of South African Life: Hunting Springbok’ (c. 1908)

The role of the colonial underclass in the springbok Hunt was that of driver (as pictured here) or *achter ryder*. This image is something of a caricature of the well-defined racial roles of the rural Cape Colony, with the comic, shirtless figure of the ‘nigger’ juxtaposed with the sure and composed figure of the sportsman.

(National Library of South Africa - Special Collections.)

### The satisfaction of His Excellency - the Governor’s visit in 1898

There is no question by this stage though that both the annual and opportunistic springbok Hunts had become part of the identity of the town and enhanced its status in other areas of the colony. Its spreading reputation had begun with the account of a Shirlands Hunt in the *South African Illustrated News* and others in the *South African Sportsman*.<sup>94</sup> It was with pride that the *Advertiser* reprinted the comments of a Cradock correspondent of the *South African News* on a former employee of the Graaff-Reinet Standard Bank with the observation that ‘Graaff-Reinet sportsmen are famous wherever they may go.’<sup>95</sup> By 1890 the springbok Hunt was attracting visitors from as far afield as Port Elizabeth when two visiting naval officers made the journey to the district specifically to hunt springbok,<sup>96</sup> and a whole new generation of estates in the mould of ‘Shirlands’ and ‘Klipfontein’ had emerged with the owners of farms like ‘Wallacedale’, ‘Roodeberg’, ‘Schietfontein’ and ‘Putfontein’, amongst others, desperate to join the social ranks of Priest, Edwards, Parkes and their predecessor Charles Rubidge.

94. ‘Reminiscences of the Karoo’, *South African Sportsman*, 31 March 1893; ‘Reminiscences of the Karoo: Springbuck Hunting’, *South African Sportsman*, 21 April 1893.

95. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 10 May 1905.

96. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 3 July 1890.

The social status of the Graaff-Reinet Hunt, however, reached its climax with the visit of the Governor, Sir Alfred Milner, in 1898. The purpose of the Governor's visit was to open the extension of the railway line from Graaff-Reinet to Middelburg, but the townspeople took advantage of the opportunity to organise a complete programme displaying the charms of the district. One of these charms was of course the springbok Hunt:

The programme providing for the entertainment of His Excellency the governor and his staff included a springbuck hunt, and the Town owe a debt of gratitude to Mr Walter Rubidge for having undertaken and so successfully carried out this by no means uninteresting item of the series ... Without delay horses were saddled, rifles got in order, achter riders appointed and the plan of the hunt mapped out by Mr Rubidge [on the farm 'Putfontein']. The camp in which the hunt took place is in extent 5,000 morgen and fenced. When the preliminaries had been arranged, His Excellency, accompanied by his aide-de-camp (Lieut. Wood), the Colonial Secretary and Mr Henry Maasdorp, in one cart, and Mr Roe and Mr C Sandford in another, drove into the camp, Sir James Sivewright preferring to take the field on horseback; the huntsmen taking up their positions as allotted to them in the field. The main road runs through the centre of the camp, so it was possible to the occupants of the carts not only to get a view of the whole hunt as it progressed in the different parts of the veld, but also to participate in it as the bucks crossed the road in their flight. Soon the game was spotted, and the hunt opened by a fusillade some distance from the portion occupied by the Governor. The buck broke past their pursuers and were soon out of gunshot, only, however, to come within danger again in the close proximity of His Excellency, who had a splendid opportunity of seeing the graceful antelopes in their mad rush past the road. Here were a few huntsmen in readiness, and Mr W Rubidge did not lose his opportunity of tumbling a buck over in fine style. Firing then became general in all parts of the field, and for a couple of hours his Excellency, piloted by the Colonial Secretary, was driven along the road wherever it was possible to get the best view of the hunt. Several times as the bucks passed and re-passed the road he was enabled to watch the game, and the huntsmen. His Excellency, whose first visit to a springbuck hunt this was, evinced a keen interest in the proceedings, and expressed again and again his satisfaction at being able to witness so interesting and novel a spectacle.<sup>97</sup>

Milner had obviously been impressed as a second hunt was organised, this time north of the town on the farm 'Kareehoogte', en route to Middelburg, and this time including the Governor as an active participant:

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97. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 7 March 1898.

The distinguished party included Sir Alfred Milner and staff, Sir James Sivewright, Dr Te Water and several Graaff-Reinet ladies and gentlemen. The programme on the way to Middelburg was a halt at Bethesda Road to have a few hours among these Spring-bucks, and when they arrived at this midway Station horses and all requisites for the hunt were in readiness, His Excellency being provided with a good horse. The party, numbering fifteen, were soon among the light-footed game, and an excellent hour's sport was witnessed, His Excellency surprising most of us by his fearless gallop across country, and he apparently enjoyed himself immensely. In a very short while six bucks were bagged, and the party returned to the Station, had breakfast, and continued the journey to Middelburg.<sup>97</sup>

The Governor was unsuccessful in 'bagging' a springbok, but the Graaff-Reinetters, ever mindful of the status and 'improvement' to be achieved and no doubt influenced by John Priest's habit of distributing springbok to his 'friends' in town,<sup>99</sup> did not let his party depart empty-handed and 'fifteen bucks, part of the spoil of the two day's hunt, went round in the governor's train for distribution in Cape Town to His Excellency and his friends.' Not satisfied with this, Walter Rubidge, on whose farm the first Hunt had taken place, forwarded one of the bucks shot at that Hunt to Cecil John Rhodes at Groote Schuur. The *Advertiser* while striking a subtly critical tone, could not help but fantasize at what support from Rhodes would mean for the district:

One of the bucks shot at the Putfontein hunt was forwarded by Mr Walter Rubidge to Mr Rhodes at Groote Schuur. We believe the buck was shot by Sir James Sivewright! On Monday Mr Rubidge received, at his town house, an acknowledgement from the Right Hon gentlemen, and he expressed a wish that they might meet someday.<sup>100</sup>

Nothing seems to have come of this sycophantic gesture however, and during the Boer War<sup>101</sup> the culture of the Hunt, while surviving,<sup>102</sup> slowly faded into the background.

### **'Almost a drug' - venison, springbok and hunting in the early 1900s**

Despite the war, the growing number of springbok on a growing number of farms saw the emergence of a new era. The presence of springbok on any particular farm had lent the owner social status since the mid-1870s, and this came to be regarded as a financial asset in the sale of property. The advertisement of the pending auction of 'Shirlands' in 1889, for example, included the statement that

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98. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 10 March 1898.

99. See for example *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 1 July 1885; 27 May 1889.

100. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 17 March 1898.

101. While Graaff-Reinet itself was never invaded, Nieu Bethesda, Aberdeen, Murraysburg, Pearston and Petersburg were all temporarily occupied by Boer commandos. See K.W. Smith, *From Frontier to Midlands*, 109-110; A. McNaughton, *When Ants Get Angry! The Importance of Graaff-Reinet in the Anglo-Boer War* (Graaff-Reinet, 1999).

102. See *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 27 July 1900; 30 July 1900.

'large troops of Springbucks have been preserved on the property for some years past, yielding a good income to the proprietor and affording a treat to sporting friends,'<sup>106</sup> and this was a trend that was to continue with the auction of farms such as 'Beaconsfield' in 1890, 'Putfontein' and 'Van Ekes Kraal' in 1897, 'Shirlands' (again) in 1899, 'Hopewell' in 1900, 'Woodcliffe' in 1902, 'Vaalbank', 'Putfontein' (again) and 'Rockwood' in 1904<sup>104</sup> and 'Wallacedale' in 1908.<sup>105</sup> That this was deemed so important a feature of a property's worth is indicated by the fact that in an initial advertisement for the auction of 'Shirlands' in 1899 there was no mention made of springbok at all,<sup>106</sup> but the following week, the same advertisement had been amended to include: '**GAME:** There are about 500 to 600 Spring Bucks, Guinea Fowls, Partridges &c. on the farm.'<sup>107</sup> The fact that the typesetting had been changed and the advertisement amended indicated how important to the sale of the estate the presence of springbok was and presumably that the omission had been discussed in the interim. The word game was capitalised and in bold print.

The value of game on a farm was not only perceived locally, but also internationally and in Somerset Playne's *Cape Colony* published in 1910-11, several Graaff-Reinet farms were lauded for the presence of 'jealously protected' springbok.<sup>108</sup> Those farms that were not lucky enough to have enclosed populations of springbok, or perhaps only very small numbers, were not without recourse however and as early as 1881 there were organised attempts to catch springbok lambs for the purpose of relocation. One of the first to attempt this at 'Wellwood' was none other than a visiting Johan Booyens<sup>109</sup> who, aside from his ostrich and springbok endeavours, later enjoyed success in '*eene nieuwe nywerheid*' breeding eland.<sup>110</sup> Attempts to catch springbok at 'Wellwood' continued over the ensuing decades, greatly increasing after the war<sup>111</sup> and culminating in July 1908 with an organised drive and elaborate netting trap that caught 20 springbok, 12 of which were then transferred to at least two other farms.<sup>112</sup> Just as important as starting new populations was protecting existing ones and at 'Wellwood' the campaign against sheep-killing black-backed jackal and caracal was extended to poisoning the carcasses of springbok killed by these predators.<sup>113</sup>

This new era widened the access to springbok and the Hunt became a popular pastime for town and country folk alike. From 1903 the involvement of the townsfolk became more apparent with golf apparently at a 'temporary discount' in favour of springbok hunting,<sup>114</sup> and almost every holiday and weekend 'hard-

103. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 28 October 1889.

104. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 23 June 1890; 31 January 1897; 15 April 1897; 20 March 1899; 28 November 1900; 5 February 1904; 24 February 1904. See also *De Graaff Reinetter*, 25 November 1889; 23 June 1890; 7 March 1898.

105. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 18 November 1908.

106. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 15 March 1899.

107. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 20 March 1899.

108. S. Playne, *Cape Colony (Cape Province) - its History, Commerce, Industries, and Resources*, 319-370.

109. 'Wellwood Journal from September 1876 to December 1892', 6 and 7 September 1881.

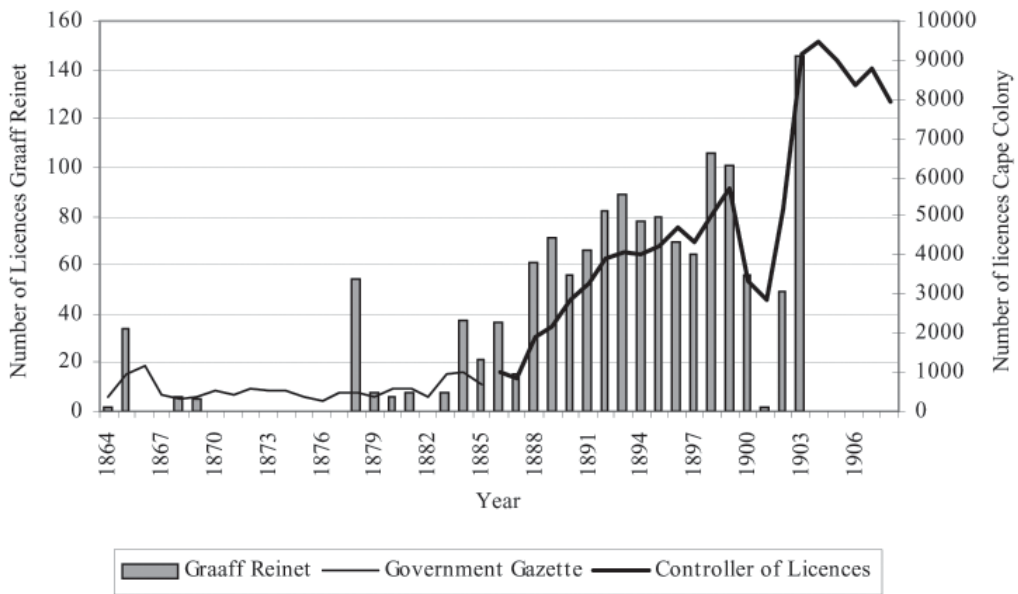
110. 'A new industry,' Booyens sold his eland to Groote Schuur and even a European dealer. See *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 1 March 1899; *De Graaff Reinetter* 21 January 1892; 1 December 1892; 22 December 1892; 15 November 1894; 20 December 1894; 15 April 1897; 24 November 1898.

111. See 'Wellwood Journal from September 1876 to December 1892', 26 August 1883; 19 July 1884; 'Wellwood Journal 1905-1910', 29 September 1906; 8 October 1906; 13 May 1907; 31 July 1907; 25 October 1907; 3 November 1907; 5 February 1908; 25 May 1908.

112. 'Wellwood Journal 1905-1910', 24 July 1908.

113. See 'Wellwood Journal from September 1876 to December 1892', 5 August 1883; 'Wellwood Journal 1893-1904', 5 May 1893; 'Wellwood Journal 1905-1910', 1 February 1905.

114. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 16 May 1904.



**Figure 7:** Graaff-Reinet (1864-1903) and Cape Colony (1864-1908) Game Licence Sales

worked townsmen [got] into the country for a change of air'<sup>115</sup> and 'picnic parties ... while many of the sterner sex spent the day[s] in trudging over the flats in search of springbuck.'<sup>116</sup> The renewed economy of language ('A party of four guns, including Dr Rubidge and Mr F Watermeyer were successful in bringing down 18 springbucks on Mr Walter Edwards farm.'<sup>117</sup>), the subtle change in terminology (reports were often entitled simply 'Hunting' as opposed to 'Great Springbok Hunt' for example), an element of debauchery and the shooting of other species previously ignored in the quest for springbok ('Mr Sydney Mellville's bag was somewhat different and consisted of two Steinbucks, three Korhaans, one Meercat, and one whiskey bottle, fifteenth shot *opslagt*'<sup>118</sup>) indicated a shift away from the Hunt as a 'grand event' and the epitome of gentlemanly culture. The advent of the railway and improved transport had also influenced the Hunt culture and meant that shooting estates were within easy reach of the townfolk for a half-day's shooting: a factor that extended the range of hunting both geographically and socially in cities as different as London<sup>119</sup> and Port Elizabeth.<sup>120</sup> Accordingly the number of game licences sold rose significantly after a lull during the Anglo - Boer War and continued the upward trend evident in the late 1880s and 1890s (see figure 7). Tom Priest was one individual who took full advantage of the new era and in May 1903, in just two weeks, is mentioned in the *Advertiser* as having attended no less than

115. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 27 May 1904.

116. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 3 June 1903.

117. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 15 May 1903.

118. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 8 June 1903.

119. R. Carr, *English fox Hunting: A History*, chapter 7.

120. L. van Sittert, 'Class and Canicide in Little Bess'. A steenbok was even reported as being shot from a moving train between Cradock and Cookhouse (*De Graaff Reinetter*, 30 July 1891).

four hunts on four different properties, each time apparently attempting to better the 'bag' of the previous hunt!<sup>121</sup>

The popular appeal of springbok hunting brought forth two predictable responses. The first was the logical reaction of a merchant class seeking to turn what remained of the colony's resources to profit and can be symbolised by a Standard Stores advertisement in the *Advertiser* offering good prices in cash for: '20 Baboons, 20 Cranes, 10 Springbucks, 10 other wild bucks, 10 Manhaar Jackals, 300 Cape Canaries and Kaffir Finches.'<sup>122</sup> Similar notices by stores such as Charles E Geard & Son - appearing as early as 1891 in both the English and Dutch press<sup>123</sup> - advertised the beginning of the shooting season in tandem with the fact that they carried 'the BEST, LARGEST and MOST COMPLETE Stock of Ammunition in the Midlands.' Game meat in Johannesburg had, by this stage, come to be considered 'almost a drug'<sup>124</sup> and springbok venison was of course available on the Graaff-Reinet market. The Rubidges of 'Wellwood' made a point of selling part of the bag of their hunts (particularly those at the end of the season) on the local market and in 1908 sold no less than 52 carcasses there.<sup>125</sup> Over this period the sale of both venison and biltong by local retail shops began to be advertised in the press,<sup>126</sup> and the considerable popularity of what was once considered a last resort in times of drought no doubt owed much to the rise in stature of the springbok Hunt.

The second response was the backlash of the sporting fraternity, which of course lamented the new era and tried to emphasise the original aspects of the Hunt. A piece that originally appeared in *The Field*, but which was reprinted in the *Advertiser* for the benefit of local readership read as follows:

It was a British sportsman who is supposed to have said: 'It is a lovely morning; let us go out and kill something,' but it does not give us all the truth about the genuine sportsman of to-day, who has often a great deal of the artist and naturalist about him, and loves sport for the reason that it takes him afield, and enables him to see and enjoy many beautiful things apart altogether from the total of the bag for the day.<sup>127</sup>

In addition several farmers placed announcements in the press threatening prosecution if 'embryonic Nimrods' were found trespassing. Three of the first farmers to do so were Richard Rubidge of 'Wellwood' and Messrs A and T Murray of the neighbouring farms 'Bloemhof' and 'Middelwater', the latter promising that the 'arm of the law would be extended towards hunters and *rondlopers* ... [and that they, the owners, would] be merciless.'<sup>128</sup> This trend extended to farms to the south of the town as well and the following year Gideon Joubert of 'De Hoop' was

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121. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 15 May 1903; 23 May 1903; 27 May 1903.

122. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 16 February 1906. A similar advertisement appeared in *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 19 August 1907; 18 September 1907.

123. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 2 March 1891; *De Graaff Reinetter*, 14 June 1894.

124. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 13 August 1906.

125. See 'Wellwood Journal 1905-1910', 8 June 1908; 30 June 1908; 24 July 1908. See also a newspaper advertisement of this fact in *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 29 June 1908.

126. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 22 June 1903; 7 August 1903; 6 July 1906.

127. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 17 January 1906.

128. 'Vagrant/trespasser'. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 29 April 1907; 13 May 1907.

‘firmly resolved to stand no nonsense, and all persons found hunting, shooting or otherwise trespassing ... [would] be dealt with according to statute law.’<sup>129</sup>

### ‘Management tool and social signifier’

The transformation of springbok from an easily available source of protein that subsidised pastoral settlement in the first half of the nineteenth century to a provider of sport, excitement and exhilaration in the latter quarter of that century is one that follows the troughs and peaks of Graaff-Reinet’s agricultural, commercial and cultural development and which has its roots in a number of causes. During a period that overlapped with the initial boom of Graaff-Reinet in the 1850s and the depression of the 1860s, springbok were hunted for protein. A nascent Hunt culture that appeared at the end of the prosperous 1850s was crippled by drought and resultant economic decline in the 1860s, only for it to reconsolidate and emerge during the economic recovery of the mid-1870s. This latter boom, and the enclosure that resulted largely from ostrich domestication, allowed both a growth of the local springbok population and a carefully structured Hunt culture with ‘Lairds,’ ‘Johnnies’ and ‘*achter ryders*.’ Springbok then served as a social elevator for those on whose farms they occurred. This culture of the Hunt reached its apogee in 1898 with the visit of the Governor.

By the 1890s, as van Sittert has noted, ‘hunting [in the Cape] was both a management tool and social signifier.’<sup>130</sup> This holds especially true for springbok in the increasingly enclosed farmlands of Graaff-Reinet and by the early 1900s the need to cull those animals enclosed on the farms was perhaps as important a factor in organising hunts as was the need to hold ‘open house’ and display one’s generosity and hospitality. By this stage the ease of rail access, as well as other factors, resulted in the re-emergence of the Hunt as a less ritualised pastime with massive popular appeal and a wider marketing of the proceeds, such as venison and biltong. While in some quarters having undergone the MacKenzie shift ‘from utility to inutility’ (‘Gentlemen sportsmen,’ it was said, ‘though they pride themselves on making the biggest bags, do not pride themselves on carrying it off’),<sup>131</sup> springbok never in fact totally lost their value as a food source, thus supporting van Sittert’s contention that hunting and the Hunt ‘co-existed and were simultaneously commodified,’<sup>132</sup> a dual notion that is only partially acknowledged by MacKenzie.

Despite Bryden’s fear that the rapid settlement and enclosure of pastoral farms would drive the springbok ‘to its strongholds and sanctuaries in the arid regions of the north-west of the Colony’<sup>133</sup> and that hunting in ‘fenced runs’ was simply not sport,<sup>134</sup> enclosure and the Hunt in fact cemented the species’ place on modern karoo farms.

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129. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 17 February 1908.

130. L. van Sittert, ‘Class and Canicide in Little Bess’, 22.

131. *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 1 July 1885.

132. L. van Sittert, ‘Class and Canicide in Little Bess’.

133. H.A. Bryden, *Kloof and Karoo*, 233-234.

134. H.A. Bryden, *Great and Small Game of Africa* (London: Rowland Ward, 1899), 335-6.