

# Dreams of sun & space in South Africa

Emily Manktelow considers the factors that attracted our migrant ancestors to South Africa.



In the years 1853-1920, 670,000 Britons emigrated to South Africa. If your ancestor was one of them, what was their life like in South Africa? What drove them to leave their native land and venture overseas? And what opportunities laid in wait for them?

## 1820 settlers

Emigration to South Africa was all about escaping poverty, grasping opportunity, and consolidating the British imperial presence in a colony of settlement. In South Africa this was complicated by the presence of two non-British groups within the colony: the minority Dutch (later

Afrikaner) population, and of course the overwhelming majority of indigenous Africans.

In 1820 the British Government decided to support an emigration scheme designed to 'make the homes of British settlers into the ramparts of an empire' (IE Edwards, *The 1820 Settlers in South Africa*, 1934). Noting that in 1819 only 4,800 of the 42,000 white residents of the Cape Colony spoke English, £50,000 was mobilised to transport English settlers to the

## Census statistics

In the 1921 South African Census 68 per cent of the population were black African; 22 per cent European; 8 per cent so-called 'Cape Coloureds'; and 2 per cent 'Asiatic' (Chinese and Indian).

Great Fish River, on the frontier with the local Xhosa peoples. These Africans, it was hoped, 'may be compelled to pacific behaviour by making them sensible of the power the English have to annihilate them, if they choose to exert it' (William Burchell, *Hints on Emigration to the Cape of Good Hope*, 1819). But 'mutual good-will being once established, these tribes may supply the new settlement with useful labourers; and furnish it, by barter, with cattle at a very cheap rate'.

Violence and commerce were the twin pillars of 19th-century imperialism.

Farmers in particular were required (ultimately making up 42 per cent of the emigrants), and they were assured that there was 'no uncertainty in the success of an emigrant of this class, if he use but common diligence and prudence' (William Burchell, *Hints on Emigration*). Each adult male was assigned 100 acres of land, and thus was to be afforded 'immediate relief to such distressed persons of this country, as may desire to emigrate to the Cape'. There were 90,000 applicants to the scheme; 4,000-5,000 were chosen.

The reality was harsher than such optimism warranted. The land grants were too small to comfortably live on, and changes in climate and lifestyle were more extreme than settlers had been led to believe. Too many (one third) of the settlers were from trading backgrounds (not farming), and the following few years were characterised by unprecedentedly bad farming conditions. In 1823 only 438 of the original settlers remained on the land allotted to them. Nonetheless, by 1904 around seven per cent of the total South African population was classified as British, and only one per cent as 'South African Dutch'. The British had triumphed in the white demography wars – but clearly, the overwhelming majority remained African.

## Gold!

The discovery of diamonds (1867) and gold (1885) in South Africa, as well as state-sponsored emigration after the South African War (1899-1901), resulted in a brief rise in the popularity of South Africa as an emigrant destination in the years 1895-1915, when the colony's representation in British emigration statistics jumped from around five per cent to approximately 10 per cent (an increase of about 10,000 people per decade). While the state was continuing to worry about the cultural imbalance between Africans, Afrikaners and the British, it was the economic boom occasioned by mining that had the most powerful effect on these figures. Around 5,000-10,000 Cornish miners made their way to the Rand mine fields, pushed by

the decline of Cornish tin mining, and pulled by wages of up to £9 per week (compared with £3 per month in Cornwall). 'Johannesburg is but a suburb of Cornwall' wrote C Lewis Hind in 1907. Twenty years later social historian AK Hamilton Jenkin wrote that 'Wherever in the world there's a hole in the ground, at the bottom of it you'll find a Cornishman searching for metal' (*The Cornish Miner*, 1927).

These so-called 'Cousin Jacks' made an indelible mark on South African culture, importing the Cornish pasty, leaving behind 1,400 graves of men lost to the mines, and sending back to Cornwall around £1,000 a week in early-1900s Redruth alone! If Jo'burg was a suburb of Cornwall, so South Africa as a whole was 'a sort of outlying farm for the mining division, and when things are brisk every mail brings twenty or thirty thousand pounds sterling for wives and families and the old folks at home' (J Henry Harris, *Cornish Saints and Sinners*, 1906). If the story of South Africa is the story of gold, so is the story of Cornwall!

**'Each week an average of about thirty men migrate from West Cornwall to South Africa; the post-office sacks of each inland mail are crammed with letters for the women left at home, and the heart of each exiled Cornish miner is set on that day when he will return, build a little granite house in the environs of Camborne or Redruth... and be his own master...'**  
**C Lewis Hind, *Days in Cornwall* (London, 1907)**

## Resources

| [ancestry24.com](http://ancestry24.com)  
Four million records from South Africa's largest genealogy website Ancestry24 have just been bought by Ancestry.com, which will make them available in the future at Ancestry. Visit [Ancestry24.com](http://Ancestry24.com) for the latest details.  
| [www.southafricansettlers.com](http://www.southafricansettlers.com)  
A free, searchable database of 19th century settlers to South Africa, with a particular focus on the 1820 settlers.  
| [www.sahistory.org.za](http://www.sahistory.org.za)  
South African History Online provides contextual information about South African history more generally.

## The South African diaspora

The interesting postscript is the irony that white South Africans, themselves descended from migrants, are now well known for emigrating all over the world. In 1996, Nelson Mandela, then president, spoke to the UK Parliament on the issue of this 'brain drain': 'To this day we continue to lose some of the best among ourselves because the lights in the developed world shine brighter.' The 2011 UK Census counted 191,000 South Africans in Britain (0.3 per cent of the population). Censuses around the old settler empire in 2006 recorded 104,128 South Africans in Australia (0.5 per cent of the population), 38,305 in Canada (0.1 per cent), and 41,676 in New Zealand (one per cent). According to South Africa's International Organisation for Migration, remittances to South Africa from abroad were worth \$1,115m in 2012. Just like the Cornish women and children who waited for mail from South Africa, thousands in South Africa now await money from their emigrants around the world. Such is the symmetry of history.

## About the author

Emily Manktelow is lecturer in British Imperial History at the University of Kent. She works on colonial family history and is one of the founders of the Family and Colonialism Research Network. See the network's new, and growing, research guide at [colonialfamilies.wordpress.com/colonial-families-research-guide](http://colonialfamilies.wordpress.com/colonial-families-research-guide).

