

The Morgenster Morkels

Part 2: Mrs. Alexander van der Byl (née Morkel)

My *Tant* Alie (Aunt Alida) told Barbara and I many stories of the family when we visited her in the 1960s. According to her there were two groups in the family – royal and *kerk* (church) Morkels. The ‘royal’ Morkels were from *Morgenster* and *Rome* and lived high. Our part of the family (from *Die Bos or The Bush*) were from the *kerk* Morkels – conventional but ‘respectable’.

The homestead at *Morgenster* is one of the finest examples of Cape Dutch architecture.(2) The connection with the Morkel family extend back to its original owner Jacques MALAN, who acquired the property in 1709 (See our story “The Malans” under “Morkel Wives”). His daughter Helena Catharina MALAN married 2nd generation Willem MORKEL. At a later stage 3rd generation Philip Hendrik MORKEL owned the farm and when he died in 1831 without sons, his nephew, Willem MORKEL, who had just married Isabella Margaretha ZEEDERBERG in 1830, acquired it. (1)

Of their ten children, some married into prominent Cape Town families such as van der Byl and van Breda. Though of Dutch origin, they assimilated into the English lifestyle of the city society. Willem's oldest son Daniel Johannes (e1) and his sister Margaret Elizabeth (e3) married sister and brother Maria Adriana and Alexander VAN DER BYL– from a prominent Cape Town family. Two of the younger daughters married British officers; Maria Dorothea (e7) with Captain Charles James BARNETT (10th Regiment of Foot, late Indian Army) and Sibella Margaretha (e9) with Captain David PERRY R.N. Captain Perry was in charge of the Royal Naval Dockyard in Simonstown in 1875. (1,p23)

- a1 Philip MORKEL 1677 – 1735 x Catharina PASMEN 1691 - 1764
- b3 Willem MORKEL 1718 – 1788 xx Helena Catharina MALAN 1759 - 1825
- c6 Daniel Johannes MORKEL 1764 – 1825 xxx Sophia Alida BRINK 1768 - 1824
- d9 **Willem MORKEL 1803 - 1876 x Isabella Margaretha ZEEDERBERG 1809 - 1886**
 - e1 Daniel Johannes MORKEL 1832 - 1917 x Maria Adriana VAN DER BYL
 - e2 Roelof Abraham MORKEL 1833 – 1877 x Hendrina Maria Frederica DU PLESSIS.
xx Johanna Elizabeth POTGIETER
 - e3 Margaret Elizabeth MORKEL 1835 – 1919 x 1853 Alexander VAN DER BYL**
 - e4 Willem MORKEL 1837 – 1908 x Anna Christina DE WET
 - e5 Hendrik Johannes Louw MORKEL 1838 - ? x Johanna Maria Mollerstrom VAN BREDA
 - e6 Johannes Rudolph MORKEL 1840 – 1864
 - e7 Maria Dorothea MORKEL 1841 - ? x Capt Charles James BARNETT**
 - e8 Pieter Gerhard Jacobus MORKEL 1844 – 1915 x Maria Susanna THEUNISSEN
 - e9 Sibella Margaretha MORKEL 1846 – 1902 x Captain George David PERRY R.N.
 - e10 Adriaan Johannes MORKEL 1850 - 1850

Those featured in this story are marked in blue.

When Willem MORKEL died in 1876, his oldest son, Daniel Johannes (e1) inherited *Morgenster*. Nine years later Daniel sold the farm to his brother-in-law, Alexander VAN DER BYL, and moved to the Transvaal. More about Daniel and his children in Part 4.

It is likely that Daniel sold because farming became uneconomical. Wine farmers at the Cape faced difficult times, as told in our story “Tough Times”. In 1859 the powdery

mildew fungus (*Oidium tuckeri*) created havoc in the Cape vineyards (3,4). The Hottentots Holland area including *Morgenster* was particularly hard hit because of its proximity to the coast. Treatment with powdered sulphur helped but in 1860 the industry was dealt another blow when the British Government entered into an agreement with France to drastically reduce import tariffs on French wines. The Cape wines, of poorer quality and with long transport distance could not compete. In 1861 the British went further to abolish preferential tariffs for Cape wines and the industry went into serious decline and exports ceased almost entirely.

Mrs Alexander VAN DER BYL (Née Margaret Elizabeth Morkel)

Peggy Heap (1,p45) has the following about the family:

Alexander VAN DER BYL was a man of means who also owned the large property Fernwood, at Newlands (later the Parliamentary Recreation Club) and a farm Nachtwacht near Bredasdorp where he bred horses. He was celebrated as a breeder and owner of race-horses and he won the Agricultural Society Cup for three consecutive years, 1860 to 1862 for races at Green Point Race Course.(1, p45).



Morgenster

Photo ex Cape Archives (2, p9a)

Alexander van der Byl disposed of *Nachtwacht* and his stud when he took over *Morgenster* in 1885. His wife, Margaret Morkel was a beautiful woman and was the hostess for many years, also after the husband's death in 1899.

The Alexander van der Byls, whose elegant hospitality was renowned, entertained many notabilities both at Fernwood and Morgenster. Among those who attended a garden party at Fernwood were the two young princes, Prince Albert Victor and Prince George of Wales – later King George V – when, in the course of a world cruise, their ship H.M.S. Bacchante, spent some weeks at the Cape.

Morgenster, Rome and stately old Vergelegen, became attractive for weekend visits and parties for Cape society - about 60 to 90 minutes by train or a few hours by horse carriage from the city.

An amusing but purely apocryphical story is told that on a glittering occasion when the van der Byls were entertaining lordly guests at Morgenster, dinner being long overdue, Mrs van der Byl sent a maid to enquire the reason. On being informed in a whisper, of the situation in the kitchen, Mrs van der Byl announced: 'I'm afraid my cook is as drunk as a lord'. (2, p45)



Mrs Alexander van der Byl (née Margaret Elizabeth Morkel) sits in the middle of the photo, next to Sir James Sivewright and family members . Early 1900's

Middle (l-r) Mrs van Breda, Widow N.J.H. Theunissen (earlier Faure, née van Breda), sir James Sivewright, widow Alexander van der Byl (née Morkel) ---?-- P.G.J. Morkel (brother and mayor of Somerset West).

Back (l-r) Mrs J.P.Cilliers (née van Breda), lady Sivewright, Widow Capt Barnet (née Morkel), --?--

Front (l-r) Misses Nettie Morkel and Helen van Breda

Source: H. C. Hopkins 1969. (5 p83)

(In the book Mrs van der Byl is wrongly identified as Mrs van Breda)

The *Morgenster* drawing room was furnished in the grand manner of the day with large pieces of walnut and mahogany furniture, which were reflected in great gilt mirrors hanging

on the walls. On a round table in the centre of the room stood an array of silver-framed signed photographs of royalty and other elevated personages. In the dining-room were sporting pictures and a vast mahogany sideboard laden with silver, including many racing and show trophies. Mrs. Van der Byl, like many Victorian ladies, took great pride in the ferns and pot plants which she cultivated in a small conservatory. Despite a full social life, she never allowed the reins of the household to slip out of her grasp, and always wore her keys at her waist. (2, p46)

In reporting her seventy seventh birthday celebrations in 1912, a newspaper of the day wrote of Mrs van der Byl:

“Her career in Cape society has been truly distinguished, and royalty as well as a long list of notabilities, have shared her lavish hospitality dispensed at Fernwood ... and at Morning Star, Somerset West where she keeps up great ceremony. Besides being a perfect hostess, Mrs van der Byl has the advantage of possessing an extremely handsome appearance coupled with brilliant conversation powers. In fact, some thirty years ago she created quite a sensation by her beauty and wit at a State Ball given by the late queen Victoria at Buckingham Palace.” (1, p45 and 46)

The S.A. Lady's Pictorial, September 1915 had the following about Mrs van der Byl:

“Mrs. Alexander van der Byl ... recently celebrated her eightieth birthday ... Her long life has also been a very full one, for in addition to her many duties, she has had several hobbies, and excelled in all of them. Archery, croquet, riding and gardening were among her many pursuits.” (2 p 23)

Mrs van der Byl died in 1919 at the age of 84. Being childless, the farm went to Mrs van der Byl's favourite nephew, Major William Alexander BARNETT, son of Maria Dorothea Morkel who was married to Captain Charles James Barnett. Major Barnett died in India and the estate passed to his only child, Zaidee, always known as Babs. Miss Barnett, a keen horsewoman farmed for many years at *Morgenster*. During her ownership the splendid front gable fell some time in the 1940s, and restored. She sold *Morgenster* in 1959 and the well reported auction of the beautiful antique furniture stimulated awareness of its value in the community. (2)

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Sources:

1. Peggy Heap. 1970. *The Story of Hottentots Holland*. A.A. Balkema. Cape Town.
2. P.W. Morkel, 1961. *The Morkels. Family History and Family Tree*. Published privately.
3. The problems of the Cape wine industry are from “*Meerlust*” by Phillida Brooke Simmons. 2003 Fernwood Press, pp 88 to 89.
4. Ted Hoefsloot and Cor Pama, 1980. *Cape Wine Homesteads*. A.D. Donker Publisher. Johannesburg.
5. H.C. Hopkins, 1969. *Die Ned.Geref. Gemeente Somerset Wes. 1819 – 1969*.