

Vanities, Fables and Foibles

Part 2

The Dovecote – an Utilitarian Folly

A feature at *Die Bos (Onverwacht)* is an ornamental dovecote built in the Cape Dutch style. The neo-classical came into vogue in the early 1800s, and it was probably built around 1810. That would make it in the time of Daniel Johannes Morkel (1764 - 1825). The dovecote became a Morkel family icon (partly because the house itself lacked a fancy Cape Dutch gable). It had a utilitarian function – the pigeons needed no upkeep but were easy to catch for pigeon pie. It has continued functioning as a pigeon house to this day. The dovecote was in the style of the old follies landed gentry erected in England – an ornamental whimsy, but in this case with some utility.



Dovecote at *Onverwacht* – *Die Bos*

Source: P.W. Morkel, (1, p71a)



Dovecote at Meerlust (Myburgh Farm)

Source: Phillida Brooke Simons, (2, p94).

There are three well known dovecotes in the Cape Dutch style. One was in Cape Town, another on the Myburgh farm *Meerlust* and at *Die Bos*. The *Meerlust* dovecote is in an older, pre 1800's style and it might have inspired the one at *Die Bos*. Daniel's aunt, Helena Catharina Myburgh (née Morkel) was married to Philippus Albertus Myburgh of *Meerlust*, and he would have been familiar with the dovecote. A matter of keeping up with the Jones'? One can never know.

Both dovecotes at *Onverwacht* and *Meerlust* had enclosed yards on either side of the central pigeon house. There is a story that they were used for cockfighting. The high walls around the enclosed courts would have made ideal venues for such games, but it was the Malay slaves who were passionate about it rather than the family. I doubt whether the side courtyards were built for this purpose. I remember my uncle keeping pigs in the yards.

The photos shown above were taken in the early 1900s. Both dovecotes have since been beautifully restored.

“We don’t go to church in a donkey cart”

A snippet of oral history told over dinner in our home: As horrible as it was, the Anglo Boer war hardly affected the family on the farm, although members of the family were involved in the fighting. The Boer Republics and their cause were far away from the Cape – more than 1,000 to 2,000 kms distant. The main impacts of the war were that the Imperial Army commandeered horses from the Cape farms, and those pesky Argentine ants came with horse fodder imported from South America. The British thus took the horses and left the farmers with only one horse each. The family was too proud to be drawn by donkeys and thus the carriage was converted to a two shafted, one horse vehicle so that they could go to church in style.

Donkey carts were used for lesser purposes. There was a nice photo (now lost) of my father as a school child standing next to the donkey cart with which he and his sisters went to school in Somerset West.

It seems others were not so lucky. In her history of the Retief family Helene Retief Lombard (3, p206) relates problems experienced by farmers in the *Bovlei* near Wellington. Some people harnessed a cow to the cart and led their family to church, stepping in cow pats on the way.

Lang Daantjie Retief of *Welvanpas* had three very fine mules that he had imported from South America. He had a special Cape cart to which the mules were harnessed in a trident fashion, one in front of the other two. He was a very particular person, and with his matching silver-handled whip, this was the ensemble he used for special occasions and for church. Major Hogg, an arrogant British commander commandeered the mules and cart, and Land Daantjie had no option but to comply. When he delivered the mules and cart major Hogg demanded the whip as well. Daantjie replied that the mules were well trained and gentle and did not require a whip. However, he had to return to the farm to fetch the whip. It was a humiliation that he never forgot, compounded by expropriation of a beautiful collection of binoculars and hunting rifles. After the war a neighbour introduced a visitor to the Retiefs at *Welvanpas* – it turned out to be major Hogg. Lang Daantjie turned his back on him and ordered him off the farm. The Retiefs were fortunate to acquire two donkeys but the long shaft of the Cape cart, designed for tall horses and mules, pointed downwards towards the road when used with donkeys. Sometimes it got stuck into the sand. But it was better than nothing and these troubles were minor inconveniences compared to the tragedies of war and devastation the Boer Republics (3, p206).

The Tangle Foot Squad

As a child I loved listening to the stories of the older folk, and they loved telling and retelling them. *Oom* Bully Anderson told of the pranks of a group he was associated with in his young days. They included my father's brother, *oom* John and several of their second cousins (some later became rugby Springboks - my father was too young for the group). The Somerset West rugby ground was on *Rome*, a Morkel farm next to *The Bush (Die Bos)* and the players were frequent visitors to the old farm - my father had several older sisters. My grandmother called them the tangle foot squad. Tangle foot was a common name for square sheets of cardboard covered with sticky paste, that were placed around the room,

usually on tables and sideboards to catch flies. Visualise someone stepping on such a sheet by accident to get the picture.

Oom Bully Anderson told many stories about the Tangle Foot Squad and I remember only a few of them. In reality they were a bunch of larrikins, but it gives a bit of the flavour of the time (about 1900 to 1910), and the stories appealed to my sense of humour, then twelve years old. My aunt 'Dolly' played the organ in the church. By the time everyone had left after the evening service and she had packed up it was already dark. Her 'beau' waited for her with his horse buggy and was a target for the tangle foot squad.

On one occasion they smeared fresh cow manure on the reins and in the dark he only noticed it when his hands were wet, sticky and smelly. At another time they quietly disengaged the draw-straps from the cart so that when he spurred the horse on to move, the cart stayed in place while the beau went over the front washboard holding on to the reins.

Another incident involved a somewhat simple member of the family who stayed as a share cropper in one of the houses on the old farm. The squad reversed the wheels of his horse cart. The large back wheels were fitted to the front and the small front wheels at the back. When he passed the farmhouse on his way to town at an awkward angle, he commented to my grandfather *Hennie, ek weet nie wat nie, maar dinge voel snaaks vandag.* ("Hennie, I don't know what's wrong but it all feels strange today".)

It sounds pretty mean as I write it, but it sounded good at the time, particularly when told with flair.

The Royal and Kerk Morkels.

My Tant Alie (Aunt Alida) told Barbara and myself 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 – respectable and conventional. This story is about the royal Morkels.

In the Family Genealogy (1), Willem Morkel 1803 – 1876), brother of our ancestor Daniel Johannes, is described as 'Capitalist' resident at *Morgenster*. He married Isabella Margaretha Zeederberg, from a family famous for their stage coaches to the interior of South Africa. Their children married into other well-known Cape families such as the van der Bijl's and van Breda's. Though of Dutch origin, they assimilated into the English lifestyle of Cape Town City and were 'high society'. Willem's oldest son Daniel Johannes Morkel (a1b3c6d9e1) married Maria Adriana van der Bijl – from a prominent Cape Town family. Two of the younger daughters married British officers. Maria Dorothea married Captain Charles James Barnett (10th Regiment of Foot, late Indian Army) and they continued to live at *Morgenster*. Sibella Margaretha married Captain David Perry R.N. and they lived on the neighbouring farm *Rome*.

Tant Alie told how they lived in style. *Morgenster* is a lovely farm and the Cape Dutch house is one of the most beautiful in the Cape. *Rome* was a newer division of *Onverwacht*. Together with stately old *Vergelegen*, the three farms 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. British visitors, including from the aristocracy also visited the farm. According to Tant Alie, they were the “royal Morkels”, belonging to the elite of Somerset West.



Morgenster

Source: P.W. Morkel, (1, p9a).

Economic realities eventually caught up with the family and the farm was sold to Daniel's brother-in-law, Alexander van der Bijl, a man of means who was also married to his (Daniel's) younger sister, Margaret Elizabeth Morkel. Van der Bijl also owned *Fernwood*, a substantial house in Newlands, Cape Town and a horse stud at Bredasdorp. Margaret visited England quite regularly and took her nieces (including Esther Elizabeth, sister of rugby springbok captain William Herman (Boy) Morkel) under her wing. In England the connections made at *Morgenster* and *Fernwood* brought them into society circles where they attended a debutante ball and were presented to Queen Victoria .

Back in South Africa, Esther Elizabeth was introduced to, and married Mr. Labilierre, who later became the Dean of Westminster Cathedral in London.



Mrs Alexander van der Byl (née Margaret Elizabeth Morkel) sits in the middle of the photo, next to Sir James Sivewright and various 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 Bijl (née Morkel) ---?-- P.G.J. Morkel (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 (5, p83) (In the book Mrs van der Byl is wrongly identified as Mrs van Breda)

Tant Alie's stories are confirmed in Peggy Heap's book on the history of Hottentots Holland (4).

"The Alexander van der Byls, whose elegant hospitality was renowned, entertained many notabilities both at Fernwood (an estate in Newlands, close to the Cape town rugby and cricket grounds) and Morgenster. Among those who attended a garden party at Fernwood in 1880 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. 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'.

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." (4, pp45-46)

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

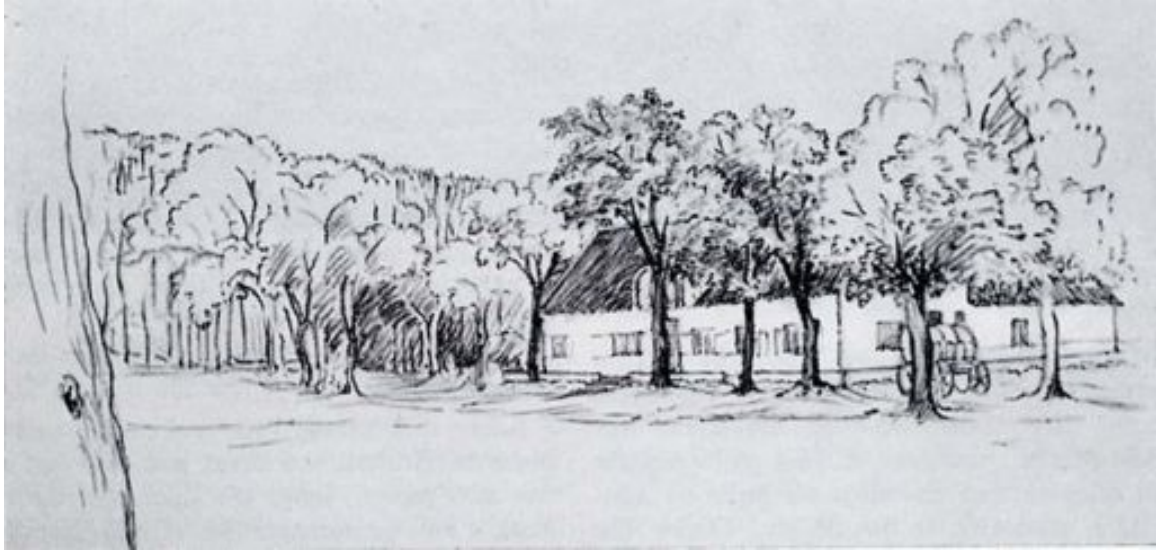
"Mrs. Alexander van der Byl ... recently celebrated her eightieth birthday ... Her long life has also been a very full one, for in addition to her many duties, she has had several hobbies, and excelled in all of them. Archery, croquet, riding and gardening were among her many pursuits."
(1, p 23)

Mrs van der Byl died in 1919 at the age of 84.

Just to even things out, a nephew of the 'royal' Morkels and grandson of Willem the Capitalist, Daniel Gustavus Morkel, fought for the Boers against the British in the Anglo Boer war of 1899 to 1902 and was sent to Bermuda as prisoner of war. Interestingly he also fought for the British in the first World War.

No Vanity Here

The main house on *Die Bos*, was large but had only a simple triangular gable above the front door, in contrast to the ornate gables popular on the old Cape Dutch houses, such as at *Morgenster*. According to family tradition the house was built by second generation Willem Morkel (1718 - 1788), but it would have replaced an earlier dwelling of his parents Philip and Catharina Morkel, and even earlier of Jan Hartog. Sir John Herschel who visited the farm in September 1835, used a *camera lucida* to sketch the house which shows a simple curved (leg-of-mutton) gable. The house would have been built before fancy gables became popular - most are from around the 1770s to 1820s. Willem was a man of means but saw no need to change the gable to keep up with the neighbours. More than half of the house was destroyed in a severe rainstorm in July 1822 and its then owner, Daniel Johannes Morkel (who had the dovecote with its neoclassical gable built) also did not change the gable. No vanity here. Thatched roofs deteriorated with time and had to be re-thatched every 40 to 50 years. In 1897 my grandfather replaced it with corrugated galvanised steel and retained the simple triangular gable. He also took the opportunity to spruce up the house in the Victorian style of the time. The family rented a house in the Strand during the renovations and my aunt, tant Maraaitjie (Maria Dorothea), was born there.



Die Bos in 1835, by Sir John Herschel

Source: H.C. Hopkins p.15



Die Bos in the 1990s

Photo: Author

Who was Niemand – Mr Nobody ?

This is a hearsay story which I cannot verify and therefore wondered whether to tell. But a few tantalising threads seem to come together, so here it is.

About 50 years ago, a University friend told me about Roelof Pasman, connected to the Morkel family, who was so disreputable that he changed his name to Niemand – literally “Nobody”. My friend had heard the story from an archivist/historian that he knew. At the time I did not follow it up and now it is too late. What neither the friend nor the historian would have known was that as a child, I knew of the Niemand family as bywoners (sharecropper/tenants) on the old farm, *Die Bos*. In fact the 1824 edition of S.A. Directories list J. Niemand as living at *Onverwacht*. (Source: Email from Grahame Naude, 28 November 2001. Grahame apologised for poor referencing). Thus the Niemand family (and also the other bywoner family I knew of, Du Toit) had a long tenure on the farm – at least back to 1824 and most likely further back.

What about Roelof Pasman? He was a younger brother of the three Pasman sisters, Margaretha, Catharina and Sibella, as told in our story “The Formidable Pasman Ladies”. There was also another daughter, Roelofina born posthumously after their father, Rudolph Pasman, died. While we know quite a lot about the three older Pasman girls and their mother, Sophia van der Merwe/Pasman/Robberts, I could find nothing about Roelof and Roelofina. If he was up to no good, it is quite possible that his sister Catharina, wife of Philip Morkel, found him a place to stay as a bywoner at *Onverwacht*, the farm she brought into the family. It is not clear what he did wrong – was he simply a weak character that could not make his way in the world – or was it worse? The story I heard hinted that he married a slave. While that may have seemed shocking in the 1950s when the story was told, it was not unusual at the Cape in the early 1700s. (Roelof’s uncle, Wemmer Pasman of the farm *Wemmershoek* was married to a former slave, for example). The mystery remains.

Another snippet may be relevant, or simply a red herring. In the appendix of our story “The Wreck of the *Schonenberg*” Lawrence Green relates:

According to the reporter, the farmer who buried the treasure, had been assisted by a servant named Nicolaas Niemaan and a slave boy. The slave boy had been shot. Niemaan had run away, crossed the colonial frontier and lived among the blacks for many years. Before he died Niemaan had met a white man named Verwey and told him that the treasure had been buried in the orchard behind the Vergelegen homestead.

There are many flaws in the full story by Green, but it is interesting that he comes up with Niemaan. Was this our Niemand? And was he originally Roelof Pasman? We simply do not know, but it makes for some interesting speculation.

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September 2006, updated December 2011.

Sources:

1. Philip William Morkel, 1961. *The Morkels. Family History and Family Tree*. Cape Town. Published Privately.
2. Phillida Brooke Simons, 2003. *Meerlust. 300 Years of Hospitality*. Cape Town. Fernwood Press.
3. Helene Retief Lombard, 2008. *The Chronicles of De Krakeelhoek*. Published privately
4. Peggy Heap, 1970. *The Story of Hottentots Holland*. Cape Town. A.A. Balkema.
5. H.C. Hopkins, 1969. *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Gemeente. Somerset Wes. 1819 – 1969*. Somerset Wes. Kerkraad.
6. David. S. Evans, T.J. Deeming, Betty H. Evans, S. Goldfarb 1969. *Herschel at the Cape. Diaries and Correspondence of Sir John Herschel 1834 – 1838*. Cape Town. A.A. Balkema.
7. A.M Hugo, & J. van der Bijl 1963. *Die Kerk van Stellenbosch*. Kaapstad. Tafelberg Uitgewers.