

The Boom and Bust of Zululand Cotton, 1910-1933

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Abstract: This paper investigates the boom and bust of the largest cotton surge in South African history. It begins by examining the link between the formation of the Union of South Africa and this spike in production, and chronicles how cotton came to figure so centrally within national agricultural priorities. I suggest that cotton emerged as a preferred crop within the Union because it fit within the political and ideological priorities of the new white settler state.

The paper then turns to the abrupt decline of Zululand cotton. Two factors explain the dramatic downturn in production. The first stems from the social relations of production that underpinned these ventures. The Zululand cotton boom was a rushed attempt to use cotton as a means of enticing ill-suited settlers to cultivate a crop most knew precious little about. Cotton's expansion into Zululand was ill conceived and poorly executed: officials and farmers selected unsuitable land, transport was inadequate, the labour supply was intermittent and insufficient. Compounding mistakes in planning and production was the more trenchant issue of ecological incompatibility. I argue that poor agricultural decision-making exacerbated environmental constraints to production, undermining Zululand cotton's fortunes.

In 1925 Zululand cotton growers boasted that they were on the cusp of the greatest yield southern Africa had ever seen. Zululand acreage under cotton had more than doubled every growing season between 1919 and 1924. Yields jumped from just over 800,000 lbs in 1922, to four million lbs in 1923, to six million lbs in 1924, and over eight million lbs in 1925.¹ Growers put over 30,500 acres under cotton during the 1924/25 growing season, accounting for just under half of the 67,500 acres devoted to cotton throughout the Union.²

The two largest ventures propelling this surge were studies in contrast. Candover Estates, the single largest private cotton enterprise in southern Africa, was the brainchild of Richard Rouillard, who had assembled over 36,000 acres located in the lowveld west of the Ubombo Mountains, between the Pongola and Mkuze Rivers. He was convinced this location was ideal for cotton: he praised the high fertility of the soils, the dry conditions during the reaping season, the large yields per acre, the ample labour supply, and the absence of insect pests.

By 1923 Rouillard had achieved profitably high levels of production. Costs of Candover lint for the 1923/24 growing season amounted to eight pence per lb. With yields averaging 300

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¹ *Official Yearbook of the Union of South Africa* 5 (1925).

² *Zululand Times*, 2 April 1925.

lbs per acre, this translated into gross revenues of £15 per acre, and net profits of £7 10 shillings per acre. This, claimed Rouillard, was almost three times greater than the returns secured by the average American producer.³

Candover harvested more than 3,500 bales of cotton in the 1922/23 season, valued at over £40,000.⁴ Good rains fell in spring 1923, which convinced Rouillard to put another 3,000 acres under cotton. Output almost doubled. The planted area reached 16,000 acres one year later, with revenues exceeding £100,000, making it the largest cotton crop ever harvested south of the Zambezi River.⁵ A visiting journalist surveying Candover's fields remarked that there was 'cotton as far as the eye could see'.⁶ Rouillard predicted that revenues for 1925 would exceed £300,000.

Zululand's second largest producer, Ntambanana, was one of a series of settlements designed to provide farming opportunities for soldiers returning from the battlefields of World War One. Over 80,000 acres were designated for settlement in 1917, situated about ten to sixteen kilometres northwest of Empangeni, between the Mhlatuze River to the south and the Mfolozi Game Reserve to the north.⁷ Over three hundred prospective settlers applied. Sixty-two properties were surveyed and allocated in June 1919, all but one to returning soldiers.⁸ Plots averaged between 1,000 and 1,500 acres.

These settlers occupied their plots in time for the 1919/1920 growing season. Most focused initially on mixed farming and grazing along with small plots devoted to sugar cane. However, the promise offered by cattle rearing and sugar were dulled after only a couple of growing seasons. The risks of nagana, the dreaded cattle sickness spread by tsetse fly, had not been adequately communicated to the new settlers.⁹ The disease appeared early in 1920, devastating cattle stocks; over 75 per cent of all cattle died between 1920 and 1922.¹⁰ Compounding this loss was the failure of all sugar planted due to a lack of rain.

Despite these setbacks the Ntambanana settlers persevered. The dry conditions that prevailed during these first few growing seasons convinced most growers that drought-resistant cotton was their most viable option.¹¹ Almost every farmer put between fifty to fifty-five acres under cotton the following growing season. By 1923 over one thousand acres were planted. At picking time, the *Zululand Times* proclaimed that cotton and Ntambanana were now 'synonymous', with yields exceeding those reported from all over the country.¹²

³ R.A. Rouillard, The Development of Northern Natal and Zululand in Relation to Irrigation Farming, Cotton Growing, Coal Mining and the Development of Sodwana Harbour, *South African Geographical Journal* (1925) 21-38.

⁴ *Zululand Times*, 21 June 1923.

⁵ 'Candover Estates', *African Sugar and Cotton Planter* 1, no. 5 (Feb/March 1925) 29/30.

⁶ 'A Visit to the Candover Estates', *The South African Cotton Growers' Journal* (November 1925) 11.

⁷ National Archives of South Africa (hereafter NA), Department of Lands (hereafter LDE-N) Vol. 5 Ref 3/2/1, Land Board Report, September 1913.

⁸ NA, LDE-N, (Ntambanana Valley Lands, hereafter NVL) Vol. 2 Ref 3/2/1, Secretary for Lands to Secretary, League of Returned Soldiers and Sailors, 9 June 1919.

⁹ This omission seems to have been selectively withheld by the relevant authorities. There is significant evidence that local magistrates communicated to the Land Boards the risks that nagana posed to any settlement, but these warnings were swept aside in the rush to open the land for settlement. See for instance, NA, LDE-N NVL Vol. 2 Ref: 3/2/1, Ntambanana Valley Lands, Magistrate, Lower Umfolozi to Chief Surveyor, 13 July 1919. See also S. Brooks, 'Changing Nature: A Critical Historical Geography of the Umfolozi and Hluhwe Game Reserves, 1887-1947', (Ph.D. Thesis, Queen's University, 2001).

¹⁰ NA, LDE-N NVL Vol. 3 Ref 3/2, Ntambanana Farmers' Association to Land Board, n.d.

¹¹ NA, LDE-N NVL Vol. 2 Ref: 3/2/1, Ntambanana Report, 6 December 1920.

¹² *Zululand Times*, 5 April 1923.

Zululand's cotton fortunes appeared unstoppable, spurred by leading producers at Candover and Ntambanana, as well as a multitude of smaller scale growers seeking to emulate these successes. But everything changed in 1925. Over the next three years average cotton yields across Zululand declined by more than 80 per cent. Yields at Candover dropped from a high of 300 lbs per acre in 1922/23, to less than 80 lbs per acre in 1924/25, and less than 48 lbs per acre in 1926/27.¹³ Costs ballooned to £16 per lb in 1925/26, and £22 per lb in 1926/27. In 1927 the meager cotton crop was not even picked, as it was 'too poor to warrant the expense'.¹⁴ The operation's debt reached a staggering £275,000 before being liquidated in 1930.¹⁵

Farmers at Ntambanana experienced similar declines. Average yields declined from 410 lbs per acre in 1923/24 to under 257 lbs per acre in 1927/28.¹⁶ Stock and crop losses amounted to over £38,000 annually.¹⁷ Average debts ballooned from £400 per settler in 1921 to over £2,000 per settler in 1931.¹⁸ The settlement was abandoned in 1933.

This paper investigates the boom and bust of this cotton surge. My argument has two strands. First, I examine the link between the formation of the Union of South Africa and this spike in production, and seek to explain how cotton came to figure so centrally within national agricultural priorities. I suggest that a new culture of expertise fuelled enthusiasm for cotton during these years. The Zululand cotton boom was impelled by a particularly nationalistic, modernist vision for agricultural production that stressed a discourse of progress, improvement, and technocratic optimism. The nation's new cotton experts furthered political support for their cause by tying cotton's expansion to the Union's ideological priorities: elevating poor, white farmers, while simultaneously suppressing black labour. I contend that cotton emerged as a preferred crop within the Union because it fit well with the political and ideological priorities of the white settler state.

The second part of the paper focuses on the abrupt decline of Zululand's cotton fortunes. Two factors explain this dramatic downturn. The first stems from the social relations of production that underpinned these cotton ventures. The Zululand cotton boom was a rushed attempt to use cotton as a means of enticing ill-suited settlers to cultivate a crop most knew precious little about. Cotton's expansion into Zululand was ill conceived and poorly executed: officials and farmers selected unsuitable land, transport was inadequate, the labour supply was intermittent and insufficient. The two most successful modes of production – large, privately-owned plantations such as Candover Estates and hastily planned settlements for returning soldiers such as Ntambanana – failed in large part because of these logistical shortcomings.

Compounding mistakes in planning and production was the more trenchant issue of ecological incompatibility. Cotton experts heralded Zululand as a perfect environment for cotton based on experiments suggesting that the crop would thrive in its warm, dry climate. Yet ecological obstacles to production, in the form of erratic precipitation and insect pests, played significant a role in torpedoing the Zululand cotton boom. Floods in 1925, followed by

¹³ NA, Department of Commerce and Industries (hereafter RHN) Vol. 1127 Ref 111/5/2, Board of Trade and Industries, Report on Costs of Production of Cotton in the Union of South Africa, 20 April 1928.

¹⁴ *Zululand Times*, 3 November 1927.

¹⁵ National Library of South Africa (hereafter NLSA), Select Committee on Irrigation Matters, Testimony of James Sommerville, Secretary for Lands, 4 May 1932.

¹⁶ Ntambanana Agricultural Cooperative Society, Annual Meeting, *Zululand Times*, 11 October 1928. See also NA, RHN Vol. 1127 Ref: 111/5/2, Board of Trade and Industries: Report on Costs of Production of Cotton in the Union of SA, 20 April 1928.

¹⁷ NA, LDE-N NVL Vol. 4 Ref 3/2, Ntambanana Lands, Extract from *The Farmer*, n.d.

¹⁸ NA, LDE-N NVL Vol. 2 Ref 3/2/1, List of Holdings and Expenditures, n.d.

successive drought years in 1926 and 1927, devastated output and morale. Insect pests thrived, eating into yields and profits. Poor agricultural decision-making exacerbated these environmental obstacles: cotton planted on sloped land was easily washed away by floods, cotton monocropped over thousands of acres was more susceptible to insect damage.

I conclude by comparing Zululand's failure with more successful contemporary ventures elsewhere on the continent. Those regimes that were able to achieve large-scale cotton production can be grouped into three categories: peasant production where African producers controlled their labour and the means of production, peasant production where Africans were compelled to grow cotton by force, and large cotton plantations that combined conscripted labour with modern agricultural equipment. I argue that such cotton schemes succeeded because they were better able to manage this relationship between growing conditions and production regimes.

South Africa's Cotton Potential

The formation of the Union of South Africa was first and foremost about unifying the two groups of white settlers, British and Afrikaner, in order to better control and exploit the African population.¹⁹ The Union's new government ministries reflected this ideological commitment. Agriculture especially emerged transformed within the new Union. Previous to 1910 each of the four South African colonies managed its own autonomous experimentation program, which revolved around the activities of the provincial agricultural college. In 1911, these scattered networks of experimentation were amalgamated and consolidated within the Union's new Department of Agriculture to form a single national network administered from the centre out.²⁰ The 1910s and 20s became crucial decades for state intervention in white agriculture, especially in the provision of capital and credit, the dissemination of improved methods and techniques, and the subsidisation of inputs. This substantial state intervention caused the total value of agricultural output on South African farms to jump from £29 million in 1911 to nearly £200 million in 1948.²¹

Cotton occupied a central position within this new vision of agriculture, signaled by the establishment of the Tobacco and Cotton Division. The head of this new division, William Scherffius, would become the most famous cotton man in the Union. Scherffius had been pried away from his position as the head of the Kentucky Experiment Station and charged with expanding South African cotton cultivation, which was stagnating at a lowly thirty bales when he arrived in 1909.

Scherffius initiated his tenure with a comprehensive set of experiments designed to gauge cotton's compatibility with South Africa's climatic conditions. He denigrated the lack of precision in previous cultivation efforts, arguing that farmers possessed only 'a limited knowledge of the best methods of procedure in the production of quality and quantity'.²² He

¹⁹ B.M. Magubane, *The Making of a Racist State: British Imperialism and the Union of South Africa, 1875-1910*, (Trenton, African World Press Inc., 1996) .

²⁰ See S. Dubow, *A Commonwealth of Knowledge: Science, Sensibility and White South Africa, 1820-2000*, (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2006) , particularly Chapter 4 on *Science and South Africanism*.

²¹ A. Jeeves, J. Crush, Introduction, in: A. Jeeves, J. Crush (Eds), *White Farms, Black Labor: The State and Agrarian Change in Southern Africa, 1910-50*, (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 1997) 1-28. See also T. Keegan, Crisis and Catharsis in the Development of Capitalism in South African Agriculture, *African Affairs* 84 (1985) 371-398.

²² W.H. Scherffius, J.P. du Oosthuizen, *Cotton in South Africa*, (Pretoria, Central News Agency, 1924) .

sought to overcome this by establishing experiments into all elements of cotton cultivation: seed selection, land preparation methods, insect control, replanting options. His aim was to maximise yields and his evaluation criteria reflected this: he tested for plant size, number of bolls, pounds of lint per acre, total estimated value. The results of these tests were then made quickly and widely available to planters throughout the Union via a range of agricultural publications.²³

Scherffius' experiments revealed that successful cotton cultivation was primarily correlated with heat exposure and inversely related to damage from wind and frost. To maximise returns, Scherffius recommended focusing cultivation in the northern parts of the country where temperatures were milder. He was especially enthused about the possibilities in Zululand. He estimated that over 80 per cent of the region was suitable for cotton.²⁴ Zululand was free of the frost and flash storms that plagued planting further south in Natal. Rainfall was limited but evenly distributed, estimated to be between 18 and 20 inches annually. Scherffius predicted a profit of over £8 for every acre put under cotton in Zululand.

Scherffius' enthusiasm about the possibilities for cotton production in Zululand was contagious. Broadsheets began to carry editorials praising the area's climate as 'singularly suitable to cotton growing'.²⁵ Speculators bragged about the lack of insect damage, and the enthusiasm with which shipments of Zululand cotton were being received in Liverpool. Acreage under cotton jumped from 250 acres in 1917 to 500 acres in 1918 to 4,000 acres in 1919.²⁶

Scherffius' cotton agenda reflected the modernist agricultural discourse that dominated in the early twentieth-century. His agents were the nation's new experts: providing information that was centralised, standardised, and disseminated widely to growers, connecting them with the centre. These agents spoke a language of progress, improvement, and an increasing reliance on the state as the primary determinant of agrarian change.²⁷ South African science became inextricably tied with the emergence of a white national consciousness and was crucial in giving shape to this vision: as Karen Brown has argued, 'the creation of a professional scientific elite was an important component in the construction of a white Anglo-Afrikaner 'South Africanist' identity'.²⁸ The science of cotton cultivation became interwoven with the political ideals of the new South African state.

Other agricultural branches were similarly transformed by the new culture of expertise. The work and objectives of the nation's new entomologists, for instance, were determined largely by the state's growing centralising and supervisory priorities. These experts successfully campaigned for more legislation and regulatory controls to convert all farmers to their improved methods, so that 'science...underpinned and legitimised an expansion in state powers'.²⁹ Veterinary science was similarly transformed: government experts used pastoral regulations to

²³ Publications included *Official Yearbook of the Union* (first published in 1917), *Journal of the Department of Agriculture* (1920), *South African Cotton Growers' Journal* (1925), and *Farming in South Africa* (1926).

²⁴ W.H. Scherffius, 'Tobacco and Cotton', *Journal of the Department of Agriculture* IV (1922) 394.

²⁵ *Zululand Times*, 11 October 1923.

²⁶ *Official Yearbook of the Union of South Africa* 4 (1920).

²⁷ T.J. Keegan, *Rural Transformations in Industrializing South Africa: the Southern Highveld to 1914*, (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1987) and Jeeves and Crush, 'Introduction'.

²⁸ K. Brown, Tropical Medicine and Animal Diseases: Onderstepoort and the Development of Veterinary Science in South Africa 1908–1950 *Journal of Southern African Studies* 31 (2005) 523, referring to the contributions of Saul Dubow, particularly his book *A Commonwealth of Knowledge*.

²⁹ K. Brown, Political Entomology: the Insectile Challenge to Agricultural Development in the Cape Colony, 1895–1910, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29 (2003) 548.

increase state intervention in rural livelihoods.³⁰ Within the realm of conservation more generally, William Beinart argues that science became inextricably linked with the nation's social and economic agenda: science became a means of advancing the twin priorities of white domination and segregation.³¹

Cotton experts similarly seized upon the state's ideological priorities to advance their agricultural enterprise. The most pressing social issue facing the new Union was that of the 'poor whites', the swelling class of Afrikaner farmers who had been abandoning rural areas since the 1880s. Their numbers spiked after the turn of the century, as thousands more left their farms and migrated to the cities in search of work. These uneducated, impoverished whites were left to compete for work with the non-white urban population. Many barely eked out livings.³² Their plight became a major concern for the South African state: officials worried about poor whites mixing with non-whites in these crowded cities and blurring the boundaries of racial distinction. The state was committed to safeguarding their position relative to non-whites.

Scherffius used the poor white problem to advance his own agenda by championing cotton as the ideal crop to empower the low-capital, low-input grower. Scherffius was confident that any white farmer could make a good living on 25 to 100 acres of South African cotton land with minimal start-up capital.³³ He drew, frequently, on the example of the United States, in which cotton was the primary earner for hundreds of poor white families with smallholdings. The state's resources were needed to capitalise on cotton's potential and solve the poor white problem: 'If a plan could be devised, embracing...the settlement of suitable crown lands of the country, with cotton growers, the cotton industry would make tremendous strides, bringing wealth into the country and helping to settle the problem that has given the Government so much worry'. Cotton was the nation's most promising means of converting this 'state liability into an asset'.³⁴

Scherffius was equally convinced about the racial roles required for successful cultivation: cotton needed the white man to supervise and the black man to labour. The subjugation of African labour would give South Africa a comparative advantage over other producers. Scherffius boasted, 'think of what it would mean to this country if the latent energy of the black race was turned into account in South African cotton fields'.³⁵ While American growers had to pay as much as six or eight shillings per 100 lbs of harvested cotton, South African growers needed only pay three shillings for their black labour.³⁶ It was left to white South Africans to pocket the difference.

Under Scherffius's leadership the national Department of Agriculture heralded a new era in South African cotton cultivation. This push for cotton was tied to the emergence of a new coordinated, centralised agricultural infrastructure. Cotton was an enticing commodity because

³⁰ K. Brown, *Tropical Medicine and Animal Diseases: Onderstepoort and the Development of Veterinary Science in South Africa 1908–1950* *Journal of Southern African Studies* 31 (2005) 513-529.

³¹ W. Beinart, *The Rise of Conservation in South Africa: Settlers, Livestock, and the Environment, 1770-1950*, (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2003) .

³² For more see 'The Carnegie Commission of Investigation on the Poor White Question in South Africa', *The Poor White Problem in South Africa*, Vol. 1-5 (Stellenbosch, 1932); R. Morrell (Ed), *White but Poor: Essays on the History of Poor Whites in Southern Africa, 1880-1940*, Pretoria, 1992; S. Trapido, Landlord and Tenant in a Colonial Economy: the Transvaal 1880-1910, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 5 (1978) 26-58.

³³ W.H. Scherffius, 'Union Cotton', *African Sugar and Cotton Planter* 1 (Feb/March 1925) 9-12.

³⁴ Scherffius and Oosthuizen, *Cotton in South Africa*, 37

³⁵ W.H. Scherffius, 'Cotton', *Agricultural Journal of South Africa*, 3 (1912) 604.

³⁶ 'Cotton', *Natal Sugar and Cotton Planter* (Jan 1925) 11.

its cultivation regime mirrored the racial roles that whites were attempting to carve out within the Union. Cotton was a means of uplifting the white agricultural sector and constraining the black; it fit perfectly with the ideological priorities of the new South African state.

The Zululand Cotton Boom

Scherffius focused on Zululand as the centerpiece of South African cotton production. Interest in Zululand's agricultural potential had been on the rise since the 1880s. Natal's expanding settler population and the dearth of suitable land within the colony (due to holdings by absentee landlords, a burgeoning Indian peasantry and the presence of African Reserves) turned many eyes north toward the agriculturally promising land beyond the Thukela River. Successive invasions and British military victories had weakened the Zulu Kingdom. Following their 1879 victory at the Battle of Ulundi, which effectively ended the Anglo-Zulu War, the British steadily expanded their control over the Zulu people and their land. Zululand was declared a British Reserve territory in May 1887, and then officially incorporated into the colony of Natal on 29 December 1897. White settlement continued to proceed slowly, though, as administrators resisted calls to open large tracts of Zululand to white settlers.³⁷

Demands that Zululand be opened for settlement reached a crescendo following the end of the South African War in 1902. The Zululand Delimitation Commission was established to set aside Reserve land for Africans, and to appropriate the remainder as Crown Land, which could then be opened up to white agriculture. More than 2.6 million acres were allocated for settlement, while 3.8 million acres were set aside as Reserves.³⁸ Twenty-one Reserves were established, mostly in the north and west, where malaria and marginal agricultural potential made land less enticing to white settlers. Almost all the superior agricultural land ended up in white hands.³⁹ The land most heavily desired by whites was in the more accessible southern sections of the territory near Eshowe, St. Lucia, and Richards Bay; here large tracts were thrown open for settlement. The Natal Land Board oversaw the allotment of these lands to eligible settlers: over 300,000 acres were distributed between 1904 and 1914, almost all of them in Zululand's coastal and southern regions.⁴⁰

Land settlement in Zululand was further accelerated by the Union-wide Land Act (No. 12) of 1913. Couched in terms of progress and development, the Land Act was effectively a land grab, ostensibly intended to free up under-utilised land for settlement, but actually a means of expropriating land designated for African use.⁴¹ The Act forbade the payment of rents in cash or crops by black tenants, allowing payment only as labour service. It also prohibited African ownership of land beyond designated Reserves, leaving only about seven per cent of South

³⁷ For the reasons behind this resistance see S. Brooks, *Changing Nature: A Critical Historical Geography of the Umfolozi and Hluhluwe Game Reserves, 1887-1947*, *History*, Kingston, 2001, 134-137.

³⁸ S. Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion: The 1906-8 Disturbances in Natal*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1970) 126.

³⁹ A.S. MacKinnon, *The Impact of European Land Delimitation and Expropriation on Zululand, 1880-1920*, 1990.

⁴⁰ A.J. Christopher, *The Crown Lands of British South Africa, 1853-1914*, (Kingston, The Limestone Press, 1984) .

⁴¹ T. Keegan, *Rural Transformations in Industrializing South Africa: The Southern Highveld to 1914*, (London, The MacMillan Press Ltd, 1987) 183.

Africa's land available to the nation's African population. This legislation allowed Zululand settlers to evict thousands of Africans from their lands, to seize their cattle, and to consolidate monopoly control over both land and labour.

Almost all white farmers who settled in Zululand before 1910 made sugar their primary crop. Growing conditions on newly opened lands within fifteen kilometres of the coast, marked by warm temperatures and high humidity, were ideal for cane sugar. The area under cane expanded five-fold in less than a decade, from 2,000 acres in 1908 to over 10,000 in 1917.⁴² Wealthy Natalians also invested significant amounts of capital in mills to process the cane during the second decade of the century.⁴³ South African sugar production ballooned from 82,000 tons in 1910 to just under 200,000 tons in 1919, due mostly to the industry's expansion into Zululand.⁴⁴

In the 1920s the South African sugar industry stalled due to global overproduction (especially in Cuba, but also in Java and Mauritius), which triggered declining prices. Zululand producers were also affected by the expansion of sugar production in southern Mozambique, which held a comparative advantage in supplying Transvaal markets. South African sugar production dipped from 190,000 tons in 1919 to 142,000 in 1920, the first decline in more than a decade.⁴⁵ As a result, prices offered to South African growers slumped from £46 per ton in 1920 to £29 per ton in 1921.

Efforts to arrest this decline created a deep schism within the Union's agricultural sector. Sugar millers and growers persuaded the government to increase the duty on imported sugar from £3 10 shillings to £4 10 shillings per ton, to provide domestic producers with greater protection from the competition of foreign growers.⁴⁶ Increased in subsequent decades, this protective tariff succeeded in insulating South African markets: sugar imports declined from 32,000 tons in 1910 to under 2,000 tons in 1938.⁴⁷

The geographical isolation of the sugar industry and the cozy relationship its most prominent leaders enjoyed with members of the government made it an easy target for critics. Many were angry at such significant government intervention directed at an industry that benefited so few. Zululand broadsheets were constantly on the defensive, shielding sugar from those who decried the government's price protection: they pointed to similar duties on tobacco, maize, and potatoes, which escaped criticism because these crops were grown by a larger number of South African farmers. They denounced the 'significant antagonism' leveled at the industry by other agricultural sectors.⁴⁸ The sense of isolation that grew from these struggles intensified the efforts of Zululand producers to find an agricultural staple that would give them common cause with farmers in other parts of the nation. Embracing cotton, a crop that was being adopted in both the Transvaal and the Cape, offered an opportunity to deflect some of the criticism directed

⁴² For more on sugar's expansion see A. Jeeves, Sugar and Gold in the Making of the South African Labour System: The Crisis of Supply of the Zululand Sugar Estates, *The South African Journal of Economic History* 7 (1992) 7-33, and A.d.V. Minaar, Labour Supply Problems of the Zululand Sugar Planters, 1905-1939, *Journal of Natal and Zulu History* 12 (1989) 53-72.

⁴³ The largest, Hulett and Sons, invested more than £500 000 in Zululand during the decade. See D. Lincoln, An Ascendant Sugarocracy: Natal's Millers-Cum-Planters, 1905-1939, *Journal of Natal and Zulu History* 11 (1988) 1-39.

⁴⁴ *The South African Sugar Year Book and General Directory* (1930/31) 173.

⁴⁵ African Sugar Association, '1930/31', *Sugar Year Book and General Directory* (1930/31) 173.

⁴⁶ For a thorough account of the government's intervention in the sugar industry see Lincoln, 'An Ascendant Sugarocracy', 7-9.

⁴⁷ Jeeves and Crush, 'Introduction', 6.

⁴⁸ *Zululand Times*, 11 May, 1922.

at the sugar industry. By 1923 the *Zululand Times* was calling for the replacement of sugar with cotton.⁴⁹

The sugar industry was increasingly controlled by big capital, in the form of a handful of wealthy sugar barons. The increased capital demanded by the expansion into Zululand allowed these individuals to extend their influence even further, as they consolidated their operations along the coast, from southern Natal to Mozambique. Through the 1920s and 30s, more and more independent white growers were bought out by large milling operations: between 1926 and 1934, consolidated estates increased their output by 110 per cent, while independent planters increased their output by only 47 per cent.⁵⁰ The monopolistic structure of ownership and increasing concentration of corporate capital and control has led one historian to dub the privileged entrepreneurs who dominated the industry a ‘sugarocracy’.⁵¹

In contrast, cotton farming fostered communalism. Cotton was farmed by many poor, diffuse growers who had few resources to offset the risks posed by poor seasons or fluctuating prices. Many decided to pool their resources in an effort to minimise these risks and consolidate their market position.⁵² Cotton cooperatives gained increasing popularity in the early 1920s. By and large they sought to ensure that farmers got fair prices for their crops, to increase their opportunities to obtain credit, and to provide accurate information regarding the grade and quality of each member’s crop. These local cooperatives were amalgamated into the Zululand Cooperative Cotton Association in 1924, with its headquarters in Empangeni.⁵³ Scattered and disparate cotton growers were united within one organisation committed to advancing the position of the small, independent producer.

Led by Scherffius, proponents of cotton cultivation championed the crop as the people’s choice, a commodity in the service of the nation’s poor, white underclass. One expert exalted cotton farming as a payable proposition for the man of limited means: ‘cotton gives a quicker return than sugar and requires less capital’. Any grower with two hundred acres could, according to this account, bank on an annual profit of between £800 and £1,000.⁵⁴ This allegiance with the plight of working whites was anathema to the dynastic sugar barons, and further buoyed cotton’s standing relative to sugar.

Cotton’s reputation as an ally of the working class was cemented by the critical role it played in buoying the fortunes of Zululand’s soldier-settlements, the epitome of state sponsored communalism. The urgency that had driven framers of the Land Act to expropriate African lands intensified with the return of soldiers following World War One. New settlements were established to reward military men for their service overseas. Ntambanana, established in 1919, was the first soldier settlement in Zululand, followed soon after by Hlhuhlwe, Mkuze, Nkwaleni,

⁴⁹ *Zululand Times*, 4 January 1923.

⁵⁰ F.J.V. Biljon, *State Interference in South Africa*, (Westminster, P.S. King and Son Ltd, 1939), 146.

⁵¹ Lincoln, ‘An Ascendant Sugarocracy’.

⁵² *Zululand Times*, 21 January 1921 and 26 January 1922. The Union government subsidised the creation of cooperative societies as part of its broader strategy to aid the fortunes of small white farmers. The national Land Bank, established in 1912, heavily financed agricultural cooperatives. The Cooperatives Act of 1922 cemented this commitment leading to the rapid establishment of cooperative mills, dairies, grain elevators and wineries through the 1920s and 30s.

⁵³ Soon after the Cooperative purchased a plot of eighteen acres of Crown Land adjacent to the railway line, with the intent of erecting a ginnery to process its members’ cotton crop. See NA, Uitvoerende Raad (hereafter URU) Vol. 1041 Ref 611, Issue of Crown Grant to the Zululand Coop Cotton Association in Respect of Holding Known as Lot 18, Empangeni Rail, 1923. See also *Zululand Times*, 31 January 1924.

⁵⁴ *Zululand Times*, 5 February 1924.

and Magudu.⁵⁵ Nearly all of these returning settlements relied primarily on cotton production, bolstering Scherffius' portrayal of cotton as an ally of the common man.

This nationalistic, centralized vision for agriculture, buoyed by racial subtexts and a desire to shift away from a dependence on sugar production, ushered in South Africa's greatest cotton expansion of the 20th century. Zululand acreage under cotton more than doubled in every growing season between 1919 and 1924. Cultivators across northern Natal and Zululand prepared record acreages in 1925: the area under cultivation in Vryheid was 50% greater than in the previous year; Eshowe was up by 117%, Alexandra by 75%. Scherffius predicted that Zululand's output would increase by more than 200 per cent in 1925.⁵⁶ Another expert predicted cotton would soon yield revenues of £10 million a year, and would overtake the gold mines as the nation's leading revenue generator.⁵⁷ None were prepared for the devastation that was to follow.

The Zululand Cotton Bust

Everything changed in 1925. Production levels dipped sharply throughout Zululand. Initial estimates placed these at only 30 per cent, but they eventually spiraled to more than 80 per cent. Many farmers replanted in 1926 and 1927, but losses continued to escalate. Debts mounted as yields plummeted by more than half.⁵⁸ The suffering experienced by the region's cotton farmers was depicted in biblical terms: according to an editorial published in the *Zululand Times*, 'the ten historical plagues of Egypt pale in significance before the chapter of afflictions this district has been called upon to suffer'.⁵⁹

The second half of the paper evaluates the major factors that precipitated the dramatic drop in cotton production. First, I investigate the role ecological factors played in causing this dramatic collapse, especially uneven precipitation and insect pests. Then I examine logistical failures related to poor planning, land selection, labour and transport. Finally, I integrate accounts prepared by two contemporary experts, which underscore how these two sets of failures – ecological and logistical – combined to undermine the Zululand cotton boom.

The 1924 to 1927 growing seasons were plagued by difficult conditions. Rains arrived early in the spring of 1924, and fell steadily during October and November. Seed was planted soon after and successful germination was widely reported. But expectations were doused in early March. On March 10th, storms brought six inches of rain to parts of Zululand. A relentless, heavy downpour continued for the next ten days. Precipitation records were set across Natal and Zululand. The local newspaper reported that Zululand was reduced to 'one big mud puddle'.⁶⁰

The timing of the rains was particularly disastrous for the 1925 cotton crop. Early rains had encouraged early planting, so that much of the crop had already matured when the floods hit. Bolls were washed away, dirtied, stained, soiled. Barely any cotton was fit to harvest. The *Zululand Times* summed up the extent of the devastation: 'At Nkwaleni, at Ntambanana, on the

⁵⁵ By the end of 1918, approximately 531 soldiers had been settled on 860,000 acres across South Africa. K. Fedorowich, *Unfit for Heroes: reconstruction and Soldier Settlement in the Empire Between the Wars* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1995).

⁵⁶ W.H. Scherffius, 'On Union Cotton', *African Sugar and Cotton Planter* 1, no.5 (Feb/March 1925) 9-12.

⁵⁷ 'The Lure of Cotton', *Natal Sugar and Cotton Planter* (October 1924) 11.

⁵⁸ *Zululand Times*, 10 September 1925.

⁵⁹ *Zululand Times*, 15 March 1928.

⁶⁰ *Zululand Times*, 19 March 1925.

Hluhluwe and up in the remote parts of Mkuze...men of our race have watched their lands, sodden with water, gradually give up the bright promise of the early season and vanish in a sea of mud'.⁶¹

Estimates of the flood's damage swelled as the extent of the devastation became clear. Initial losses were placed at less than 30 per cent of the total crop, though this was soon revealed as a significant underestimate; within days, losses were said to exceed 40 per cent.⁶² All roads in northern Zululand were impassable through April and May, preventing farmers from transporting the small amount of cotton that survived the floods to market. Once the territory had dried out, it became clear that the flood had destroyed almost 90 per cent of the crop.⁶³ Final tallies provided by the Zululand Cooperative Cotton Association record revenues of £161 for the 1924/25 season, down from an expected £770. That puts the financial loss at just under 80 per cent.⁶⁴

Despite this setback, hopes remained high for the 1925/26 season. The losses of 1924/25 were dismissed as an anomalous variability in rains that could not be repeated. Early in the 1925/26 season there was a prevailing sense that the worst had passed: 'the weather has up to present been so favourable that even the most pessimistic of our agriculturalists brightened up and began to think that better days were ahead'.⁶⁵ As they had been the previous year, rains were plentiful through the planting season. But they stopped abruptly in the new year. A heat wave began in late December 1925 and continued through the summer months. Little rain fell in the first two months of 1926, which are typically the wettest: fewer than four inches were recorded in most parts of the province in January and February.⁶⁶ When rains finally arrived in mid-March, most of Zululand received less than three inches, too little to allow crops to recover.

Output was severely affected by the drought. The lack of rain hampered germination (successful germination requires water immediately after planting) leaving a poor, thin stand. The plants that grew matured quite well, revealing plenty of buds; however the lack of good rains in January caused many to fall before they developed bolls. Many of the bolls that grew failed to open properly. One cotton farmer observed:

Judging from my own farm the worst effect of the drought was the bad germination of the seed, leaving a poor stand of plant. Once established the plants have come on fairly well and you see now quite presentable cotton fields as the plants are concerned but the yield is poor. The plants are full of buds but when maturing lots of the bolls either drop off or are so damaged by bollworms that they do not open up properly.⁶⁷

Yield and quality suffered accordingly. Growers throughout Zululand reported difficulties in finding buyers for their poor, wilted crop. Most of the cotton that was harvested sold at rock-bottom prices of between and 0.5 pence and 3.75 pence per lb.⁶⁸

⁶¹ *Zululand Times*, 2 April 1925.

⁶² *Zululand Times*, 19 March 1925 and 2 April 1925.

⁶³ *Zululand Times*, 17 December 1925.

⁶⁴ Zululand Cooperative Cotton Association, Annual Meeting, *Zululand Times*, 10 July 1926.

⁶⁵ *Zululand Times*, 12 March 1925.

⁶⁶ *Zululand Times*, 18 February 1926 and 11 March 1926.

⁶⁷ Hluhluwe Annual General Meeting, *Zululand Times*, 10 June 1926. See also NA, Department of Entomology (hereafter CEN) Vol. 689 Ref E7638, Tobacco and Cotton Expert, Eshowe, Zululand, Powell to C. Haines, Entomologist, 23 March 1926.

⁶⁸ *Zululand Times*, 10 June 1926.

Dry conditions persisted through the 1926/27 growing season. Rains were very light in August and September, delaying plowing. When they finally arrived in late October, planting proceeded in hope that the crop would compensate for the past two seasons of disappointment. But again the clouds refused to yield. A grower at Mtubatuba complained: ‘hot dry winds are the order of the day, and the crops and grass are scorched, despair has taken the place of anxiety. The sprouts are dry and this in the middle of the wet season’.⁶⁹ Further north at Hluhluwe cotton prospects were equally bleak: ‘the terrible drought still continues here, and though the rain which fell at the end of December has improved the veld from its state a month ago, the outlook for crops...is very black indeed’.⁷⁰ Extreme heat exacerbated these difficulties, causing plants to wilt and inhibiting future growth.

When rains arrived late in March they came in short violent bursts, just as the cotton crop was at full boll. Eshowe received just over 14 inches of rain and Empangeni 11 inches between 24 and 31 March. Nkwaleni reported over four inches in just one night. Much of the cotton was washed away. Other stands were so dirty and wet they were unpickable.

The heavy rains also catalysed jassids – a small winged leafhopper that breeds on the underside of the leaf – which were particularly damaging with the cotton at full boll. Zululand growers had first noticed a link between wet, cloudy weather, and insect attacks more than five years ago. Few were surprised when jassid attacks spiked following the flood. Jassids began making their appearance immediately after the rains, and serious outbreaks were reported from all corners of Zululand, including Hluhluwe, Nongoma, and Ntambanana.⁷¹ Cotton bollworm, another major pest, also caused heavy losses: growers at the Mkuze soldier-settlement reported losses of up to 75 per cent due to bollworm; those further north at Ndumo complained of losses exceeding 80 per cent.⁷² There were so many insects on the plants that one farmer remarked the entire colour of his field was changed from a ‘lovely green colour to a rusty red’.⁷³ The Tobacco and Cotton Division estimated that 60 per cent of crop losses in the 1924/25 season were due to insect pests.⁷⁴

Ntambanana was hit particularly hard by this combination of flood, drought and insects. After suffering huge losses from nagana and the repeated failures of the sugar crop, many Ntambanana settlers mortgaged their holdings to plant as much cotton as possible in hope of a bumper crop in 1924/25. When the rivers flooded, dozens of holdings were almost completely wiped out: J. MacMahon, on Lot 236, had expected 150 bales prior to the flood and ended up reaping only 30. R.C. Lyle, on Lot 239, saw his expected yield drop from 98 bales down to eight. W.M. Shepstone on Lot 240 saw his crop plummet from an expected 95 bales to three. C.V. Tustin, on Lot 247, harvested seven bales after investing upwards of £375 in the cultivation

⁶⁹ *Zululand Times*, 23 December 1926.

⁷⁰ *Zululand Times*, 29 July 1927.

⁷¹ NA, CEN Vol. 689 Ref E7638, Tobacco and Cotton Expert, Eshowe, Zululand, General, Powell to C. Haines, Entomologist, Pretoria, 23 March 1926.

⁷² NA, Board of Trade (hereafter RHN) Vol. 1591 Ref 600/92, Board of Trade and Industries Report #92, The Cotton Growing Industry with a Minority Report on the Proposed Stabilization of Cotton Prices by Mr. FJ Fahey, 1929.

⁷³ *Zululand Times*, 24 March 1927. See also President’s Report, Hluhluwe Farmers’ Association, Annual General Meeting 1926, *Zululand Times*, 10 June 1926.

⁷⁴ NA, Department of Agriculture (hereafter LBD) Vol. 4044 Ref QC15, The Role of Government Entomologists, Memo to the Director of the Field and Animal Husbandry from the Department of Agriculture, Tobacco and Cotton Division, 18 August 1925.

of his 75 acres in expectation of harvesting near 100 bales.⁷⁵ Only 700 of the 7,000 acres planted during this growing season were ever picked.

Farmers became mired in debt: of the 46 who remained in 1926, only 13 (28%) were able to pay back even £1 towards their debts. 1927 was slightly better, as 22 of the farmers (48%) made partial debt repayments. Twenty farmers (43%) were unable to make a contribution in either year.⁷⁶ Average debts ballooned from £400 per settler in 1921 to over £2,000 per settler in 1931.⁷⁷

The final tally of the cotton crash was devastating. Yields collapsed from a zenith of 11.6 million lbs in 1926 to less than 100,000 lbs by 1932.⁷⁸ By 1933 there were fewer than one hundred acres under cotton in all of Zululand. One year later cotton had all but disappeared from Zululand farms.

Explaining Cotton's Collapse

Various explanations were put forward to explain this dramatic collapse. Many farmers blamed the downturn on the inadequacies of African labour. The Zululand cotton industry was crucially predicated on the sustained availability of a low-wage seasonal labour force. However, Africans living in nearby Reserves were routinely enticed by higher wages and better working conditions offered by the gold mines at the Witwatersrand.⁷⁹ Cotton growers fretted constantly about the intermittent stream of labour to their fields. They became increasingly vocal in their opposition to recruitment firms enticing labourers from the Zululand Reserves into the gold mines, suggesting that such labour should rightfully be theirs.

Desertion was another problem. Growers claimed that labour accounted for more than 85 per cent of their costs during the height of the cotton boom, due primarily to the high proportion of worker abandonment.⁸⁰ Many of these cotton growers were relying heavily on recruitment from outside Zululand, primarily Mozambique, at significant cost. Growers complained that they lost over half of their recruited labour to desertion.⁸¹ As the President of the Hluhluwe Farmer's Association observed wryly, 'the cheap labour is expensive when three-quarters run away'.⁸² Growers lobbied for heavier fines to curtail this practice.

Many expressed dissatisfaction with the national government's inability, or seeming unwillingness, to secure a reliable African labour force for the cotton fields.⁸³ Some growers demanded that the recently enacted Pass Laws be strengthened, to further constrain African

⁷⁵ NA, LDE-N NVL Vol. 2 Ref 3/2/1, Ntambanana Valley Lands, Report by Cotton Experts upon Visit to Ntambanana to Secretary of Lands, 7 July 1924.

⁷⁶ NA, LDE-N NVL Vol. 3 Ref: 3/2, Ntambanana Valley Lands, Debt Repayment, n.d.

⁷⁷ NA, LDE-N NVL Vol. 2 Ref 3/2/1, List of Holdings and Expenditures, n.d.

⁷⁸ *Official Yearbook of the Union of South Africa* 17 (1935).

⁷⁹ Africans testifying before the Native Farm Labour Commission in October 1937 stated that they opted for work in the gold mines because of higher wages and superior work regiments. Lincoln, 'Settlement and Servitude in Zululand'. Jeeves estimates that during the 1920s wages at the gold mines were more than double those offered for agricultural work in Zululand. See A. Jeeves, *Sugar and Gold in the Making of the South African Labour System: The Crisis of Supply of the Zululand Sugar Estates*, *The South African Journal of Economic History* 7 (1992) 7-33.

⁸⁰ *Zululand Times*, 11 November 1926.

⁸¹ Minaar, 'Labour Supply Problems'.

⁸² *Zululand Times*, 6 June 1926.

⁸³ See for instance editorials in the *Zululand Times*, 19 February 1925, 23 July 1925, 6 August 1925, and 18 February 1926.

movement and force a greater proportion of the local population into the local labour force.⁸⁴ Others favoured the establishment of a central recruiting agency modeled on the Native Recruiting Corporation of the Witwatersrand, which had been so successful in securing labour for the gold mines.⁸⁵ Still others suggested importing Africans en masse from neighbouring Mozambique, or the wholesale recruitment of child labourers.

Labour concerns were most pressing at Candover Estates. Historian David Lincoln has shown that Candover suffered labour shortages from its inception, despite being situated at the confluence of the major migrant labour routes bringing Tsonga workers south from Mozambique, and being surrounded by Native Reserves on all sides. Candover was forced to compete directly with better-coordinated and better-funded recruiters from the gold mines and the sugar estates.⁸⁶ Healthy males enticed by the superior wages of the mines were recruited there, while the best of the workers too young or too unhealthy for the mines went to work on the sugar estates. This meant that only 'leftovers' – mainly young children – were available for cotton farms.

Explanations for the collapse at Ntambanana focused less on issues of labour; records suggest that farmers' needs were met by labourers from the surrounding Reserves. Instead, Ntambanana farmers attributed their collapse to poor foresight on the part of the national government, accusing them of providing inadequate land, misguided plans, and insufficient transportation for successful cotton cultivation. The farmers' complaints were championed by the Member of Parliament for Zululand, George Heaton Nicholls. Nicholls was committed to helping hard-working Zululand farmers and lobbied tirelessly for compensation and rehabilitation that would allow these men to remain on their lands.⁸⁷ He blamed the disaster that befell Ntambanana and the other soldier-settlements on poor planning by J.B. Hertzog's new National Party government; he reserved his harshest criticism for the Minister of Lands, P.G.W. (Piet) Grobler.⁸⁸ He was particularly exercised about the lack of coordination between the four departments responsible for land settlement: Agriculture, Irrigation, Labour and Land. He accused officials of deliberately propagating misinformation, and indicted the government publication *Farming Opportunities in South Africa* (1922) for suggesting returns from Zululand cotton approximated £40 per acre, arguing that these were absurdly inflated estimates.

Ntambanana settlers were adamant that they deserved compensation for their losses, complaining that more was owed them after their service to the Commonwealth. They accused the state of overvaluing the land offered to them: only 50,000 of the 90,000 acres allotted were suitable for stock, due to the prevalence of nagana. Settlers demanded acknowledgement of the mistakes made in allotting them unsuitable land at inflated prices: Their solution:

⁸⁴ Heaton Nicholls, the MP for Zululand, favoured this solution. See *Zululand Times*, 2 July 1925 and 28 February 1929.

⁸⁵ "Meeting of the Pongola Growers' Association", *South African Cotton Growers' Journal* (January 1926) 11.

⁸⁶ Lincoln, 'Settlement and Servitude in Zululand', 60/61.

⁸⁷ Nicholls, himself a wealthy sugar farmer, had become convinced of cotton's potential as a driving force for Zululand settlement during a visit taken with then Prime Minister Jan Smuts in 1922. He had a particular empathy for the settlers as he had himself been a sugar pioneer in Zululand before entering politics. See G.H. Nicholls, *South Africa in my Time*, (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1961).

⁸⁸ The accounts of Nicholls' impassioned pleas to Parliament on behalf of the soldier-settlers are found in *Zululand Times*, 17 March 1927. It is important to note the partisan nature of this issue: Nicholls was a member of Smuts's South African Party that was ousted as the Government by a coalition headed by J. B. Hertzog's predominantly Afrikaner National Party in the general election of 1924. The tensions that existed between Nicholls and Grobler were rooted largely in their political opposition.

Cut out the bad land. Provide fencing and clearing on the re-adjusted boundaries. Control all traffic emerging from fly areas. Systematically sterilise all stock in the settlements. And finally, make some provision whereby the state contributes something towards the cost of the disastrous experiment which has resulted in every settler who took part walking out a ruined man, or with this prospect in the near future.⁸⁹

The official request from the Ntambanana Farmers' Association to the Minister of Lands articulated their proposal as a three-fold solution: the government should take over the whole settlement, initiate a re-evaluation of the farms with the objective of refunding monies paid, and then provide settlers with preference in the allotment of additional land, preferably further north in Nkweleni where the land seemed comparably free from pests and nagana.⁹⁰ Lobbying on their behalf, Nicholls implored the Minister to absolve these men of their debts.

The National Party coalition government bristled at these requests for intervention. Responding to Nicholls, Grobler seemed indifferent to the settlers' complaints, and categorically refused them compensation or relocation to other more promising allotments. Despite recommendations from a group of visiting cotton experts who suggested special loans to help offset labour and living expenses, the only concession the government made to the Ntambanana settlers was an advance from the Land Bank to cover the cost of tractors.⁹¹ This proposal was regarded with scorn by many in the province, who bemoaned the inaction of the 'unsympathetic government' in hastening Ntambanana's decline.⁹²

Inadequate transportation was another problem. When Ntambanana was established in 1919, settlers were promised a regular lorry service.⁹³ But this single transport link was not enough to ensure efficient and economic travel between the producers at Ntambanana and their market at Empangeni. Due to a financial dispute between the Department of Lands and the provincial administration over the maintenance costs for the newly paved twenty-mile road, it quickly fell into disrepair, and the settlement lost its only public transport link with its market.

Unreliable transport was a major obstacle throughout Zululand. Wagons were the only means of bringing cotton from the disparate soldier-settlements to the railway terminus at Empangeni. According to the *Natal Sugar and Cotton Planter* there were 30,000 to 40,000 acres suitable for cotton in Hluhluwe, over 50,000 acres near the Pongola River, and over a million in Swaziland that were left uncultivated due to lack of adequate transport.⁹⁴ This transportation deficit was felt most keenly by the gin at Empangeni. Built by the Zululand Cooperative Cotton Association at the end of the 1925/26 season to serve soldier-settlements at

⁸⁹ NA, LDE-N NVL Vol. 4 Ref 3/2, Ntambanana Lands, Mr. F.T. Brighton, Statement from the Settler's Point of View of the Nagana Problem as Affecting the Ntambanana Settlement, Submitted to the Nagana Conference at Pretoria, 24 September 1931.

⁹⁰ NA, LDE-N NVL Vol. 4 Ref 3/2, Ntambanana Lands, Ntambanana Farmers' Association to Minister of Lands, 16 August 1933.

⁹¹ For the report by these cotton experts see NA, LDE-N NVL Vol. 2 Ref 3/2/1, Report by Cotton Experts (Beaumont, Scherffius, Milligan, White) on a Visit to Ntambanana, 7 July 1924. The decision to advance funds towards the purchase of the tractors is found in NA, LDE-N NVL Vol. 4 Ref 3/2, Ntambanana Lands, Managing Director, Land Bank to Secretary for Lands, Pretoria, 17 December 1927.

⁹² 'Ntambanana Settlements', *African Sugar and Cotton Journal* 1 no. 2, (May 1927) 27. Again, anti-government sentiment directed at the Nationalist Party on the part of these predominantly British settlers was a significant factor fuelling this resentment.

⁹³ A truck and driver were to be provided by the Department of Lands. See NA, LDE-N NVL Vol.2 Ref 3/2/1, Ntambanana Valley Lands, Commissioner for Returned Soldiers to Secretary for Lands, 17 September 1920.

⁹⁴ 'The New Zululand Railway', *Natal Sugar and Cotton Planter*, (November 1924) 10.

Ntambanana, Hluhluwe and Mkuze, the gin was constantly hindered by the inadequate transportation linking it to producers. It posted a loss in each of its eight years of operation.⁹⁵

The official report on the Zululand cotton disaster, prepared by the South African Board of Trade, downplayed the limitations posed by the environment, labour, planning, and transportation, to focus instead on the vagaries of the international cotton market.⁹⁶ American cotton acreage increased from 38.7 million acres in 1923 to 42.6 million acres in 1924 and 46.5 million acres in 1925. The United States produced 15.6 million bales in 1925, only half a million bales below the highest output on record. A year later the American crop was just under 18 million bales, the largest ever recorded.⁹⁷ American production alone exceeded world demand by more than three million bales.

World prices dipped sharply as a result. The price of American middling dropped from just under twelve pence per lb in 1923 to seven and a half pence per lb in 1926.⁹⁸ By 1927 prices in Zululand were down to six pence per lb. Despite a mini-resurgence that lifted prices past ten pence per lb in 1928, they dropped soon after, falling from nine pence per lb in 1929, to five pence in 1930, and then three pence in 1931.⁹⁹

The challenges presented by failed production regimes and declining prices caused many growers to turn back to sugar, the crop that had first enticed them to settle in Zululand. The total area under sugar cane in Zululand jumped from 26,500 acres in 1923 to over 50,000 acres in 1939.¹⁰⁰ The amount of cane processed in Natal and Zululand experienced a similar boost, from just over two million tons in 1926 to over four and a half million tons in 1939.¹⁰¹ The decline in cotton's fortunes solidified sugar's standing as the primary commodity crop in northern Natal and Zululand.

The most informed contemporary accounts of Zululand cotton's collapse evaluated each of the above factors in turn, and then zeroed in on the failed combination of growing conditions and production regimes. William Himbury, the Managing Director of the British Cotton Growing Association, visited Zululand in 1927 at the height of the despair. Himbury suggested that the ultimate cause of the collapse was the unsuitability of the Zululand climate for cotton. He argued that the series of floods and droughts which had devastated output was the norm for Zululand, and for cotton to thrive it would have to develop within a planting system that accepted this reality rather than ignored it: 'these seasons have been described as abnormal, but if one studies the crop results from year to year and in different districts, it is an open question

⁹⁵ The gin, and the Cooperative Association itself, were both taken over by the Department of Agriculture in 1931/32 for £10 400, the sum of the company's debt. NA, Public Works Department (hereafter PWD) Vol. 562 Ref 1304, Empangeni Agricultural Department: Purchase of Zululand Cooperative Cotton and Agricultural Association, Secretary of Finance to Secretary for Public Works, 26 July 1934.

⁹⁶ NA, RHN Vol. 1591 Ref 600/92, Board of Trade and Industries Report #92: The Cotton Growing Industry with a Minority Report on the Proposed Stabilization of Cotton Prices by Mr. F.J. Fahey, 1929. The Board was given a mandate to survey cotton-growing conditions in South Africa and account for the massive rise and subsequent decline of cotton production in the 1920s.

⁹⁷ 'American Cotton Crop', *African Sugar and Cotton Planter* 2, no. 12 (Dec 1926) 21.

⁹⁸ B.R. Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988)

⁹⁹ J.A. Todd, 'Twenty-Five Years of Cotton Prices', *Empire Cotton Growing Review* 15 (October 1938) 278.

¹⁰⁰ Minaar, 'Labour Supply Problems', 53

¹⁰¹ Union Government, Office of Census and Statistics, Official Year Book of the Union and of Basutoland, Bechuanaland Protectorate and Swaziland, 20, Pretoria, 1939, 773, in A. Jeeves, Sugar and Gold in the Making of the South African Labour System: The Crisis of Supply of the Zululand Sugar Estates, *The South African Journal of Economic History* 7 (1992) 33.

whether those so-called abnormal years are not normal ones'.¹⁰² He further suggested that officials and farmers exacerbated the effects of these poor growing conditions by rushing to put too much acreage under cotton too quickly. Himbury listed a multitude of mistakes: planting on marginal soil, planting at too high an altitude, planting late as a gamble that was ruined by frost. He was particularly critical of the plantation system implemented at Candover, arguing that monocropping increased the damage wrought by both floods and insects. He suggested that the erroneous judgment exercised by farmers, based on poor advice received from agricultural officials, made growers more vulnerable to these adverse growing seasons.

G.E. Keatinge, a representative of the Empire Cotton Growing Corporation (ECGC) who first visited Zululand in 1922, and then again in 1925 after the devastation of the floods, corroborated these conclusions.¹⁰³ He agreed that the national scientific infrastructure had been ineffective in aiding local farmers achieve success with cotton. Keatinge was convinced that a poor understanding of the natural constraints of cotton production caused the disastrous outcome, and that poor decision-making by farmers exacerbated these difficulties. In the rush to maximise acreage, land that was recently cleared was put immediately under cotton, diminishing the soil's productivity. Insect pests increased as cotton was planted on the same land year after year without reprieve. Damage due to excessive rains could have been mitigated by planting cotton alongside other crops, a strategy that had been ignored in the hype of the cotton boom. Keatinge suggested that single-crop farming was an untenable agricultural system within Zululand, 'owing to the uncertainty of the climate, the cotton-planter, pure and simple, cannot exist here except in rare cases. He must be more of a general sub-tropical farmer, skilled in the knowledge of raising a variety of other crops'.¹⁰⁴ Both experts concluded that cotton's collapse was due to poor growing conditions, which were exacerbated by inappropriate production regimes.

Conclusion

In this paper I argue that cotton was embraced as a preferred crop within the state-led agricultural expansion of the 1910s and 20s because it furthered the new Union of South Africa's political and racial imperatives. William Scherffius inaugurated a new era of cotton production, which resonated with the Union's broader vision for state-sponsored rural capitalism, one that was centralised, standardised, and relied on the state as the primary determinant of agrarian change.¹⁰⁵ Scheffius's experts further seized upon the state's ideological priorities to advance their agricultural enterprise: cotton was an enticing commodity because its cultivation regime mirrored the racial roles that whites were attempting to carve out within the Union. Cotton was a means of uplifting the white agricultural sector and constraining the black; it fit perfectly with the ideological priorities of the new white settler state. Cotton also served to deflect some of the animosity directed towards the privileged sugar industry. Focusing on a crop grown in the Transvaal and the Cape helped to align Zululand's agricultural future with that of other Union growers.

¹⁰² W. Himbury, *The Union of South Africa as a Source for Increasing our Cotton Supplies*, (Manchester, 1929), 14. Himbury was Britain's leading cotton expert, having spent much of his career touring Britain's tropical possessions and assessing each colony's viability for cotton. He was the Empire's most respected voice on cotton. See Obituary: William Himbury, *The Geographical Journal* 122 (1956) 140.

¹⁰³ Keatinge's first report was printed as a pamphlet: G.F. Keatinge, 'Cotton Growing in South Africa', 193.

¹⁰⁴ Keatinge, 'Cotton Growing in South Africa,' 194.

¹⁰⁵ T. Keegan, *Rural Transformations in Industrializing South Africa*, 112.

After reaching its zenith in 1925, cotton production in Zululand was reduced to a trickle by the early 1930s. This account has identified two explanations for this dramatic collapse. Ecological factors in the form of erratic precipitation and insect pests stymied growers big and small. Ill-conceived and poorly executed production regimes compounded these ecological obstacles and accelerated cotton's decline. This combination of ecological and logistical shortcomings undermined Zululand's cotton fortunes.

Comparing the bust in Zululand with other, more successful ventures elsewhere on the continent underscores the impact of these interactions. Those regimes that were successful in achieving large-scale cotton production can be categorized into three groups. The first was a peasant production regime where African producers controlled their own labour and means of production, though generally exerted little control over the means of exchange.¹⁰⁶ Africans chose to grow cotton because of a combination of favourable returns – often in the form of a pre-existing, indigenous weaving industry – and suitable growing conditions. Peasant producers in Nyasaland's Tchiri Valley grew cotton alongside food crops in quantities that ebbed and flowed with fluctuations in both price and climate.¹⁰⁷ Climatic conditions were also suitable for cotton in the French Soudan, where an indigenous industry had long preceded attempts by the French to impose a system of export production.¹⁰⁸

A second category of successful ventures succeeded by relying on forced peasant production. The Portuguese were only able to end a sixty-year long history of failed cotton attempts in Angola and Mozambique after the ascension of Salazar's *Estado Novo* in 1930. The brutal regime of forced labour compelled Africans to cultivate the crop by using a combination of threats and force, yielding annual production in excess of 70,000 tons for export.¹⁰⁹ A similar level of brutality underpinned cultivation efforts in the Congo: between 1917 and 1935, beatings, fines, and the threat of prison were used to expand production.¹¹⁰ In Cote d'Ivoire, production was also strongly correlated with hardship: all three peaks in cotton exports around this time (1930, 1938, 1942) corresponded to periods of heightened coercion in the cotton growing areas.¹¹¹ In all these cases 'successful' production was achieved by compelling Africans to produce the crop en masse.

The third model of successful production was the large cotton plantations of north-east Africa, which paired conscripted labour with modern agricultural equipment. The most successful example is the Gezira scheme in Sudan, whose 25,000 tenants farmers had only conditional access to their land, predicated on their willingness to cultivate cotton. Standard tenancies mandated that at least twenty per cent of each farmer's acreage had to be devoted to

¹⁰⁶ A. Isaacman, *Cotton is the Mother of Poverty: Peasants, Work, and Rural Struggle in Colonial Mozambique, 1938-1961*, (Portsmouth, Heinemann, 1996) helped me to understand the critical characteristics that distinguished these different production regimes.

¹⁰⁷ E. Mandala, *Work and Control in a Peasant Economy: A History of the Lower Tchiri Valley in Malawi, 1859-1960*, (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1990) .

¹⁰⁸ R.L. Roberts, *Two Worlds of Cotton: Colonialism and the Regional Economy in the French Soudan 1800-1946* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1996) .

¹⁰⁹ M.A. Pritcher, *Sowing the Seeds of Failure: Early Portuguese Cotton Cultivation in Angola and Mozambique, 1820,1926*, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 17 (1991) 61.

¹¹⁰ O. Likaka, *Forced Cotton Cultivation and Social Control in the Belgian Congo*, in: A. Isaacman, R. Roberts (Eds), *Cotton, Colonialism, and Social History in Sub-Saharan Africa*, (Portsmouth and London, Heinemann, 1995) 201.

¹¹¹ T.J. Bassett, *The Peasant Cotton Revolution in West Africa 1880-1995* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001) 52.

cotton.¹¹² Recognising that unreliable and uneven precipitation was a major constraint to successful production, British overseers invested heavily in irrigation technology. This combination of forcible tenant labour and reliable water supply allowed Gezira farmers to put more than 215,000 acres under cotton in the late 1930s.

The combination of growing conditions and production regimes present in Zululand did not fit within any of these templates. Early experiments indicated that Zululand's growing conditions were ideal for cotton, but ecological constraints to production, in the form of uneven precipitation and insect pests, thwarted cultivation efforts. Colonists lacked technologies (such as irrigation or insect-resistant varieties) that were needed to overcome these constraints and allow cotton to thrive within these marginal growing conditions. Zululand settlers were unable to conquer the ecological incompatibilities between theoretical ambition and practical cultivation.

This story of agricultural failure was rooted in the environment and in human interactions with it. Poor agricultural decision-making exacerbated these climactic limitations and accelerated cotton's decline. Planting on heavy slopes at Candover left the crop susceptible to flooding. Monocropping cotton over thousands of acres at Ntambanana increased the crop's vulnerability to variations in precipitation and insect pests. These deficiencies combined to undermine the largest cotton boom in South African history.

¹¹² V. Bernal, *Cotton and Colonial Order in Sudan: A Social History, with Emphasis on the Gezira Scheme*, in: A. Isaacman, R. Roberts (Eds), *Cotton, Colonialism and Social History in Sub-Saharan Africa*, (Portsmouth and London, Heinemann, 1995) 104.