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A Soil Conservation Safari: Hugh Bennett's 1944 Visit to South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Hugh Bennett, then Chief of the United States Soil Conservation Service, paid a two-month official visit to South Africa in 1944. His visit threw into relief many of the country's social and political cleavages, not least the administrative division between the Department of Agriculture, responsible for soil conservation on white-owned farms, and the Department of Native Affairs, responsible for soil conservation in so-called 'native areas'. The latter were paid scant attention in the itinerary, and Bennett himself appeared reluctant to acknowledge how any national soil conservation effort would be compromised by the racially segregated socio-political context in which it occurred.

KEYWORDS

Soil conservation, South Africa, Hugh Bennett, Soil Conservation Act, racial segregation

INTRODUCTION

South Africa in the 1940s provides an especially interesting geographical and historical context in which to examine connections between broader socio-political forces and environmental conservation efforts. The decade saw an unprecedented level of official and public concern, evident in voluminous records in the official archives and a plethora of popular publications, about the perceived degradation of the country's land and vegetation resources.¹ Yet far from being above politics, as many of its contemporary proponents claimed, soil conservation was inherently and inescapably political in a country where the very land itself was

divided along racial lines. Into this contested terrain came the man known as 'Big Hugh' or 'The Chief': Hugh Bennett, then Chief of the United States Soil Conservation Service and widely regarded as the father of soil conservation in the United States of America.² In 1944, Bennett paid an official visit to the Union of South Africa. Coming as it did at a critical juncture in South African history, as the Second World War was nearing its end and just a few years before the advent of formal apartheid, Bennett's South African tour exposed many of the political tensions and contradictions that would ultimately hobble the development of an effective South African soil conservation movement.

This paper begins by establishing the political and ideological context of the 1940s soil conservation movement in South Africa and identifying possible political motives for the Bennett visit. It goes on to sketch a brief biography of Bennett and describe the particular model of soil conservation developed in the United States under his leadership. The bulk of the paper is a detailed description of Bennett's South African tour, from its initiation and planning to its outcomes and legacy. Attention is paid both to the official record and to the extensive media reporting of Bennett's progress through the country. The Bennett tour starkly revealed the differential official concern about white-owned farms, catered for by the Department of Agriculture, and the African reserves, under the entirely separate administration of the Department of Native Affairs. Ultimately, the paper argues, the soil conservation agenda that Bennett's high-profile visit was intended to advance was instead fatally compromised by the inherent contradictions of a race-based system of land ownership and administration. Furthermore, the American model of soil conservation of which Bennett was such an ardent advocate proved a poor fit to South African social and political realities.³

THE IDEOLOGY AND POLITICS OF SOIL CONSERVATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

The targeting of South Africa for such a visit at this time is not entirely surprising. Before the war, the country's soil erosion problem had been identified as especially urgent and deserving of international attention. The two renowned British colonial soil scientists G.V. Jacks and R.O. Whyte had published their acclaimed work *The Rape of the Earth* in 1939, identifying South Africa as an erosion 'hot spot': 'A national catastrophe, due to soil erosion, is perhaps more imminent in the Union of South Africa than in any other country'.⁴ But this was seen as far from simply an environmental catastrophe. Jacks and Whyte were unambiguous in identifying soil erosion as a threat to the very existence of European settlement and 'civilization' on the African continent: 'Can it be doubted that the soil of South Africa would... be capable of sustaining a population at least double its present total and that the foundations of our sometimes precarious civilization would be deep and secure in a prosperous, well-watered

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land from which the spectre of drought was banished?'.⁵ They go on to identify the political threat to such a vision:

The difficulties – some of them perhaps insuperable – in the way of its realization are largely political; when General Smuts said that soil erosion was 'bigger than any politics' he was addressing a people among whom politics is a particularly powerful, and powerfully disruptive, force. British, Dutch, Africans and Indians are quarrelling over the share-out of the South African skeleton after it has been finally stripped... Unavoidable political passions and antipathies are still strong enough to restrain the co-operative spirit which, in South Africa as elsewhere, must form the basis of a national soil-conservation policy.⁶

Jacks and Whyte's text, and the wider colonial conservationist discourse of which it forms part, simply begs critical deconstruction. Conserving South Africa's soil resources, in their proposal, meant inevitable European overlordship and African serfdom. Bennett was certainly aware of Jacks and Whyte's work, and whatever his understanding of South African politics before his 1944 visit, his very coming brought many of these political differences and tensions to the surface. He was certainly unable to avoid becoming embroiled in the country's political discord and divisions, which ran not just between races but also between the two 'European' language groups as well as between different political factions and parties.

Indeed it is likely that Bennett's very despatch to South Africa was politically motivated. South Africa at the time was an official if ambiguous ally of Britain, the Commonwealth and the United States. Prime Minister Jan Smuts faced a strong and strident Afrikaner nationalist opposition who were anti-British, even pro-Nazi in sentiment, and certainly isolationist in their vision for South Africa's post-war political development. While I have yet to find direct evidence of this in the archives, it may well be that the Bennett visit was a gesture calculated to lend support to the Smuts government and bring South Africa more securely into the democratic community of nations that had united to try and defeat fascism and totalitarianism in Europe. The indirect evidence for such a motive is substantial. Remember that this was wartime, which must have made the sheer logistics of the trip formidable. The two governments' expenditure on Bennett's two-month tour of South Africa must also have been considerable and, given the need to sustain an all-out war effort, would surely not have been granted official sanction without backing from the highest levels of government. Certainly the South African records reveal an unusual degree of administrative activity and inter-departmental co-operation in organising Bennett's tour, suggesting that the proposal came 'from the top' – perhaps even the outcome of a personal exchange between Smuts and Roosevelt at a meeting of Allied leaders? Smuts was acutely conscious of the domestic political significance of soil conservation in his own country, and the US government was doubtless keen to keep

Smuts in power. There were thus both national and international political and strategic interests at stake

BENNETT BIOGRAPHY⁷

Bennett himself was a not uncontroversial figure. Born on a farm in North Carolina in 1881, he joined the Bureau of Soils of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) in 1903. Soil erosion was at that time an acknowledged but poorly-understood and under-estimated problem. Bennett's early claim to fame was to recognise the significance of sheet erosion – less visible than gully erosion, but just as damaging in terms of overall soil loss. By 1918 he had begun to speak and write extensively on the 'menace' of soil erosion. A decade later, his 1928 USDA Circular 'Soil Erosion, a National Menace' attracted widespread public and official attention to soil erosion and to what by then could justifiably be described as Bennett's personal crusade against it.⁸

What really made Bennett were the Dust Bowl and Depression of the 1930s, which seemed to vindicate his dire earlier warnings. Soil conservation and 'scientific' land use planning became an essential component of Roosevelt's 'New Deal'.⁹ In 1933, Bennett was put in charge of the newly-formed Soil Erosion Service, part of the federal government's response to both the Dust Bowl and Depression-related unemployment. This Service was initially seen as a temporary relief measure, falling under the Department of the Interior. In 1935, the passing of the Soil Conservation Act turned it into a permanent agency, renamed it the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) and placed it under the Department of Agriculture (USDA). Bennett continued as its Chief, a position he was to hold until his retirement in 1951. The secure institutional establishment of the SCS was largely Bennett's own achievement, and can be attributed in part to an oft-recounted example of his skills at oratory and showmanship:

[O]n March 6, 1935, the SCS chief was again recounting the nation's soil erosion problems..., this time to a Senate Committee on Public Lands. Bennett had been told by his aides that another big dust storm was building up and moving eastward. He kept one eye on the window as he reminded the senators of the conditions that were resulting in widespread wind erosion damage. He painted a vivid picture of the 1934 dust storm, in which, he said, no less than 300 million tons of soil had been blown off Great Plains lands. During Bennett's testimony, the sky darkened and for the second time in twelve months yellow soil from the far-off Dust Bowl began to settle on the streets of Washington.¹⁰

Much of the early work of the Soil Conservation Service was in the development of conservation plans and provision of technical assistance to individual landowners within designated demonstration projects.¹¹ Unemployment relief was an explicit part of its mandate, and labour was recruited in part from local

relief rolls. While useful in the early stages of the SCS, this system of demonstration projects was cumbersome and inefficient, ill-suited to the ongoing operation of a permanent agency. The solution was found in the establishment of soil conservation associations in designated soil conservation districts, run by farmers themselves and effectively operating as local units of government in rural areas. Symbolically, the first such soil conservation district was set up in Bennett's birthplace: Anson County, North Carolina. This model of conservation, decentralised in terms of day-to-day operation yet co-ordinated by a strong national body, became the paradigm that Bennett sought to export around the world.

This bare outline of his career conveys little of Bennett the man. By all accounts, favourable and unfavourable, he was a remarkable character, 'big' in every sense of the word. Soon after its publication, Wellington Brink's 1951 biography, *Big Hugh*, was justifiably described by Charles Hardin as 'idoltrous'. Hardin went on: 'All SCS personnel appear to exult in Hugh Hammond Bennett, a truly 'charismatic' leader in Max Weber's term'.¹² He was described as being as much politician as bureaucrat, as much showman as scientist, and certainly by the 1940s was considered by many to be the world's leading authority on soil conservation.

Indeed the years of World War Two saw Bennett at the height of his powers, his national reputation established and his international stature growing.¹³ He was in great demand as a public speaker as soil conservation became a popular and unifying cause. Just a sample of the titles of his speeches conveys the tenor of the times: 'America at War with Erosion' (Wisconsin Farm and Home Week, 31 January 1940); 'Conservation Against a Background of War' (Canadian Conservation Association, London Ontario, 9 May 1941); 'Meeting Production Needs Through Soil Conservation' (Southern States Conference, Alabama, 27 March 1942); 'Soil Conservation Goes to War' (Royal Canadian Institute, Toronto, 7 November 1942); 'Conservation for Wartime and After' (Friends of the Land Meeting, Philadelphia, 25 February 1943).¹⁴ The earlier speeches are characterised by a 'national security' perspective: 'while we gaze across oceans at what is taking place thousands of miles away, we must not overlook the home scene immediately about us'.¹⁵ After Pearl Harbor, he adopts a more actively internationalist stance, mobilising soil conservation as part of the war effort. Here he is speaking to a Canadian audience in 1942: 'Within the past year – since Pearl Harbor – I have had the privilege of spending some time in South America, in Mexico, and in Canada working on the agricultural job which jointly faces all the countries of our hemisphere... The great friendship of our countries, which was strong in peace time, has grown still stronger now that we are close allies in a mortal fight to destroy Hitler and his cohorts of hate, plunder, and blood'.¹⁶ It was at this level of international prestige and in this fighting spirit that Bennett came to South Africa in 1944.

PREPARATION AND PLANNING FOR THE BENNETT TOUR

Whatever the origins of the Bennett tour proposal, it was the US Department of War Information which informed the South African government in January 1944 of their intention to send Bennett to South Africa 'on a lecture tour of approximately two months', beginning in early May.¹⁷ The Secretary for Agriculture and Forestry responded with enthusiasm that '...a visit by Dr Bennett at this stage would be most opportune and of particular benefit to the officials of my Department who are most closely concerned with soil conservation'.¹⁸ Prime Minister Smuts then extended an official invitation to Bennett 'to be the guest of the Union Government during his sojourn in this country'.¹⁹ Intriguingly, Brink's biography of Bennett presents a different version from that in the official South African record, with the initiative in his account coming entirely from South Africa: 'The Union of South Africa pled its case so fervently that Bennett took off a few weeks back in 1944 for a hurried visit to the Dark Continent'.²⁰ Further research is required in the archival records held in the United States in order to reconstruct the actual nature and order of events.

Even before Smuts's official invitation had been extended to Bennett, the political and administrative faultlines that would ultimately undermine the whole exercise began to reveal themselves. Like all other aspects of the country's administration at that time, soil conservation was run by two separate and parallel departments. White farming areas, which constituted the majority of the land area but a minority of the rural population, fell under the ambit of the Division of Soil and Veld Conservation of the Department of Agriculture. Soil conservation in so-called 'native areas', the meagre 13% of the country's land area reserved for the majority black population, fell under the control of the agricultural branch of the Department of Native Affairs.²¹ For the most part, these two departments functioned independently, with only limited interaction and communication between their respective officials. In fact Bennett's visit was one of the few occasions in which there appears to have been genuine inter-departmental co-operation, although there was never any doubt that it was the Department of Agriculture which was in charge. The senior official given overall responsibility for organising the tour, including its itinerary, was Dr J.C. Ross, Chief of the Division of Soil and Veld Conservation.²²

From the record it seems at first not to have occurred to the Department of Agriculture to involve the Department of Native Affairs in Bennett's tour at all. It was only at the request of the Secretary for Native Affairs, D.L. Smit, that his department became involved in planning the tour and that native areas were placed on its itinerary.²³ The initial letter to this effect from the Secretary for Native Affairs to Secretary for Agriculture P.R. Viljoen bears a marginal note by an unnamed official of the latter department asking casually: 'Shall we include the Native areas and ask Dr Ross to include them in the itinerary?'²⁴ Given that a large proportion of the budget and personnel of the Department of

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Native Affairs at that time was devoted to soil conservation, this omission was no mere oversight. Rather, it reveals the day-to-day administrative practice of the ideology of racial segregation, soon to be further codified and entrenched in the post-1948 policy of apartheid. Once the idea had been mooted, however, both the Secretary for Agriculture and his senior officials agreed that if they were to take full advantage of Dr Bennett's visit, it would be a good idea for him to visit selected native areas and to hold discussions with officials from both Agriculture and Native Affairs.²⁵

Further considerations arose with respect to the so-called High Commission Territories, Basutoland, Bechuanaland and Swaziland. At the time, these were administered as protectorates of the British government by the British High Commissioner to South Africa. Their present and future status were the subject of profound disagreement between the South African and British governments, with the South Africans keen to have them incorporated into a larger Union of South Africa.²⁶ The politics of responsibility and control were thus extremely delicate, especially with the future direction of South Africa's own political development so problematic and uncertain. Both the High Commissioner himself and the colonial 'men on the spot' in the three territories were keen for Bennett to include them in his itinerary, and made their requests to the Secretary for Agriculture and Forestry accordingly.²⁷ Their lobbying was successful, although probably as much because of the close ties between conservation officials in South Africa and their counterparts in the territories as because of any high-level international politicking.²⁸ The South African government would also have been concerned to display its suitability as potential custodian.

J.C. Ross diligently set to work making arrangements for the tour, trying to accommodate his own department's interests as well as the numerous other demands on Bennett's time and expertise. The original draft itinerary was extremely ambitious, with no less than eight separate tours by road, rail and air, each of between five days and two weeks and between them covering most of the country, including native areas as well as Basutoland, Bechuanaland and Swaziland.²⁹ Ross estimated that the time required would be fifteen weeks, and urged that Bennett's visit be extended to 'four months, or say 20 weeks'.³⁰ At Ross's instigation, and urged by senior officials in the agriculture section of his own department, the Secretary for Native Affairs also pressed the Secretary for Agriculture to try and extend the duration of Bennett's stay, as eight weeks would be 'quite inadequate to give him anything like a clear picture of conditions in European farming areas, let alone Native areas and High Commission Territories'.³¹ By this stage, however, Bennett's arrival was supposedly imminent, and the Secretary for Agriculture replied that 'the whole question of prolonging his visit will be taken up with him personally on his arrival in the Union, when the position of the native areas will also be considered'.³² As it turned out, the visit was not extended, and Bennett spent only two months in the country.

Ross's organisational task was made all the more difficult by the uncertainty regarding the actual date of Bennett's arrival in South Africa. Originally scheduled to come in May, Bennett was delayed owing to 'war conditions'³³ and eventually arrived in South Africa only at the beginning of August 1944.³⁴ One outcome of the delay was the opportunity for considerable media build-up, even hype, of the visit before it had begun. 'World's foremost authority the Union's soil conservation guest', trumpeted Johannesburg's *Star* newspaper on 15 July. The government's publicity and propaganda machine also swung into action, with plans for press coverage, radio broadcasts, a booklet and 'the production of a 35mm film on the subject which would be suitable to show in public theatres'.³⁵ The extra time also afforded Ross the opportunity to revise and refine the itinerary. Far from the lecture tour originally envisaged by the US Office of War Information, Bennett's visit to South Africa was fast becoming a prototype of the sort of rural development tourism by the international expert that was to become so characteristic of the post-war 'Third World'.³⁶ Even the 'revised and attenuated' itinerary prepared by Ross in mid-July comprised six separate tours: to the Northern Transvaal; Eastern Transvaal and Swaziland; Natal; Orange Free State, Basutoland and Eastern Cape; South East Cape and Transkei; and South West Cape. Tellingly, however, only nine days were scheduled to be spent outside the white areas of the country, including two days each in Swaziland and Basutoland and a mere five days in native areas of South Africa itself.³⁷

BENNETT IN SOUTH AFRICA

Once Bennett had actually arrived in the country, the official record dries up, no doubt as everyone became too busy in the day-to-day operation of the tour. Media coverage, by contrast, exploded. There were almost daily reports and frequent editorials in all the major newspapers, both English- and Afrikaans-language.³⁸ The official record, though patchy, suggests that the tour party did not adhere strictly to the proposed itinerary. The files of the Department of Agriculture contain a number of frantic telegrams from Ross to the Minister and department officials in Pretoria referring to cancelled visits owing to the distinguished visitor's 'overstrain' and 'opposition to train travel'.³⁹ Perhaps coincidentally, although more plausibly the result of bias on the part of either his Agriculture hosts or Bennett himself, it appears always to have been the native areas that were cut out. At least one of the two days scheduled for the Transkei was lost⁴⁰ and the *Star* reported on 31 August that '[t]he inspection of Basutoland's soil conservation and erosion areas continued yesterday without Dr. Bennett, who remained at Maseru to rest', reportedly under medical orders.⁴¹

This relative neglect of native areas was in spite of the best efforts of certain officials in the Department of Native Affairs who, even as the tour was under way, continued to press for the areas under their jurisdiction to be given greater

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prominence in Bennett's programme. For example H.R. Roberts, Senior Engineer in the Department, wrote to the Secretary for Native Affairs on 15 August:

The D.N.A. was informed yesterday that Dr Bennett... would be allowed one day for Herschel district [a native area in the eastern Cape] starting and finishing in Alival North. D.N.A. protested strenuously at this short period & today informed me that... the timetable has been altered so that we get from about noon on Aug 31st to 4pm on Sept 1st & thence to Lady Grey. This is a distinct improvement.

No times or dates for the Transkei are available yet but it is requested that a minimum of 2 ½ days be set aside and that if possible the Minister and yourself should be present.⁴²

Instead it seems that Bennett ended up spending but a single day in Transkei.⁴³ Local officials failed too in their attempt to get Bennett to address a gathering of 'paramount chiefs and native leaders' during his visit there. On 26 August, the government in Umtata ('capital' of Transkei) telegraphed Senior Engineer Roberts at Native Affairs in Pretoria asking for Bennett to give such a talk, 'as this would have great propaganda value'.⁴⁴ The Chief Magistrate of the Transkeian Territories repeated his request in a letter to Roberts two days later, adding: 'You will appreciate that if Dr. Bennett consents to give our leading Native Representatives a talk as suggested we must make the necessary arrangements for them to come to Umtata. The matter is thus one of urgency'.⁴⁵ The response came only on 8 September, in a one-line note from the Secretary for Native Affairs: 'Kindly note that Dr. Bennett will not address a gathering [sic] of Natives'.⁴⁶ It is not clear at whose instigation, nor for what reasons, the invitation was declined.

One possible explanation is that it was a government damage control exercise following unfavourable publicity in response to Bennett's first forays into native areas. If his hosts had hoped that keeping Bennett's exposure to native areas to a minimum might keep the glare of publicity off 'the native question', they were soon proved wrong. In the early stages of the tour, it was soil erosion in native areas that attracted most media attention. The following extract is from the *Natal Mercury* on 11 August 1944, during the tour's Natal leg:

It is estimated at the moment that [of] the ultimate total of 40,000,000 acres which will be allotted to Natives throughout the Union, 20,000,000 will require protective and curative treatment... Differences of opinion exist as to whether the Native control and development side should be carried out by the Department of Agriculture or by the Agricultural Division of the Native Affairs Department. One of the main problems at the moment is the congestion of the Native population, and their lack of education to appreciate soil conservation and agricultural methods. Dr. Bennett's ultimate report to the Union Government may assist in the solution of the difficulties, for it may lead to a reorientation of protective control.⁴⁷

The *Natal Witness* carried a similar report the following day.⁴⁸ The next leg of Bennett's tour took him to the Eastern Transvaal, where he visited the Acornhoek native reserve. The *Star* of 19 August 1944 reported thus:

Replying to questions by Native Affairs Department officials, Dr. Bennett said that a proper system of rotation of crops suited to the area would increase food production, and in this way the natives, who already seemed to have enough land, should be able to maintain not only themselves but many others... Major Roberts, Senior Engineer, Native Affairs Department, told Dr. Bennett how the natives, when allocated an area, would flatly decline to live there if the Native Affairs Department demarcated it fairly. They insisted on living according to tribal customs, regardless of damage to the land, and refused to learn a better way of living.⁴⁹

A copy of this article in the files of the Department of Native Affairs bears an annotation from Roberts denying having made the reported statements. Whatever had been said by Roberts, or for that matter by Bennett, the damage in government publicity terms was done.⁵⁰ The *Sunday Times* weighed in on 20 August:

It is because they no longer find the reserves attractive – a mild way of putting it – that many natives flock to the cities. But although the Bantu peoples are largely to blame for the deterioration of their own areas, this has also been due to a neglect of the principles of European trusteeship... It is no secret that much of the Native Trust land bought under General Hertzog's Act has proved to be far from suitable. Other land, and much more of it, will be needed, especially for the settlement of natives from badly eroded areas, which, in the opinion of Dr. Hugh Bennett, can only be saved by removing every human being and animal and sealing those areas off until Nature can restore them.⁵¹

Bennett cannot have been so naïve as to be ignorant of the political dimensions of soil conservation – this was, after all, a man who had grown up in the American South, and in 1944 race relations were almost as much an issue in the United States as they were in South Africa. Nor can he have been unaware of the sensitivity of the native land issue. His remarks in the Eastern Transvaal were soon picked up by the more radical press, and their political implications subjected to critical scrutiny. The weekly newspaper the *Guardian*, mouthpiece of the South African Communist Party, took both Bennett and the South African government to task.⁵² Citing 'a British soil expert at present in Cape Town', the *Guardian* pointed out that the natives had little choice in where to live and that the best land went to white farmers. 'The real responsibility for the denudation of the land rests with those who allocated the land, not with the inhabitants who live there only because they must'. The same article also observed that: 'When Dr. Bennett criticises African methods of cultivation he is really damning the Union Native education policy'. It concluded: 'It is unfortunate if Dr. Bennett allows himself to be used as a mouthpiece by certain reactionary elements. It would be better for South Africa if he got on with his job of giving technical

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advice and instruction and refused to be drawn on subjects outside his scope'. Small wonder, then, that Bennett's planned subsequent visits to native areas were curtailed; and probably no coincidence that the note attached to a copy of the *Guardian* article in the Native Affairs files bears a date just two days before the terse message to the Chief Magistrate in Umtata announcing that Bennett would not be addressing native leaders in Transkei. His trip through the Transkei instead followed the classic pattern of the rural development tourist, complete with project and roadside biases: 'Travelling to Umtata, Dr Bennett judged, from the roadside, that an effective conservation programme would cost the Transkei £12,000,000'.⁵³ Perhaps taking heed of the *Guardian*'s advice to stick to technical matters, Bennett does not seem to have made any further pronouncements on the native land question.

Clearly Bennett had to tread a fine line between providing constructive criticism and giving offence to his South African government hosts. His only other potentially controversial remarks were about soil conservation in Basutoland. Despite having spent much of his time in the territory resting in Maseru, Bennett made a point of praising Basutoland's measures, thus implicitly criticising South Africa's policy, especially that towards conservation in native areas. As reported in *Veld Trust News*, Bennett observed: 'In Basutoland, they are doing what everyone says you cannot do—they are working advantageously with the natives... Probably the best way for the Union to develop conservation works in its native areas is along the same lines as in Basutoland'.⁵⁴ One senses that he may have been encouraged, even primed, by his chief host and South African counterpart J.C. Ross, who was quoted at length on the matter in the *Daily Representative* of 28 September. Ross went so far as to remark that 'it was rather a reflection on the Union that he should have to bring Dr. Bennett to non-Union Territory to see conservation principles applied according to a national plan'.⁵⁵ Ross too would have been treading a fine line, sensitive to the possible political implications of his and Bennett's comments, but keen to embarrass the Union government into allocating more resources to soil conservation in South Africa.

The same *Daily Representative* article, which covered native areas in South Africa as well as Basutoland, went on to conclude: '[T]he Native areas presented to Dr. Bennett much to commend and much to condemn. He saw what had been done, but, alas, how much there was to do. His suggestions for the further betterment of our Native areas should make interesting reading'. Yet if anyone had hoped that Bennett would openly either condone or condemn South African native policy, they were to be disappointed. Whether by diplomatic design or simple oversight, Bennett was remarkably silent on the native question in all further commentary, including the published report on his visit.⁵⁶ The solutions he advocated for South Africa's 'national erosion problem' were technical and financial, not social or political, with 'sound conservation farming' rather than greater racial equality or land redistribution being his primary recommendation.

Where he did mention native farming practices, propaganda and education were seen as the remedy.

Media attention in the final weeks of his trip also focused on the *national* nature of the problem. Native areas, the subject of so much of the earlier coverage, largely slipped from view. Typical Bennett-quoting headlines were: 'Union has Perhaps World's Worst Erosion Problem' (*Rand Daily Mail*, 23 September); 'Erosion Leads SA to Disaster' (*Sunday Times*, 8 October); 'Suid-Afrika Verkeer in Gevaar'⁵⁷ (*Huisgenoot*, 3 November). 'The whole of South Africa – not part of it – is washing away' is how he was quoted in October's *Veld Trust News. Libertas* that same month headlined its summing-up of the tour with the Bennett quote: 'South Africa I Pity You'. Apart from a reference to Basutoland, it mentioned 'natives' only in the captions to some of the accompanying photographs. Indeed from some of these accounts an outsider would have gained the impression that South Africa was a racially homogeneous and politically unified nation of white farmers, all on privately-owned land, with only the neighbouring territories having trouble with 'natives' and their unsound traditional farming practices, and even these being put to rights through the intervention and expertise of South African scientists.⁵⁸ The *Star* did point out the problem of the administrative division of soil conservation between the Departments of Agriculture, Lands, Irrigation and Native Affairs, but largely on the grounds of administrative inefficiency.

Bennett left South Africa in the middle of October. In the two months he had spent in the country, he had travelled 10,000 miles, made radio broadcasts, given public lectures, and met farmers, officials and members of a range of public bodies.⁵⁹ Whatever its merits and weaknesses, his visit made a lasting impact.

BENNETT'S LEGACY

The immediate impact of Bennett's visit and its associated publicity was heightened public and official interest in soil conservation. Founded just the previous year, the organisation known as the National Veld Trust began to attract large numbers of new members, which in turn brought expanded readership for its magazine *Veld Trust News*.⁶⁰ Soil conservation continued to receive widespread media attention, and Bennett was frequently and favourably cited. Ross and his officials in the Division of Soil and Veld Conservation, buoyed by the visit and the positive attention it had attracted, made soil conservation a central component of their plans for post-war agricultural reconstruction.⁶¹ The Department of Native Affairs, similarly encouraged, put the finishing touches to their plans for 'a new era of reclamation' in the reserves.⁶² Back in the United States, Bennett wrote up his report, which was published in Pretoria in April 1945. It earned a fulsome foreword from J.G.N. Strauss, Minister of Agriculture and Forestry:

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The deep gratitude of the Government and people of the Union goes out to Dr. Bennett for the magnificent service he has rendered to the cause of conservation in this country. He cheerfully bore the heavy strain to which he was subjected during his sojourn with us, and has accomplished all and more than was expected of him. His visit has aroused widespread public interest, which augurs well for the future, and his splendid report marks a new and important milestone in the progress of the effective conservation of our greatest asset – the soil of South Africa.⁶³

The report met with wide acclaim, nationally and internationally, with requests for copies coming from countries around the world.⁶⁴ Despite its apparent propaganda coup, the government had little opportunity for self-congratulation. Almost immediately upon its publication, the report was employed as the basis for attacks from both right and left. Although superficially in ‘a unanimity rarely achieved’, the press coverage in fact reveals diverse and conflicting political standpoints and agendas.⁶⁵ The Natal English-language newspaper the *Daily News* expressed the opinion that the government probably did not have the ‘courage’ to take any measures that might prove unpopular with white farmers.⁶⁶ The Afrikaans-language *Transvaler*, by contrast, called on the government to provide more aid to white farmers.⁶⁷ All urged the state to take action, but disagreed as to precisely what action – the stick of legal enforcement or the carrot of farmer subsidy – was appropriate. There was disagreement too on the whole question of the ‘native areas’, with some commentators calling for the allocation of more land to ‘natives’ while others called for further forced removals of ‘natives’ to prevent further denudation. Perhaps most damaging to the government in political terms, *Die Vaderland* attacked Smuts directly for being too busy with ‘the world’ while South Africa’s land was being lost to soil erosion.⁶⁸ The accompanying cartoon shows Smuts as a Don Quixote-style mounted knight bearing British arms on his shield, off to do some overseas battle while a traditionally-attired Afrikaans woman points to the devastated landscape behind him.⁶⁹ If Bennett’s visit had indeed been intended to bolster Smuts politically, it was far from being an unqualified success, with Smuts’s Afrikaner nationalist political opponents portraying Bennett’s findings as an indication of government’s neglect of the largely-Afrikaans white farming community. As is well known, Smuts lost power to the National Party in 1948, marking the advent of formal apartheid. The rural vote, especially in the Transvaal, was pivotal in securing the National Party victory.⁷⁰

The report itself had a number of weaknesses and omissions, although few pointed these out at the time and many are more obvious only with hindsight. Although nominally calling on the whole country to tackle the ‘national menace’ of soil erosion, it was biased towards soil conservation on privately-owned (which essentially meant white) farms. Not only was his bias inherent in what Bennett had been exposed to during his tour, but it was also part of his own personal and professional baggage. The soil conservation model Bennett brought

with him from the United States was that of soil conservation associations in local soil conservation districts. It was one that he advocated repeatedly while in South Africa and which formed the core recommendation in his report: that it should be not the state but *farmers themselves* who took responsibility for soil conservation *on their own land*.⁷¹ The role of the state, according to Bennett, was to provide education, technical advice and financial assistance. Bennett was especially ill-equipped to comprehend the true causes of soil erosion, and thus the real constraints on soil conservation, in 'native areas'. Nowhere does he display any recognition or understanding of factors such as inequitable land distribution, the migrant labour system, or any other aspect of race-based socio-economic marginalisation and political oppression. Few black South Africans were 'farmers' as Bennett would have understood the term; fewer still had secure rights to the land that they farmed. Even in white areas, it is not clear that the American model could work in such a different rural culture, characterised by conservatism and tradition; or in such a profoundly undemocratic political system, and one in which the rural white vote had such disproportionate political significance.

Bennett's legacy can also be seen in the Soil Conservation Act. Passed in 1946, work on the Act began soon after Bennett's visit. In his submissions early in 1945 to the Social and Economic Planning Council, set up to implement the country's post-war reconstruction, Chief of the Division of Soil and Veld Conservation J.C. Ross envisaged 'enabling legislation of a comprehensive character'.⁷² The public and media were also calling for the implementation of legislation. Interestingly, it was not government lawyers but members of the private organisation the National Veld Trust who drew up the initial draft Soil Conservation Bill.⁷³ Based largely and explicitly on the American prototype, it had four central features: the creation of a statutory body to carry out a national programme of soil conservation; the mandatory division of the whole country into soil conservation districts; the election in each district of a committee with powers to carry out soil conservation measures; and the establishment of a national soil conservation fund. The Act as finally passed was considerably watered down, with only weak powers of enforcement, which was left largely to peer pressure among the members of each soil conservation district. This is now regarded as one of its central flaws.⁷⁴ The Bennett model, which seems to have worked reasonably well in the United States, was never wholly effectual in white farming areas of South Africa.

The Act was even more of a failure in 'native areas'. There was from the start, and remains to this day, disagreement as to whether the Act even applied in these areas. Although Ross and the Department of Agriculture held that it applied to the whole country, the Department of Native Affairs, from the Secretary down, regarded themselves as exempt from its provisions.⁷⁵ Instead, and especially after 1948, they pursued a decidedly un-Bennett-like policy of soil conservation, based on enforcement, coercion and punishment in the so-called 'betterment

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schemes'. These are now recognised as having been at least as much about social control as saving the soil, and were the source of considerable resentment and resistance on the part of their supposed beneficiaries.⁷⁶

CONCLUSIONS

Although hailed at the time as a triumph, boosting public awareness and bolstering official efforts to combat soil erosion, a more critical reading of Bennett's 1944 visit to South Africa tells a more ambiguous tale. Bennett unwittingly allowed his visit to be manipulated for political ends, paying scant attention to native areas and being entirely uncritical of the country's segregationist policies – policies that were themselves a major exacerbating factor in soil erosion. Part of his legacy was the adoption of soil conservation policy and legislation quite inappropriate to the South African social, cultural and political context. Bennett's thinking saw soil conservation as grounded in democracy and individual rights and freedoms. His was also a nation-building vision, forged in the American dust bowl and depression. South Africa was hardly ready for such a project, riven as the country was by social and political divisions.

Bad enough in 1944, each of these divisions deepened after 1948. White farmers were allowed to get away with unsound farming practices, if this meant securing their political support. Black South Africans, denied either equitable access to rural land or full access to the urban economy, unavoidably pursued land use practices that exacerbated soil erosion. As in other departments, English-speaking officials in both Agriculture and Native Affairs were pushed to the margins by Afrikaner Nationalist yes-men.⁷⁷ Whereas the Bennett visit might have heralded a new era of soil conservation, one that could have placed South Africa at the forefront internationally, soil conservation was instead sacrificed to an ethnically nationalist and racist political agenda.

NOTES

¹ In addition to copious coverage in newspapers and agricultural magazines, there were also numerous pamphlets and booklets aimed at public education about soil conservation e.g. Sam de Kock, 'Bewaar ons Bodem', *Kennis vir Almal* 33 (1945); J.C. Fick, *The Abuse of the Soil, Veld and Water Resources of South Africa* (South African Interests Group, 1944); Captain E.E. Harris, *African Education: Save the Land* (Union Defence Force, 1944); Melanchthon (nom-de-plume of Patrick Duncan), *The Enemy* (1943); N.H. Porritt, *How to Save our Soil* (Cape Town: Longmans, Green and Co., 1948); C.A. Smith, 'The Soil Declares War on Man', *South African Affairs Pamphlets* no. 3, (1944); C.J.J. Van Rensburg and E.M. Palmer, *New World to Win* (1946). This 1940s soil conservation movement formed a crescendo within the wider emergence of conservationism in South

Africa's farming areas, described by William Beinart in *The Rise of Conservation in South Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

² Wellington Brink, *Big Hugh: The Father of Soil Conservation* (New York: Macmillan, 1951).

³ The paper draws primarily upon South African sources, both primary and secondary. Much of it is based on the records of the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Native Affairs in the South African national archives. The former department was responsible for soil conservation in white-owned farming areas, while the latter was responsible for soil conservation on what were known at the time as 'native reserves', later as 'homelands' or 'bantustans'. Contemporary secondary sources consulted include the South African press as well as pamphlets and magazines like *Veld Trust News*, official organ of the popular conservation organisation known as the National Veld Trust. Bennett wrote a report on his visit to the country, published as *Soil Erosion and Land Use in the Union of South Africa* (Pretoria: Department of Agriculture and Forestry, 1945), and the paper devotes attention both to the report itself and to its reception. Other secondary sources consulted include Wellington Brink's *Big Hugh: The Father of Soil Conservation* (New York: Macmillan, 1951); D. Harper Simms's *The Soil Conservation Service* (New York and Washington: Praeger, 1970); Donald Worster's *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); and Charles M. Hardin's *The Politics of Agriculture: Soil Conservation and the Struggle for Power in Rural America* (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1952).

⁴ G.V. Jacks and R.O. Whyte, *The Rape of the Earth: A World Survey of Soil Erosion* (London: Faber & Faber, 1939). Interestingly, the book was published in the United States under the less controversial title *Vanishing Lands*. This quotation is from the American edition (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1939), 278.

⁵ Jacks and Whyte, *Vanishing Lands*, 280.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ My main sources for this section are Brink, *Big Hugh*; Harper Simms, *The Soil Conservation Service*; and Worster, *Dust Bowl*. The earlier two works are both highly hagiographic, and it is sometimes difficult to disentangle legend from fact.

⁸ Bennett's speeches and writings are full of biblical reference and resonance, and he is often described as a crusader, evangelist, missionary or even apostle.

⁹ William Beinart and Peter Coates, *Environment and History: The Taming of Nature in the USA and South Africa* (London: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁰ Harper Simms, *The Soil Conservation Service*, 15-16.

¹¹ Information in this paragraph is from Harper Simms, *The Soil Conservation Service*.

¹² Hardin, *The Politics of Agriculture*, 97.

¹³ The publication of his 1939 book *Soil Conservation* did much to enhance and expand his reputation, especially internationally.

¹⁴ Copies of these speeches were provided to me by the United States Department of Agriculture.

¹⁵ Address by H.H. Bennett at Wisconsin Farm and Home Week, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 31 January 1940.

¹⁶ Address by H.H. Bennett to the Royal Canadian Institute, Toronto, Canada, 7 November 1942.

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¹⁷ Pretoria, Central Archives Depot (CAD), Department of Agriculture (Landbou), LDB 3246 R4250/11, file 'Division of Soil and Veld Conservation, Dr Hugh Bennett: Proposed Visit to South Africa', Legation of the United States of America, Cape Town to the Secretary for Agriculture and Forestry, 27 January 1944.

¹⁸ LDB 3246 R4250/11, P.R. Viljoen (Secretary for Agriculture) to Secretary for External Affairs, 1 February 1944.

¹⁹ CAD, Treasury (Tesourie), TES F20/655, file 'Entertainment. Dr Bennett. Chief, Soil Conservation Service, United States Department of Agriculture', Secretary for Agriculture and Forestry to Secretary for Finance, 2 March 1944.

²⁰ Brink, *Big Hugh*, 137.

²¹ Officials in both departments, needless to say, were themselves white.

²² LDB 3246 R4250/11, file 'Division of Soil and Veld Conservation, Dr Hugh Bennett: Proposed Visit to South Africa'.

²³ CAD, Department of Native Affairs (Natuurlesake), NTS 9538 138/400/110, file 'Soil Erosion Works. Visit of Dr Bennett, American Soil Erosion Expert', Secretary for Native Affairs to Secretary for Agriculture and Forestry, 19 February 1944.

²⁴ LDB 3246 R4250/11, marginal note on letter from Secretary for Native Affairs to Secretary for Agriculture and Forestry, 19 February 1944.

²⁵ LDB 3246 R4250/11, Secretary for Agriculture and Forestry to Secretary for Native Affairs, 23 February 1944.

²⁶ Eventually, in the 1960s, these territories were granted full independence by the British government as Lesotho, Botswana and Swaziland. On the political history of the High Commission Territories see Ronald Hyam, *The Failure of South African Expansion, 1908–1948* (London: Macmillan, 1972).

²⁷ LDB 3246 R4250/11, Secretary for Agriculture and Forestry to Mr Priestman, Administrative Secretary to the High Commissioner, 6 March 1944; and NTS 9538 138/400/110, J.C. Ross, Chief of the Division of Soil and Veld Conservation, to R.W. Thornton, Agricultural Department, Maseru, Basutoland, 30 March 1944.

²⁸ Many agriculture officials in Basutoland were South African nationals ('Anti-Erosion Steps in Basutoland', *Star*, 31 August 1944). R.W. Thornton, Director of Agriculture in Basutoland, had been a senior official in both the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Native Affairs in South Africa prior to his appointment in Basutoland. See Thackway Driver, 'Anti-Erosion Policies in the Mountain Areas of Lesotho: The South African Connection', *Environment and History* 5 (1999): 1–25.

²⁹ NTS 9538 138/400/110, J.C. Ross, Chief of the Division of Soil and Veld Conservation to R.W. Thornton, Agricultural Department, Maseru, Basutoland, 30 March 1944.

³⁰ LDB 3246 R4250/11, Ross to Secretary for Agriculture and Forestry, 30 March 1944.

³¹ LDB 3246 R4250/11, Secretary for Native Affairs to Secretary for Agriculture and Forestry, 17 April 1944.

³² LDB 3246 R4250/11, Secretary for Agriculture and Forestry to Secretary for Native Affairs, 24 April 1944.

³³ LDB 3246 R4250/11, Legation of the United States of America to Secretary for External Affairs, 22 May 1944.

³⁴ The journey was not without incident. As Brink wrote in *Big Hugh* (138): 'The great RAF hydroplane to which he had transferred from an ATC bomber at Accra made a forced landing on the Congo River and was eight days being repaired – long enough for Big Hugh to get well acquainted with equatorial Africa and its mosquitoes and tsetse flies. He wasn't any happier for this episode.'

³⁵ LDB 3246 R4250/11, Secretary for Agriculture and Forestry to Deputy Director of Information, 1 July 1944.

³⁶ For an analysis of this phenomenon and its associated professional biases see Robert Chambers, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (London: Longman, 1982).

³⁷ LDB 3246 R4250/11, Ross to Secretary for Agriculture and Forestry, 17 July 1944.

³⁸ As a sample: 'Planning to Save the Soil', *Natal Mercury*, 11 August 1944; 'Both Townsfolk and Farmers Fully Aware of Soil Erosion Menace', *Natal Witness*, 12 August 1944; 'Dr Bennett's Union Tour Curtailed', *Star*, 16 August 1944; 'Soil Erosion in Eastern Transvaal', *Star*, 19 August 1944; 'The Native Reserves', *Sunday Times* 20 August 1944.

³⁹ LDB 3246 R4250/11, telegrams from Ross to Viljoen.

⁴⁰ LDB 3246 R4250/11, telegram from Ross to Viljoen, 16 September 1944.

⁴¹ 'Anti-Erosion Steps in Basutoland', *Star*, 31 August 1944.

⁴² NTS 9538 138/400/110, memorandum from H.R. Roberts to the Secretary for Native Affairs, 15 August 1944.

⁴³ LDB 3246 R4250/11, telegram from Ross to Viljoen, 16 September 1944.

⁴⁴ NTS 9538 138/400/110, telegram from Govt Umtata to Roberts c/o Natives Pretoria, 26 August 1944. It is not made clear whether the perceived 'propaganda value' was simply in terms of convincing native leaders to practise soil conservation or in terms of convincing critics that the South African government had the natives' interests at heart.

⁴⁵ NTS 9538 138/400/110, letter from Chief Magistrate of the Transkeian Territories to H.R. Roberts, 28 August 1944.

⁴⁶ NTS 9538 138/400/110, note from Secretary for Native Affairs to Chief Native Commissioner, Umtata, 8 September 1944.

⁴⁷ 'Planning to Save the Soil', *Natal Mercury*, 11 August 1944.

⁴⁸ 'Both Townsfolk and Farmers Fully Aware of Erosion Menace', *Natal Witness*, 12 August 1944.

⁴⁹ 'Soil Erosion in Eastern Transvaal: Damage to Veld by Natives', *Star*, 19 August 1944.

⁵⁰ NTS 9538 138/400/110, Roberts's annotation to the *Star* article of 19 August 1944, dated 22 August.

⁵¹ 'The Native Reserves', *Sunday Times*, 20 August 1944.

⁵² 'Enough Land in Reserves? American Soil Expert Criticised', *Guardian*, 24 August 1944.

⁵³ 'A Nation Imperilled: Dr. Bennett Views South Africa', *Veld Trust News*, October 1944, 5.

⁵⁴ 'A Nation Imperilled: Dr. Bennett Views South Africa', *Veld Trust News*, October 1944, 3.

⁵⁵ 'Dr. Bennett's Tour. III. – The Native Areas', *Daily Representative*, 28 September 1944.

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- ⁵⁶ H.H. Bennett, *Soil Erosion and Land Use in the Union of South Africa* (Pretoria, 1945).
- ⁵⁷ Translation: 'South Africa Heads for Danger'.
- ⁵⁸ The *Huisgenoot* article of 3 November is the best example.
- ⁵⁹ LDB 3246 R4250/11, file 'Division of Soil and Veld Conservation, Dr Hugh Bennett: Proposed Visit to South Africa'.
- ⁶⁰ Various *Veld Trust News* editorials and letters, 1944–1946.
- ⁶¹ CAD, LDB 3228 R4250, Ross to the Secretary of the Social and Economic Planning Council, 19 February 1945.
- ⁶² CAD, LDB 3253 R4250/21, D.L. Smit, Secretary for Native Affairs, 'A New Era of Reclamation', 9 December 1944.
- ⁶³ J.G.N. Strauss, foreword to Bennett, *Soil Erosion and Land Use in the Union of South Africa*.
- ⁶⁴ These included Nyasaland, Australia and Burma, and the High Commissioner in Cape Town requested no less than 47 copies for despatch to the High Commission Territories, the Colonial Office, the Dominions Office and other interested departments in London (LDB 3246 R4250/11, various letters to the Department of Agriculture).
- ⁶⁵ 'Warning to South Africa', *The Forum*, 21 April 1945.
- ⁶⁶ *Daily News*, cited in *The Forum*, 21 April 1945.
- ⁶⁷ *Die Transvaler*, cited in *The Forum*, 21 April 1945.
- ⁶⁸ Editorial cartoon by Ivanoff in *Die Vaderland*, reprinted in *The Forum*, 21 April 1945.
- ⁶⁹ One of the things occupying Smuts, apart of course from World War Two, was the founding of the United Nations – hardly insignificant international affairs!
- ⁷⁰ See D. O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years: The Apartheid State and the Politics of the National Party, 1948–1994* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1996).
- ⁷¹ Bennett, *Soil Erosion and Land Use in the Union of South Africa*.
- ⁷² LDB 3228 R4250, Ross to the Secretary of the Social and Economic Planning Council, 19 February 1945.
- ⁷³ LDB 3253 R4250/21, file 'Draft Soil Conservation Bill, 1945'.
- ⁷⁴ See Beinart and Coates, *Environment and History*; P. Delius and S. Schirmer, 'Soil Conservation in a Racially Ordered Society: South Africa 1930–1970', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26 (2000): 719–42; M.A. Rabie, 'Soil', chapter 8 in R.F. Fuggle and M.A. Rabie (eds.), *Environmental Management in South Africa* (Cape Town: Juta, 1992).
- ⁷⁵ LDB 3253 R4250/21, Secretary for Native Affairs to Secretary for Agriculture, 26 March 1946 (and ensuing correspondence).
- ⁷⁶ W. Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa* (Oxford, 1994).
- ⁷⁷ D. O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years*.

