

PROSPECTING WITH Mrs LUCY MOLTENO

Namaqualand and Namibia

Peter Gibbs

Introduction

This is an account of a two-month-long trip in 1953 that Mrs Lucy Molteno, aged 79, made in her old Dodge pick-up across some of the most remote parts of Namaqualand in the Northern Cape and through Namibia (South West Africa). The author, Peter Gibbs, was a very young man at the time. His brother, John Mike, was engaged to Lucy Molteno's granddaughter, Margaret Williamson – which may be how Lucy came to take Peter on as her driver. He kept a diary and used it 45 years later to write this manuscript. Shortly after this trip, Peter and a friend became the first persons to walk from the source of the Orange River in Mont aux Source in the Drakensberg, along the river and, when it became navigable, to canoe down the its whole length to its mouth on the Atlantic Ocean where South Africa and Namibia meet. He has also written the story of this extraordinarily courageous adventure, and made it available privately.

In the account here of his journey one gets a real sense of what travelling in these desolate and almost uninhabited parts of Southern Africa was like in the middle of the 20th century. The only pity is that we learn nothing about the lives and stories of either Lucy Molteno, who very much kept herself to herself, or the three men he and Lucy were travelling with – John van Wyck, de Vries and Takker the prospector. Peter enjoyed these men's company and their stories around the camp fire. They had many laughs together. But he didn't ask many questions about their lives or their families.

His account here should be read in conjunction with other pieces on this website. Notably, Lucy Molteno's short piece which she entitled *An Account of how I became a Woman Prospector*. And her more substantial memoir, *What a Strange Thing is Memory*. I have written Introductions to both these pieces which the reader may find helpful.

Sadly, either Lucy never took any photos on her prospecting trips – which seems likely – or they have been lost. Google Images, however, has a wealth of maps and photographs which give a most wonderful sense of this stark and awesome South African landscape.

Finally, I would like to make clear that I have made a small number of cuts of passages to Peter Gibbs' manuscript not relevant to the actual trip. These omissions are indicated by dots. I have also slightly rewritten his text where infelicities of style and punctuation demanded it and have corrected one or two factual mistakes. The footnotes are mine and have been added for readers who may not be familiar with particular members of the family, Afrikaans words, and so on.

Robert Molteno

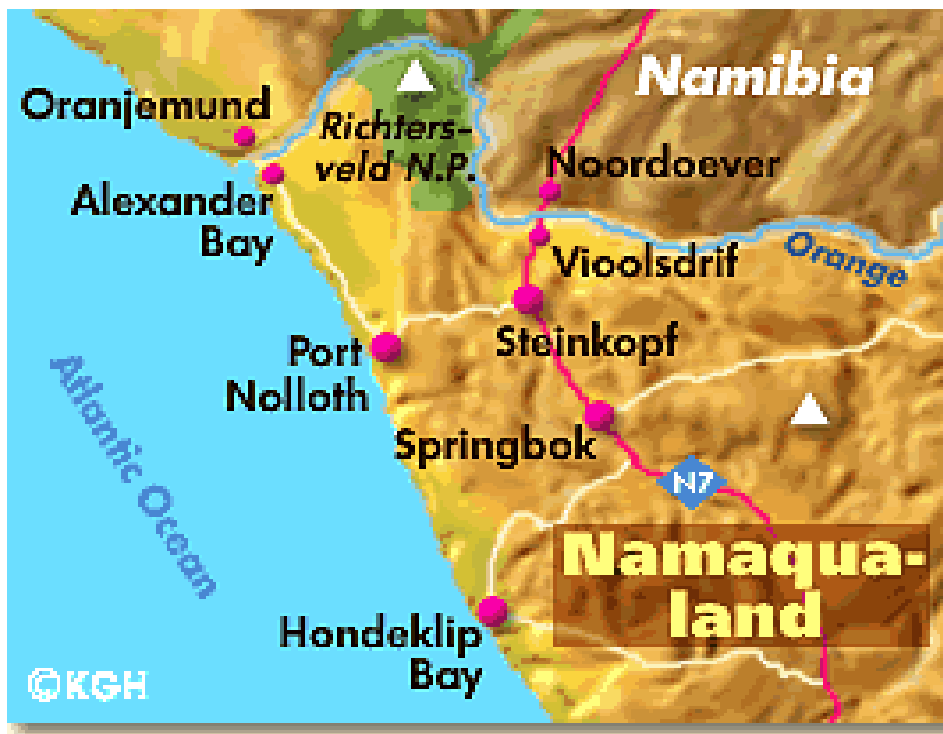
July 2013

Setting off for Namaqualand

We left Cape Town on Sunday 15th February 1953 with the old Dodge pick-up truck well loaded with the Warsop Drill and various cases, Bill¹ on the seat between us and Mrs Carol Williamson, Margaret's mother, squeezed beside her mother as we had first to load up with some supplies from Krom Vlei near Elgin.² This entailed crossing Sir Lowrie's Pass, where the engine boiled. At the Moltenos' farm the children played with Bill as if they had never seen a puppy before, while I was asked to retrieve some new-born kittens from the thatched roof eaves. We stayed the night there, John Molteno rather wearily giving his opinion to his mother about the prospect of discovering gold on this trip.

Next day we got away north through Malmesbury over the Gray's Pass where, with the temperature outside at 110°F, the car again boiled. Mrs Molteno had frequent cups of tea. I noted in my diary that evening at Vanrhynsdorp that, when she does finally die, it will not be from the heat, which dismays her not at all. Happily, the hotel did not object to dogs, so Bill was made comfortable.

Twenty-five miles north of town next morning we visited the monazite mine. It was a rough road which led to a solitary rocky kopjie, the only place in the world, we were told, where monazite is found in



Namaqualand (showing the Richtersveld in the westernmost bend of the Orange River) (from Google Maps)

quantity (monazite is, I think, a mineral containing uranium). Mr Small, the manager, had come down from Oxford in '51. He knew a few of my brother John Mike's contemporaries, and promised that if I went to 'The Dog and Duck' near Keble [College] I would get a beer free on his name. We lunched at a dirty siding appropriately called Bitterfontein and went on to tea at Garies, a more picturesque *dorp* surrounded as it was by pretty

Namaqualand *kopjies*. The following wind caused the car to boil frequently, but we arrived at our

¹ Bill is Peter's young puppy.

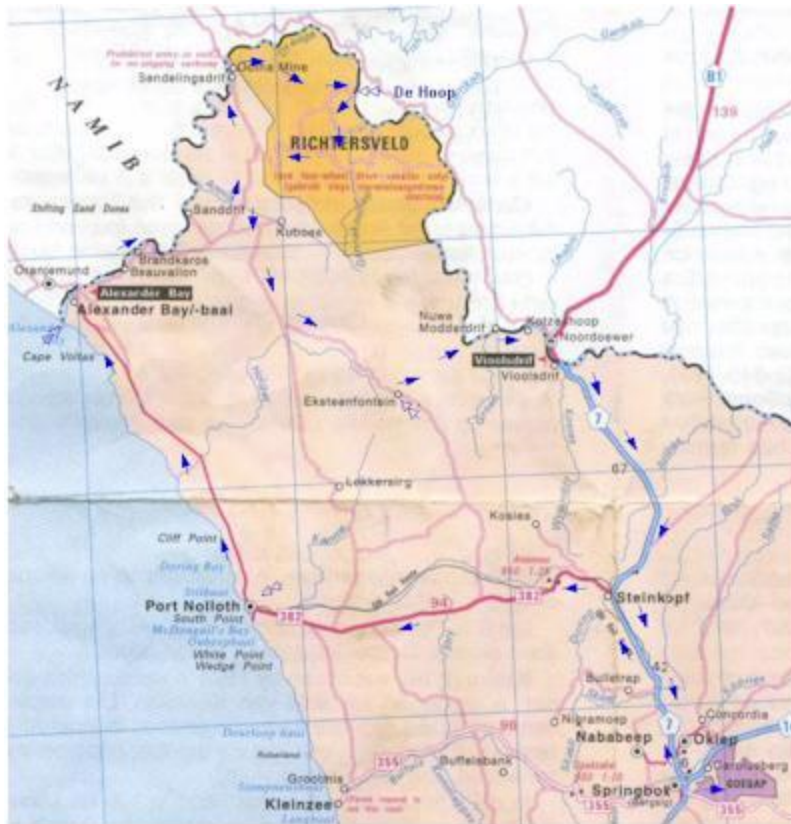
² Krom Vlei was a small cottage on Ted and Harry Molteno's fruit farm at Elgin which Carol Williamson and her children had the use of for many years.

destination, Springbok, that evening. I was not impressed with the place, and trouble was in store for Bill. There were two hotels – the Masonic and the Springbok. The Masonic was managed by a cringing man called Shapiro. I procured milk from the kitchen and gave Bill a couple of dog biscuits. He was so hungry that he tried to swallow the biscuits whole....

In the afternoon we drove to Steinkopf to meet John van Wyck, the Coloured foreman Mrs Molteno had used for some years, and to prepare for the Richtersveld on the morrow. Steinkopf was a pleasant-looking place with one Post Office, an Algemene Handelaar shop,³ a police post and several one-roomed houses. The men wore stetson hats like cowboys.....

Exploring the Richtersveld

We set off next morning on the first of ten days exploring in the Richtersveld. This is situated in the great final bend of the Orange River enclosing desolate hills and cactus trees and flat grassy *laagtes* (shallow



valleys). But first we picked up 'the men' that John had collected, de Vries and Takker the prospector. Both had some Baster Hottentot background mixed with a touch of White, maybe a touch of Bushman too.⁴ Takker was in his late 60s, with grey hair, and had fought in the Boer War, as I later learnt, and de Vries perhaps 50.

We stopped at the top of Annalies Pass by a spring under a palm tree, and below us stretching into the distance lay the Richtersveld in a series of folds. We took a sandy track to a farm called '29' where the owner siphoned 2 gallons out of his jeep as his pump was dry, which gave us a half tank plus 4 gallons of petrol in tins. We filled all the water containers and the 10-gallon milk churn.

Richtersveld
(The region is much bigger than the national park,
and stretches from Steinkopf and Port Nolloth up
to the Orange River)

³ A general dealer's, typical of small South African dorps at that time, and selling just about everything that was useful.

⁴ This remote region has South Africans with some of the most complicated mixed ancestries of any part of the country.



Welcome to the Richtersveld

The road was now worse than any I had driven on before, and the passes, of which there were several, steeper. The country had had good rains some days before giving green grass to the veldt, but there were large deep dongas in the road and some of the mud was still soft. The hot wind followed us, so we boiled frequently. We went over Kliphoogtes Pass, a gradient of about 1 in 5, and camped 10 miles further on, just 4 miles short of Modderdrift on the Orange River. The 10-gallon churn had sprung a leak, so we topped up the other water containers. That evening with the camp fire, the clear night sky and the first-rate company of Takker, John and De Vries was really enjoyable. Mrs Molteno always retired into her tent and was usually content with just a cup of tea and a biscuit.

In the morning we had to go over Hell's Kloof Pass. This was so steep on the other side that the Dodge felt as if it would start to slide with the wheels locked. The track led down to a very dry area with rugged canyons and mountains – terribly inhospitable. The men climbed out of the canvas-covered back covered in dust. We made camp in a river bed where there were a few trees. In the morning we went off at Mrs Molteno's bidding to take samples from her claim, an abandoned mine shaft. The walk up was hot and the one waterbag shared among us was soon depleted. The rock contained pyrites which, Takker knowingly asserted, was a good sign.

In the afternoon I took Bill and followed the tracks of the 'prospectors' who were exploring the hills north of the camp. Though cooler – it had tried to rain just a few drops – it was still enervatingly hot,

and when we did catch up with them they had finished the water in the bag. 'Die berge hierond is dood',⁵ said Takker, meaning that the area contained no minerals. It certainly looked dead in other respects, with occasional 'halfmens' cactus trees on the black boulder-strewn slopes and a few acacia thorns in the valley bottoms. But as we explored up a long kloof we found spoor of jackal, lammergeier⁶ nests on inaccessible cliffs, and a leopard's lair. Bill was so footsore that I carried him the last couple of miles.

All indications of rain had gone, and that night was a corker with the added torment of mosquitoes. John's arms were covered in spots of blood, but between swatting them the men told stories around the fire. Takker, the oldest, had been a young man in the Boer War, and had spent most of his life since prospecting. He had worked on water wells in the Kalahari 25 years before for 5 years, and had a detailed knowledge of the Richtersveld and the country north of the Orange. He told us a story about a poisonous 'tok-tokkie' beetle that (for some reason not recorded) trailed a man's footsteps all around South West [Africa] and eventually caught up with him and killed him.

Reaching the Orange River

Exhausted with the heat through the night we chose to spend the next day on the Orange River to collect water and cool off. A sand track led down the valley to the tree-lined river. The river had risen



The Orange River flowing through the Richtersveld today

⁵ Literally, 'the mountains round here are dead.'

⁶ The Bearded Vulture.

with rains and the volume was impressive: some 200 yards wide and running midstream at 5 mph. With Bill I walked 3 miles downstream past some rapids where the width reduced to 75 yards and the current increased to 15 mph or so. The water was turbulent and must have been deep for such a volume to pass through with little fuss. I was imagining navigating it in the canoe. The mountains either side were barren and big. The Trig Survey map (which I did not then have) shows the Stinkfontein Berge, which we had skirted, dropping in 12 miles from 4,039 feet to perhaps 500 at river level. Descriptive names like Mt Terror, Devils Tooth, The Seven Sisters, Dolomite Peak and Rubble Hill are apt, while Joffe's Diggings, Prospector's Diggings and Claim Peak tell of earlier interest in the minerals of these hills, and one wonders who Joffe was and would like to have heard his story.

I had a lovely swim, not venturing far from the bank due to the current and vaguely thinking about The Great Snake, which, like the Loch Ness Monster, has been seen in The Great Bend of the river. Of this perhaps more when we do the river trip.

We filled the containers and set off to camp towards Kliphoogtes. It rained and brought a sweet smell out of the sand and rocks. The Dodge managed Hell's Kloof in first while the men walked the steepest parts. That night it rained a bit too much, so I sought refuge in the cab.

The Old Lady sent the men off prospecting next day while I climbed a local hill, Bill managing unaided. While writing letters in the shade of an overhanging rock overlooking camp, I saw a donkey cart approach, so I went down as the Old Lady was alone. It was a middle-aged, weather-beaten trekboer-cum-prospector⁷ who said he was looking for some mules of his. In the cart was his wife, a young child, a couple of blankets, pots and pans. They were not following any road, just 'looking for mules'. I wished them good luck.

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The Sandveld

Beyond Kliphoogtes we turned off the main Modderfontein track and drove for 8 miles into completely different country, the Sandveld. Here were herds of wild horses and donkeys and a smell of the sea. Takker had an idea that tantalite could be found in the vicinity. It was fetching £1 a pound at the time. We walked miles along a mountain ridge across some plateaux, and in mid-afternoon dropped down into a kloof which happily had some water. I carried Bill much of the return journey, getting back to the Old Lady and the car at sunset and sadly reporting 'no Eldorado'. Working on the principle that the monazite mine was found in association with copper, she decided to move next into Bushmanland, where there is known to be copper. We camped at a lovely spot by a lone tree. The night was clear, cool, no mosquitoes or ants, and a three-quarter moon lit up the mountains in a ghostly light. I felt ignorant about the stars and decided then to start learning their names and celestial navigation.

We reached Steinkop with no petrol to spare, having passed through farm '29' and found the pump still empty. Just two hours in the dorp to collect mail, buy food, and Takker to get drunk, then we filled cans at Jakkalswater and set off into Bushmanland guided by Takker, in a sinuous line, and in search of a chap called Edward Cloete, who Mrs Molteno desperately wanted to see. We did not find him, and camped

⁷ Trekboer was the name given to any itinerant Afrikaans-speaking farmer who was too poor to own land and who eked a precarious existence grazing whatever animals he had in relatively uninhabited and marginal districts of South Africa.



The Sandveld in Northern Namaqualand

near a deserted copper mine, the kind of place, surrounded by *kopjies* and cactus, where you might expect to see a covey of cowboys riding out. It was chilly when I awoke just before sunrise to see the men still sitting round the fire and Takker taking off his car tyre boots⁸ and putting his bare feet into the flames to warm them up.

Having cooked the Old Lady some breakfast, I followed the men's spoor along a sandy *vlakke*⁹ and saw a black snake with a small head about 5 foot long. De Vries said it was a *spuigslang* (spitting cobra) and John told how he had nearly lost his sight when one spat in both his eyes. We climbed up to a disused copper mine and took some samples, getting back at midday.

Here Mrs Molteno had the idea that Edward Cloete might be at Vioolsdrift on the River, in which direction we headed with de Vries as *padwyser* (guide). What a refreshing and transformed stretch of river here, with orange groves along the flood plain and palm trees! The width was only about 100 yards, and in consequence the river ran swiftly. We found Cloete, and I had to interpret Mrs Molteno's highfalutin English and his pidgin English-cum-Afrikaans – no easy job for them to understand each other. I refreshed myself with a swim, coming out caked in mud as the water itself contains 30% sediment and the banks were soft mud. We came across a chap who had broken down with a leaking radiator whom we could luckily help with some radiator cement, and in turn he gave us some lovely grapes from the Olifants River.

⁸ A cheap, home-made form of footwear in South Africa is made from cutting up chunks of old motorcar tyres to use as soles.

⁹ A stretch of low-lying land.

Next morning, before leaving the area, we drove back to the abandoned copper mine and hammered in a painted claim stake in Mrs Molteno's name. I forget the area to which this gave her mineral rights (excluding diamonds),¹⁰ but I know the outlay at 2 shillings and 6 pence for registering it was not too bad at the price!

We camped in the dark and I played some *liedjies* on my mouth-organ before going to sleep. In the morning, while driving to Springbok, Mrs Molteno said to me: "I could not get to sleep for a while last night because someone in the road was playing a piano accordion." I asked her if the person was playing it well, and she replied, "Oh yes, quite well, but I do hate the instrument!" I took the hint and decided to keep the mouth-organ more private....

We spent the weekend of the end of February in Springbok, going to O'Kiep for Sunday morning service.... The plan now was to do an exploratory trip through South West Africa (SWA)¹¹ visiting what mines we could. De Vries had known of this and was reluctant to come, but I managed to talk him into it, which was fortunate as otherwise all the camp chores would have been mine!

Having labelled and packed a number of rock samples and sent them off to a laboratory in Pretoria, we left at midday on the 2nd of March and drove to the ferry crossing at Goodhouse¹² by evening. Here was



The road today by the Orange River at Goodhouse

another splendid example of irrigation on the fertile banks from a weir on the Namaqualand side. The farm run by Van der Heenan grows several thousand orange, peach, banana, mango, lemon and guava trees plus a vineyard of grapes. This last was surprising due to the heat which had reached 120°F the previous month. The valley here is deeply incised between black mountains.

The river was about 150 yards across and running strongly. It had risen 2 feet in the night, so the end of the

¹⁰ Prospectors were allowed to look for any minerals *except* diamonds. The ban was to protect the monopoly of the De Beers Company. This company had been founded by Cecil Rhodes in 1888, before he became Prime Minister of the Cape. The ban provides a thought-provoking example of a company using its close connections with government to protect its commercial interests by means of criminalising free market activity. The result in South Africa, in practice, was a constant temptation on the part of ordinary people to engage in IDB – Illegal Diamond Buying, which was a heavily punished criminal offence.

¹¹ Today called Namibia, and comprising a gigantic slab of Africa lying between the Northern Cape and Angola..

¹² One of the rare crossing points over the Orange into Namibia.

pontoon was not flush with the bank, which needed shovelling. The pontoon was a simple but effective platform taking a single car or lorry. It was connected to a steel wire slung across the river by two short ropes attached to wheels that ran on the wire. By getting an angle to the craft, the current propelled the boat across. The current was estimated at 7 mph, and we drifted across in 10 minutes, ripples running around the craft. It had been built by Carl Weidner,¹³ whose fame was enhanced by his sense of humour. On one occasion during rough water, a car slipped off the end of the pontoon when it was half way across. The irate owner was furious with Carl and demanded recompense. Carl, unperturbed, said to him, "Man, I'll be generous with you, and considering how far you got, that will be just the half fare!" When we arrived on the far bank 2 feet of sand had to be shovelled to close the gap on to the steep bank. The back wheels proceeded to plough into it and sink with the Dodge angled up the bank. But with the three strong helpers and De Vries we made the gradient.

Into South West Africa (Namibia)

The first 20 miles towards Warmbad was heavy sand through desolate mountains. It was like driving along the contours of a ploughed field. Then it hardened and became badly corrugated with occasional washed out dongas across the road. Driving at over 45 mph to skim the corrugations, the danger was that you were on to the dongas with no braking distance, and we crashed through more than one with damage to the shock absorbers and springs. There was a story heard in the Warmbad hotel: "Man, how could I see the donkey? It was lying in one of the corrugations!"

We camped near Keetmanshoop. Thunderclouds were building up with showers all around. Another long slow day towards Marienthal under cumulus clouds with the country looking greener from recent rains. That night, camping under trees and with the grass green, de Vries told me the story of the 'Halfmen' trees – the cacti with two arms and a head looking north. A long time ago there had been a terrible drought, and the Bushmen trekked south and crossed the Groot Rivier¹⁴ into (for them) forbidden territory in search of *kougoed*, a plant which can be chewed to give moisture. Behind them suddenly they heard thunderclaps and turned in despair to see it raining far away in their own country. They were petrified in this position and grew into these 'halfmen' trees. That is the legend, but the botanical explanation is no doubt that the flower faces towards the sun, which is always northwards just south of the Tropic of Capricorn.

Windhoek, the capital, was prettily set among hills, about the size of Paarl, with one main street, a residential area below the centre and the government buildings on a hill overlooking town. We drove straight through to find a camping spot 5 miles on, with trees, birds, long green grass and signs of game. This was strange country to de Vries. He did not want to be left alone next morning while we went into town, so we packed up the camp. First stop was the office of the Mines Commissioner to enquire the laws of the land. I marked off the prohibited areas of the Sperregebiet¹⁵ and others on the maps we had brought with us. The Old Lady did a garrulous round of all the officials, talking about irrelevant topics of our trip, which they took in good part.... I had the Dodge repaired for its broken shock absorbers.

¹³ This was probably the father of the P. Weidner who wrote such a generous tribute to Lucy Molteno following her death in 1969. His letter to the papers is reproduced on this website.

¹⁴ I.e. The Orange River.

¹⁵ The area, literally the Prohibited Territory, stretching a couple of hundred miles along the coast north of the Orange River mouth. No one was allowed to travel here in case they picked up diamonds in the sand.



North of Windhoek on the road to Grootfontein the country became closed in with thick bush. The road was sometimes badly washed away. We camped half way between Sukkes and Otjiwarongo, just off the road but surrounded by kameeldoring (camel thorn), jacarandas, teak, acacia and mopane¹⁶ trees with tall brown grass of the previous season, and visibility only 50 yards or so. While de Vries was braai'ing some steak for supper I had a short walk with Bill, putting up a *duiker* and some guineafowl. That night on the radio we heard of Stalin's death and wondered about the repercussions. Springbok Radio had some dance music. While 'You belong to me' was being played, de Vries in sudden high spirits blurted out that he felt like dancing with the Old Lady (who was keeping her own company in her tent as usual). He danced alone in the light of the fire grinning with joy. For supper he produced a good dish of bully beef and onions with a Provita crust.

I learned how to bake bread in the sand from him. Having made the dough rise and given it a good flour covering, the fire would be scraped aside and a hole excavated in the hot sand. The dough would then be placed straight in the hot sand and covered over with coals. Twenty minutes later it was removed and dusted off, no sand adhering to the crust.

We reached Grootfontein next morning and sought out Mr Bristow, manager of the SWA Company, whose advice the Old Lady sought on where she could and should prospect. He went out of his way to be helpful. He said we must see his wife, whom we found astride a tractor¹⁷ mowing lucerne on their farm. Having showed us around the farm she asked us to lunch, and this led to an invitation to stay the night. For supper Mr and Mrs Bristow dressed in evening dress, while I could only sport a lumberjacket and dusty flannels. But I did justice to the several courses served by waiters. Bristow's strong

¹⁶ One of Southern Africa's best hardwood trees.

¹⁷ A woman on a tractor in the early 1950s would not have been a common sight!

recommendation was that, having come this far, we must visit Etosha Pan, stay at the old fort on the edge of the Pan, safe from lions, and spend a day game-watching. That night I slept in a lovely spare room hoping Bill would not mess on the carpet.

We said our goodbyes after a substantial breakfast and reached Tsumeb at 12 pm, going straight to the magistrate's office to get a permit.... We also went to get the car examined at the police station and then set off for Etosha.

Eleven miles outside Tsumeb we stopped at Otjikoto lake, the 'pool of death'. It is a water-filled crater about 100 yards across with vertical sides and unfathomed depth (at that time). I never considered it then, but I expect it is a limestone cavern with a collapsed roof, but it's surprising to have the water table so high.

An awful hole in the road which I saw too late broke a rear spring. We limped back to Tsumeb and spent the afternoon at Oubaas Garage, camping for the night just outside.

The Etosha Pan



The Etosha Pan today

On the 75 miles to Namatoni, on the edge of Etosha Pan, we passed through wonderful indigenous trees and bush – marula, jacaranda, wild olive, mopane, mborongo, and lots of others whose names I did not know. We drove up to the castle which had been built in 1900 as a German holdout against the Ovambos and the Hereros.¹⁸ The police made clear the rules (designed to protect the animals, not the visitors!), and said that three lions had spent the previous night in the camp site which was indicated to

¹⁸ The Germans fought a long, genocidal war mainly against the Herero at the turn of the century. A moving account of how the indigenous people of Namibia suffered is contained in Horst Drechsler, *Let Us Die Fighting*, Zed Books.

us. There was a welcoming carved out pool beside the fort, which was refreshing. We then had the most magnificent game-viewing drive along the edge of the pan. I had never seen game in such quantity, even when on holiday in the Kruger National Park. We drove beside huge herds of wildebeest and zebra stampeding on both sides of the truck. In addition, we saw jackal, kudu, springbok, ostriches, several small buck, Pauws and several other wildfowl and birds. The impression was an original Africa teeming with life.

De Vries and I sat around a huge fire that night listening to distant lions roaring and the howls of jackal nearer. Accommodation arrangements were reversed that night – perhaps on account of the lion stories – as Mrs Molteno was in the cab of the truck and we were offered her tent, in which mosquitoes soon drove us into bed. Around midnight, woken by deep-throated purrs nearby, we all of us sought refuge in the back of the Dodge and passed the rest of the night swatting mosquitoes and listening to this ominous sound.

Before breakfast we again drove slowly on to the edge of the pan in search of game. I stopped the Dodge to point out a steenbok 50 yards off when it suddenly darted off startled. In a flash three cheetah shot past in pursuit, yellow blurred streaks of movement. And then we saw a fourth deliberately trotting at right angles to cut off the buck's arc of flight. The kill took place out of sight.

So ended our short, but rewarding, excursion. We collected Bill from the de Klerks¹⁹ overfed and well, and were again made welcome at the Bristows. She loaded us up with eggs and bottles of fresh milk on our departure next morning. In Tsumeb, besides supplies, we bought some paludrin as a prophylactic against malaria possibly contracted at Namatoni, then retraced our steps to Otjiwarongo for the Dodge agent to repair our broken shock absorbers, but no spares were available. On to Omaruru, another 80 miles of bad road.

Again the Old Lady opted for the cab, so I had the luxury of her camp bed and read by candle light *St Francis of Assisi* and parts of Lawrence Green's *Lords of the Last Frontier*, about his visit to Etosha Pan. I noted with interest that he also related the story of the Halfmens trees de Vries had told me. Bill was troubled by large soldier ants.

To Omaruru and the Kaokoveld

At Omaruru the local German mechanic made effective repairs to the shock absorbers and fitted an extra blade to each rear spring – all for £8. We then took a terrible road to Karibib to visit the mines there, crossing the dry Omaruru River bed and later the Khan River. The policeman at Omaruru, recently posted from Johannesburg, said what a God-awful place it was, prejudiced as he was against the Germans and the place lacking the bright lights of the city. He told us where to find someone called Burger, a German geologist. We went but his maid recommended that we should call again next morning (Sunday). So we found a decent clean camp spot a few miles out and watched displays of lightning and storms over the Ovango mountains some 15 miles off. Poor de Vries is homesick and only perks up when we have a *gesels* (chat) about all and sundry after the evening braai.

¹⁹ Bill had been left behind with this couple because he was not allowed into the Etosha Pan.



Omaruru today

Burger was at home next morning, but communication was difficult as he spoke little Afrikaans and no English. However, in between admiring his many trophies of hunting in the Kaokoveld – leopard and lion skins on the floor, an elephant's foot as a waste paper basket by the door, a large pair of kudu antlers on the wall – he did not encourage prospecting around Karibib. Instead he advised a visit to Mr Dunn, manager of the Uis tin mine. So back we drove to Omaruru, this time crossing the Khan and Omaruru rivers flowing quite strongly after last night's rain in the hills. At this point I should explain that there was not a single bridge as yet built in South West Africa. The roads would just lead down to a drift. Only in the case of the main road to Windhoek was there even a concrete ramp on to the river bed. So when the rivers ran,²⁰ it was necessary to check the depth and current first, and the rains this season made driving at times difficult and dangerous.

At the hotel we were told to call back on the morrow to find Mr Dunn, so we drove out and camped. We were just about to eat two partridges that I had shot when a storm broke overhead. We all sheltered in the Dodge while for just 15 minutes the heavens opened. A small river now flowed where the fire had been and de Vries's trunk was swept downstream 50 yards and got stuck in a bush. We retrieved pots and pans from further down and then, just as suddenly, the sand absorbed the flow of water and was

²⁰ Almost every one of the rivers in Namibia and the Northern Cape only have water in them after rain. A river then comes down '*in spuit*' with the waters rushing down the dried up river bed. .

just damp. But the morning air was scented with that clean veld aroma after rain when *songololos* come out and black ants make up their trails again and the morning sun sucks up the moisture. We were in no hurry, so enjoyed a leisurely morning drying out.

Dunn was still not back from Windhoek, so, having bought some supplies and filled up with water, we camped 6 miles out on the Omajette road in a fine spot beside a river bed. I went off with the gun after two pheasant which eluded me, but I came within 50 yards of two lovely kudu bulls that watched me for a brief moment before gliding off with their horns laid elegantly back. With plenty of meat, wood and water, de Vries and I were content. And the Old Lady had been served with her routine thermos of tea brewed with the precise measure of leaves. The rest of us slept out contentedly and awoke in the morning to the sound of guineafowl clucking, and damp with dew.

De Vries was now brave enough to stay in camp alone while the Old Lady and I went into the dorp to do things – take some of her clothes to a laundry, a wireless to repair, the Magistrate's office for a permit to enter the Okambale Native Reserve where this tin mine is located, a haircut for me and even an ice-cream together in a cafe. De Vries welcomed us back with hot juicy chops which went down well with the fresh bread. Back to town to meet Dunn but we learnt that he had flown from Windhoek directly to his mine at Uis. Pesch had mended the wireless and agreed to take care of my guns while we were in the reserve.

So we left in the morning on the Omajette road which was, as reported, in a bad state. We came first to Kahero tin mine, where two handsome dogs of bull-terrier/ridgeback cross bounded into the back of the truck scaring de Vries badly but doing no harm. Mr Francis, the miner, called them off and envied Bill, the first white bull-terrier he had seen in 30 years. Compared to these animals Bill was still very much a pup, but he splayed his stance squarely and bravely. We were now in sight of the Brandberg mountains as we drove on, seeing flocks of wild ostrich and a herd of some 200 springbok melting across the open sandveld. By 3 p.m. we reached the mine and found Dunn supervising new construction. It was no time to interrupt him, so we shoved off and camped in a pretty desolate spot with a hot south wind blowing out of the Namib.²¹ Perhaps Dunn would show Mrs Molteno the mine in the morning.

The Namib Desert road to Swakopmund

He detailed a Mnr. Botha, his assistant manager, to show her around. After a talk on minerals in general, he drove us out to a tantalite claim 10 miles off, this mineral selling at £1 per pound weight. He kindly gave me a small sample. Over a tinned lunch which he kindly provided, he suggested that we should take the Namib Desert road to Swakopmund before returning to Omaruru. We would have to take a chance on finding the Omaruru River too high. It had to be crossed at the mouth, but they had no means of finding out what it was like by phone or radio. We decided to chance it, and filled up with 6 extra cans of petrol plus 10 gallons of water. Just 10 miles out, a shock-absorber casing broke, and while inspecting it I found a leak in a petrol pipe. I bound this with tape, but we decided to return to the Uis mine, where unfurnished accommodation was offered. In the evening Botha talked about the Brandberg Mountains, seldom if ever climbed and rising to 8,500 ft. I think Margaret's brother Denys Williamson had done some ascents here. I would love to have had an opportunity.

²¹ The Namib Desert.

Their mechanic fixed up the Dodge and also a leaking radiator, and with a sketchy diagram of the tracks to take we were away by 10.30 in the morning. We were soon into dunes with flat stretches between, good hard sand so that driving at 30 mph was possible. We saw plenty of game – springbok and ostrich – and had the delight of one springbok pacing the car effortlessly for 2 miles. One fork in the track was not marked but we guessed right, as we came to the Omaruru River, flowing alright but fordable. We then followed the coast on the best salt road of the trip, hard and flat as a pancake, beside the Atlantic – the Skeleton Coast– to Swakopmund, camping just outside the settlement in a desolate place.

The ‘salt king’ of Swakopmund was a Mnr. Klein, known also for his interest in semi-precious stones in the area. So we visited his office early, only to be told that he may be back on the morrow, Sunday. To make some use of the day, we drove to Rossing, 24 miles off, which was reputed to be a mineralised area. Rossing was no major town, consisting only of a short railway siding, a water tank and a signboard! All around was sand desert. But a hill feature broke the skyline, and there we found an old prospector who had started working a beryl claim. He gave us a sketch direction to an old rosequartz mine 4 miles on. It was a kopjie composed entirely of beautiful rosequartz, which we learnt later fetched 10/- per kg if you could reach the market. With the railhead so close by, I was surprised at the failure of this mine.

Returning towards Swakopmund we camped just 500 yards from the sea, which was very cold because of the Benguela current. The backwash also was not inviting for a swim. With a cold wind we appreciated the fire with the dead wood collected from the beach. Our getaway in the morning was delayed first by the Old Lady taking some time to get ready in her tent and then, having driven just 20 yards, we got stuck in soft sand. We carried two planks for just this contingency. We put them under the two rear driving wheels. But every time the car came to the end of the planks it ploughed down into the sand again. After an hour of exertion and with the loan of a bumperjack from a passing Jeep, we got onto the main harder track. Mnr. Klein was very affable and proud of his collection. It bored me, sad to say, which I regret because, had this visit been a year later after taking prelims in Geology, I am sure a great interest would have been kindled. But I saw them only as precious stones of commercial interest, which did nothing to me.

We had advised family to write c/o Poste Restante, so our visit to the PO in the morning was in anticipation of mail, but sadly the mail train would not arrive until Tuesday afternoon the next day. We decided to wait, enjoy the beach and a cold swim, collect driftwood, take a long walk with Bill. It was very cold at night and the Old Lady suffered. I filled two hotwater bottles for her, but one of them leaked! There is a daily pattern to the weather here, getting warm and calm by midday, a sea mist developing by teatime with an onshore cold wind. It never rains, and only the moisture from the mist sustains the few cacti and a fine flowering plant – the *Welvitchia Mirabilis*. We lazed away the next day and, to add to frustration, discovered that the train was held up several hours, so repaired again to the shore to build up a fire for the night.

We were rewarded next morning, except for de Vries, who had nothing from his wife, which left him in a sour mood....

To Usakos and Rehoboth

We now set off for Usakos, 90 miles down the coast, to see a jeweller by the name of Brusiers. Past Rossing and the rosequartz kopjie again through featureless country for another 70 miles, seeing nobody. Poor de Vries was in a melancholic state, but that evening he made two lovely *vetkoek*²² as a surprise for me, he said. This was, I believe, in return for my present of a bag of tobacco, which I had given him to smoke in secret because the Old Lady had forbidden him cigarettes. She said that his



The countryside around Usakos

coughing at night kept her awake. But this cough was actually due to the terrible dust in the back of the Dodge. Brusiers, like Klein, enjoyed showing off his private collection but his English was very poor. He also traded in mineral water, and we appreciated a sample. No other locality of interest was offered from here, so we backtracked to Windhoek, collecting the firearms from Pesche's house in Karibib on the way.

We found the same pleasant camp site beside a hill which commanded a good view and had many nooks and crannies for hide and seek with Bill.... Mnr. Boysen, the Mines Commissioner, was clearly amused at our 3 weeks of sight-seeing and excursions into the mineralised areas. The Old Lady hung on his kindly words and advice. As he explained the diamond prospecting laws, her face lit with enthusiasm.

Our next destination was Rehoboth, where she had a mind to do some actual prospecting. We camped in the Bastard Reserve, an area set aside for folk of mixed Hottentot descent called Bastards. Though against regulations, I shot a guineafowl, which we enjoyed for supper in perfect weather, a starry night and a good fire. Rehoboth was a run-down place of half-castes who 'were without exception downright crooks',²³ from where we hoped to hire a trustworthy prospector. We camped in a place that lifted the spirits somewhat, outside by a hill which was good for climbing practice. We had a disturbed night, however, as rain came over. The Old Lady sheltered in the cab and we took to her tent. The Magistrate had recommended an old prospector, and described his dwelling. This man recognised none of the samples of beryl, tantalite, scheelite, copper and fool's gold which we showed him. I had already dismissed him as a fraud when he blurted out that he knew of a monazite reef. Gullible Mrs Molteno was beside herself with interest, so we arranged to collect him next day. We bought metal standards and tin for staking claims, supplies and fuel, and set up camp again. It was raining now more on than off, and then continuously. De Vries's bedding got soaked, the degrees of wetness being described initially as 'So nat soos 'n kat' and then 'So nat soos 'n nat hoender' (as wet as a wet chicken). In the morning we fiddled with the primus stove inside the tent to make tea for Mrs Molteno and some porridge for

²² A South African delicacy – a ball of dough plunged into boiling oil until the surface turns a golden brown.

²³ It is unclear who Peter Gibbs is quoting, or whether this judgement of Rehoboth is his own.

ourselves. It was slow to boil. Our expression is: 'A watched kettle never boils'. De Vries had a new one: 'Die water sal kook as die dassie stert kry!' (the water will boil by the time a dassie grows a tail). We reached the prospector's house by 10 a.m. A small girl came out to say that her father had gone away for the day. I went inside and found the wife and elder daughter – but no sign of the 'prospector'....

It rained again all night which further dampened our situation, and this turned out to be the beginning of a record flood period over the whole of South West Africa.

The next day was April 1st – April Fools – and we were fools to be travelling flooded roads. Our plan was to get to Bethanie graphite mine near Keetmanshoep. But the roads were reduced to thick mud and water. And before Marienthal we got stuck in clay. But not for long as, pushing and digging, we did make slow progress. Between Marienthal and Keetmanshoep we were the last car to get through that night. There was a 5-mile stretch of thick mud through which we crawled and slewed at one mph. Had we stopped once, we would not have got started again. We slowly passed one family in a new Cadillac stuck in the mud up to its doors. We halted on a slight rise, the road ahead being under water. I walked back to the Cadillac. Its driver, Mr Lichtenstein, said that a team of donkeys had tried and failed to pull the car out and he had been stuck since noon. (I later discovered that this Mr Lichtenstein was one of two Germans who escaped internment during the War by living rough in the Karasberg mountains for 18 months.)

Next morning we went on as the water had drained off the road, leaving the mud behind. We came to a river running across, which I inspected first by wading across. The flow of water was not too bad, but there was a layer of soft sand underfoot that could not be avoided. I concluded that the chances were favourable, so covered the spark plugs and removed the fan belt. But we stuck with the back wheels deep in the soft stretch, which luckily had a hard bottom. But the back wheels and the exhaust were under water. The current felt as though it was getting stronger, and Mrs Molteno had to put her feet up on the seat as the river was running through the cab. We struggled for an hour, jacking the car up in the water and knocking in rocks and planks. And then, with a concerted heave from de Vries and careful use of the throttle – for luckily the engine had not cut out – we edged out and up the far bank with a great sense of relief. Then another car came up and stuck in the same place. His engine stalled and the river was running through the doors. Finally a Chevrolet arrived and got through alright. So together with a rope and chain we towed the first car out and then all enjoyed a cup of tea on the far bank.

Ten miles beyond Tses we were stopped by another swollen river that looked dangerous. By 10 p.m. there were 15 cars waiting. An experienced driver took two Fords and a Chev through with several of us pushing behind, the water level rising to the headlights. As we were the only car with supplies, we managed to serve a number of the waiting passengers with tea and food. In the morning the crossing was negotiable and we reached the Hansa Hotel in Keetmanshoep for a good lunch. It was Good Friday. We camped 3 miles out between the road and the railway, where I collected some coal for a fire.²⁴ I reflected that at this very moment I would normally be in a 3-hour service with the family,²⁵ but instead was here discussing with Mrs Molteno the prospects of finding diamonds along the lower reaches of the Orange River! I told her that the only way she might do so would be to trek with pack donkeys from Modderdrift for 150 miles towards Sendelingsdrift, as there were no tracks for vehicles in the area.

²⁴ This was still the age of steam in South African Railways.

²⁵ Peter was the Dean of Cape Town's son, and on Good Friday the family would normally have been at the 3-hour service in St. George's Cathedral.



A 1947 Chevrolet – what Namibian roads and climate can do!

At Keetmanshoep the whereabouts of the graphite mine were explained. So we set out along the Luderitz road, which was interesting as it ran through the Vis River valley²⁶ before climbing through a broken mountain range. We camped 8 miles after Simplon in threatening weather. So we men occupied the tent.

I celebrated Easter morning with a shave and climb up a local hill, which left me feeling faint. But breakfast restored me and we drove on to Jakkalswater. At the mine we were invited to share accommodation with

the Bowen family and Mr Chappel, whose room I shared. He was from Cornwall and had spent his life prospecting

We were given a tour of the graphite mine, Chappel's tin claim and a nearby beryl mine being worked by three tough-looking chaps.²⁷ I took some good samples. Another interesting man we called on was a Mr Schneider at Simplon, who talked at length about his life of prospecting and mining in South West Africa until his servant came in to say that his pet baboon had escaped, and he left to give chase!

Our South West Africa agenda was now done, after a 4-week reconnaissance and some 2,000 miles of driving, and de Vries's spirits rose as we discussed the road back to Namaqualand. There was just one more visit to make from Warmbad to the Weidners' place. Here Carl Weidner (of Goodhouse)'s son had now struck it rich in 'Tantalite Valley'. Their house was built of reeds, making use of existing shade trees. He and his family were most hospitable and made us feel welcome. After a good breakfast next morning, he showed us around the tantalite claim being successfully worked at £4,000 a ton. He had plans to lay a railway line into it. As one of our truck's back springs was broken, he kindly offered to take it in to Warmbad after lunch to get it repaired. So we jacked up the car and removed the spring. De Vries, Bill and I climbed the mountain behind the house after lunch, and took in a marvellous view of 60 miles of the Orange snaking its way through this rugged country. Cecilia, his daughter, had tea ready on our return. And Weidner came back from Warmbad to say that we must spend a second night, as the mechanic would bring the repaired spring in the morning.... As we left next day he gave Mrs Molteno a marvellous collection of minerals with the words – "You needn't spend any more time looking for a

²⁶ Better known today as the Fish River Canyon. The Fish is the only major tributary of the Orange in this whole desolate region. Even the Fish, however, only runs with water occasionally. The Canyon is the second largest in the world, running for a 100 miles and in places up to 1,800 feet deep.

²⁷ One must not think that mining in this part of Southern Africa was anything like large-scale, modern mining today! Most of it was on a tiny scale and with little or no modern equipment.

mine, dear lady, 'cause I'm giving you one!" They didn't want to see us go, particularly Bill, whom Weidner would liked to have kept.

As we drove carefully back to Warmbad, we heard the news that the Orange was coming down in flood. It had already reached Onseepkans. So we pressed on toward the Goodhouse ferry. It was still working though the current was strong. We had tea with the Van der Heerers and pressed on to camp in the sandveld towards Jakkalswater. We were back in the Richtersveld, and the nights were now much colder, but de Vries was relieved to be in familiar country.

Saturday 11th April 1953 we had one more task to do for the Old Lady, and that was to collect 10 lbs of copper samples from her claim in Bushmanland and estimate the size of the quartz reef. The samples were to be sent to Mr Schneider at Simplan for his assessment. We then drank a cup of tea in the pretty valley with the rugged hills around....

On Tuesday the 14th, we had to drive to Pella (130 miles away) to see Weidner's corundum saliminite deposit. Then on the 15th we began the long drive homewards via the monazite mine near Vanrhynsdorp we had visited two months previously....

In conclusion

Being in Mrs Lucy Molteno's company through the wilderness areas we had travelled in the past two months was an experience I was more than fortunate to have. Apart from the disturbance of the 'piano accordion' one night and my hitting some holes in the road, I think she was pleased with her [employee's] conduct. I, of course, wished that I had had some geologist's training so as to be able to help her in her prospecting. Now 45 years on [1998] I can only write a short sequel to the later years of this remarkable woman. She was 79 at the time of this trip and she continued these arduous adventures into her late 80's. She ardently hoped that one of her claims would be a rich strike. And yet I suspect she was not too disappointed when she failed, for it was the wilderness and the desert that she liked – the sound of jackals, the sight of 'Halfmen's trees', and just a cup of tea with maybe a biscuit.