

## Ted and Harry Molteno join the picnic

by

Marion Cran

### Introduction

This delightful vignette of Ted and Harry Molteno on a picnic with friends from Elgin at the mouth of the Palmiet River near Betty's Bay is by the English author, Marion Cran. It is taken from her *The Gardens of Good Hope* (London: Herbert Jenkins Ltd., 1927), pp. 99-101. Ted and Harry were two of Sir John Charles Molteno's youngest sons by his third wife, Minnie Blenkins (nee Jarvis). Born in 1877 and 1880 respectively, the two brothers formed a lifelong partnership. After completing their degrees at Cambridge, they bought their first farm in the Elgin valley in 1903. They proceeded to build up the country's largest deciduous fruit farm, mainly for export, during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Marion Cran met them when staying a few days with their niece, Kathleen Murray, who was also a pioneering fruit farmer in Elgin. Already a well-known writer of books on gardening, Cran was touring the country in order to collect material for a new book on remarkable South African women who were creating distinctive gardens.

Reading her inimitable portrait of Ted, it comes as no surprise to learn that, in his second year at Cambridge, he 'went in for the University boxing competition and fought in the finals. One of the papers said that "contrary to the expectations of both combatants and spectators, the judges decided against Molteno."' (Ted's letter to his half-sister, Caroline Murray, 4 March 1898) Or to read that 20 years later – just a few years before Marion Cran encountered Ted on this picnic – one of Ted's nephews, Lenox Murray, wrote to his sister, Kathleen, in response to some outrageous act of interference on Ted's part: 'There is only one thing which will do Ted any good and that is a real good thrashing. There is a limit to what one can put up with.' (Lenox's letter of 18 October 1921)! At the same time, this story of the picnic paints an excellent picture of several personality traits that many Moltenos down the generations have shared.

**Robert Molteno**

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### **‘The Moltenos are going to join us’**

One day we went for a picnic through the Houwhoek Pass to Palmiet River mouth. It was a wonderful day of long drives and long swims in the lagoon under the sun. It was on this occasion that I first realised the family quality of the Moltenos. I had felt already that there was a strong personality in Kathleen Murray, but I had imagined it was just the gift to her of her immediate parentage – clever Dr. Murray and gentle Mrs. Murray.<sup>i</sup> I began to see, however, that that land-sense, that vision and that courage, were rooted deeply in the blood from which her mother sprang.

On that picnic day we drove for a long time with two cars packed with hampers, surf-boards and laughing people until we drew up at a certain place to meet somebody. “The Moltenos,” I was told, “are going to join us.”<sup>iii</sup>

### **Ted and Harry arrive**



**Ted Molteno, the 8<sup>th</sup> of Sir John Molteno's sons, as a young man, c. early 1900s**

Genequand<sup>iii</sup> in a shady place among the rocks looking out to the blue sea with thoughtful eyes; Colonel

Two good-looking, bronzed men presently arrived in another car; and from that moment we were dominated by a new force. They made us all get out to look for sites, town-building sites for seaside houses. The elder one walked on in front rapidly, hunching his shoulders and radiating such a stubborn intensity of self-absorption that I had to forget the sky and sea and flowers to watch him. He seemed all one bitter will; an iron creature, with nothing but the will to win in his spare, determined frame. He wanted the best site, the highest, the most commanding – and it was already sold. So we all went back to the cars. Nothing but the best suited *him*.

During that day, that happy, care-free day among pleasant people, I kept trying to forget the Molteno brothers. I would watch the shapely lass, my hostess, fighting the race of the tide in the river mouth; Mademoiselle



**Harry and Ted Molteno with Con Pare and one of their beloved sheep dogs, Glen Elgin, c. 1940s**

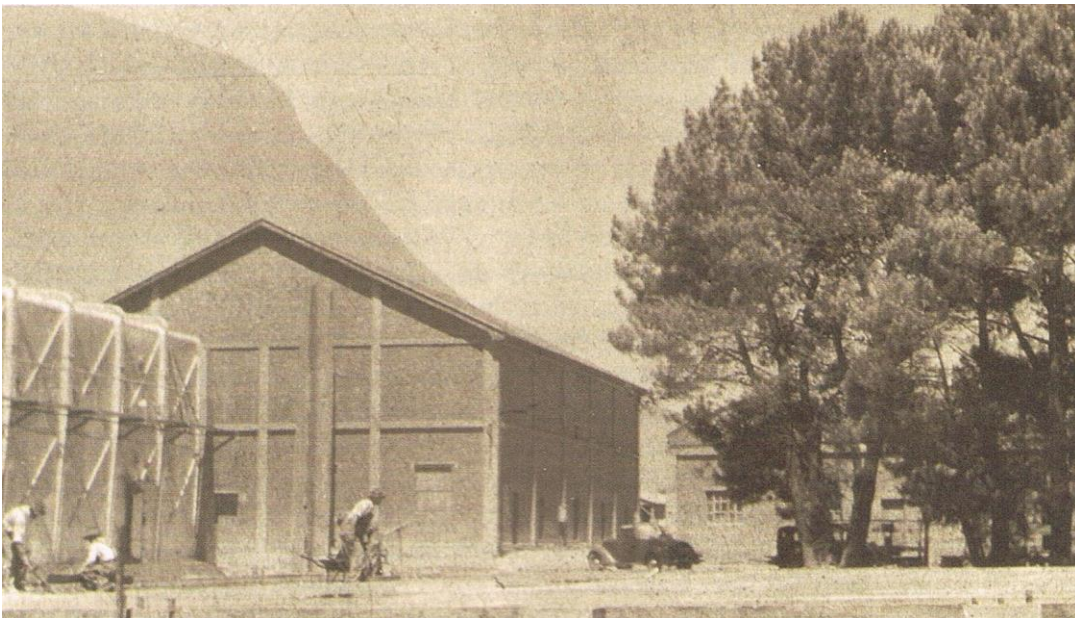
and Mrs. Cunningham with their active little daughter – and the talk of the north still with them, for they had only been settled in Africa two years; Mrs. Boucher and her son, out five years; and all the rest of the merry party. But presently the Moltenos would come into the picture again – we must go out and surf – then we must have lunch, and they made tables and seats for us of the surf-boards; one could not possess the day at all without feeling these dominant men like a strong cord through every moment.

Now they were all wonderful; clever and kind; missing none of the fun of talk; playing with the children; giving out all the time character, personality. Gnarled knots of character; difficult, determined bachelors, two brothers living alone. They spoke of Greece and the classic mould of thought; of line in art. Like reborn Greeks complete, themselves, they looked to me, with their fine profiles cut hard against the sun; no embellishment of mind, person or practice lacking. Later on I learned more. They own enormous tracts of land; they farm fruit with savage intensity and success. They have used more brain, vision and forethought than any in the neighbourhood, and are the most successful there. Sometimes disliked, as is usual with strong folk, for they will not yield one inch to anyone and others will not give ground to them. So there are often deadlocks. Useful to a young nation, types like this; the fights are nothing; they pass. The work they accomplish remains.





**Ted and Harry Molteno's first home on their farm, Glen Elgin, 1903**



**The old packing shed and coldstore on Harry and Ted Molteno's farm at Elgin**





**Ted and Harry Molteno's 'new' house (built after their previous home burnt down), sometime after 1925**

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<sup>i</sup> You can read Caroline Murray (nee Molteno)'s *Reminiscences* about growing up on the Karoo and visiting Cape Town in the 1850s and '60s elsewhere on this website. And also several fascinating recollections by her husband, Dr C F K Murray, of growing up in Ireland, life as a surgeon in the Royal Navy, and medical practice at the Cape in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>ii</sup> Ted Molteno and his younger brother, Harry, were Kathleen Murray's half-uncles, but in fact not more than a dozen years or so older than her.

<sup>iii</sup> Another relative, Cynthia Payne (nee Stanford) who was a granddaughter of Ted's half-sister, Maria, and who knew Ted well, told me long after his death that Mademoiselle Genequand was a well educated and enormously intelligent woman. She had a house on Ted and Harry's farm. She and Ted had many intellectual interests in common and were close friends, but not lovers. Ted felt that there was a strain of eccentricity in his mother which meant that neither he, nor his three brothers and sisters, should marry and have children. Neither he, Harry, Clifford nor their sister, Minnie, did.