

## **8. Cape of Good Hope – John Molteno makes good (1830s and '40s)**

John Molteno was the eldest of his brothers and sisters – Frank, Nancy, Frederick and Alicia – and the first of the four to leave London and seek a new life overseas.<sup>1</sup> After the death of his father in early 1827, he went to work at the age of fourteen or so in the office of Mr T. Dennis, a shipping and insurance broker, of Langbourne Chambers, Fenchurch Street, London. His job brought him in contact with men from around the world and gave him a lifelong fascination with ships and the sea. 'He was always eager to step on board a ship newly arrived and learn all the news of the voyage and of the country whence it came... All his life, he was never happier than when on board ship, up on deck at all hours making out the points of the coast-line or the well-known lights'.

John holds a pivotally important position in the Molteno family because of his achievements, and also because his fourteen children spawned a whole clan of Moltenos, Murrays, Andersons, Stanfords and others who are descended from him. In emigrating to Britain's newly acquired Cape Colony, he founded a new branch of the family at the southern tip of Africa. What's more, he became prosperous – the only grandchild of Anthony Molteno, the London printseller, to do so – and this transformed the prospects of his offspring.

### **Leaving London for the Cape of Good Hope**

While working for Mr Dennis, John got an opportunity to take a job in a bank, possibly through his grandfather, George Bower, who was working at the Bank of England. But he was determined to do something more exciting and with better prospects than life behind a desk. Fortunately, his other grandfather, Anthony Molteno, had had a publisher and author friend, Mr J. H. Richardson of 23 Cornhill, who stepped in.<sup>2</sup> He was the London agent supplying books ordered by a recently established Subscription and Circulating Library which had opened in the Commercial Exchange in Cape Town and was being run by Mr Johnstone Jardine.<sup>3</sup> Jardine was 'a man of considerable culture and wit' and 'not like one of your bookworms who grow thin on literary lore, but possessed of a goodly presence and comely aspect, that sheds a cheerful influence on the establishment.'<sup>4</sup> Wanting

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<sup>1</sup> This and the following chapters have only been possible because of his son, Percy Molteno's two-volume life of his father based on access to his papers. P. A. Molteno, *The Life and Times of Sir John Molteno*, London, Smith, Elder & Co., 2 vols., 1900.

<sup>2</sup> Percy Molteno's Diary, 12 June 1885, recording a few recollections his father, John Molteno, related to him about his early years. This conversation took place during his last stay in London shortly before his death. UCT Archives.

<sup>3</sup> D H Varley, Chief Librarian, South African Public Library, to Kathleen Murray, 16 April 1958.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Dr R. F. M. Immelman from D H Varley, *Adventures in Africana*, Cape Town, 1949.

someone to come out to Cape Town and assist him, he responded to Richardson's recommendation<sup>5</sup> offering John the post with a salary of '£25 [a year] and board and lodging, with occasional remunerations for extra or diligent services'. He added that John 'would have so many spare hours for writing etc that he could easily at least realize £30 a year 'additional'.'

John jumped at the offer and Richardson immediately gave him an extra assignment on his own account: 'When you get out, consult with Mr Jardine with respect to the numerous accounts owing to me at the Cape, and with Mr Jardine's approval ... continually press, always in the civilest manner (except, unfortunately, the party should be bad ones) for settlements.... And [if] this is well done, I will take care that you shall be remunerated.'

Richardson went on to give the 17-year old some advice: 'Much will depend on your own assiduity and attention, but if you conduct yourself with the propriety I fully expect and indeed rely upon, I'm sure Mr Jardine, to whom I have written to entreat it ... will afford you every encouragement in his power. In whatever situation of life you may be hereafter placed, never be satisfied with just doing what may be rigidly expected from you, but always do more, anticipate people's wants, and even wishes, and you will soon become so necessary as to be sought after on all hands, and your advancement will be the certain consequence.' How much John took this advice to heart, we will soon see.

So it was that he set off for the Cape of Good Hope in the summer of 1831, little realizing that it would be 20 years before he saw his mother or any of his family again. Caroline was greatly saddened by his departure. Day after day when he left, she would walk up to higher ground near Peckham and look out to sea; as her letters to him show, and indeed his attempts to reassure her in his replies, she never fully accepted his decision to live his life in what she regarded as a wild and barbarous part of the world.

This being still the age of sail, ships usually took three months or more to cover the 6,000 miles to Cape Town. Indeed because of the Doldrums in the tropics and occasional Atlantic storms blowing vessels off course, they only averaged in an hour three or four miles of the distance to be covered – a normal person's walking speed. John had the good fortune to arrive in Table Bay as summer was taking hold there and, more to the point, the little town had a healthy Mediterranean climate where people from Europe did not suffer the incredibly high death rates they faced in Britain's tropical colonies.

John worked for Mr Jardine for over a year until the end of 1832 and then had another stroke of luck. The son of one of Cape Town's leading merchants and wine exporters, John Bardwell Ebdon, decided to try out living in one of the Australian colonies, and John had already established a sufficient reputation for Mr Ebdon to take him on as his replacement. This new job gave John sound commercial experience and brought him in contact with Cape Town's tiny circle of businessmen – 'At that time everybody knew everybody else; ... [he] even knew each black man and whose slave he

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<sup>5</sup> A J Jardine to J H Richardson, 3 Nov. 1830, and reproduced in Richardson's letter to John Molteno, 26 July 1831.

was.<sup>6</sup> And because Ebden, who among other things was Chairman of the Cape of Good Hope Fire Insurance Company, had also founded the Cape of Good Hope Bank, John 'learned a good deal about banking there, which enabled him to start the Beaufort West Bank later on.'<sup>7</sup>

At some point after arriving in Cape Town, John found lodgings with Mrs Ost in Boom Street, where three other young men wanting to get on in business were also living. He later stayed with Mrs Hoets who ran a small boarding house in Strand Street near the Lutheran Church that still stands there.<sup>8</sup> This was within easy walking distance of both the Table Bay shore off which visiting ships anchored and the hub of Cape Town's business community. It was so convenient that John lodged with Mrs Hoets for eight years until he moved up to the Karoo in 1844.

### **A very young man**

What was John like in those early years when he was still in his teens and early twenties? Mrs Metlerkamp knew him from when he was first at the Library and then working at John Ebden's store. She remembered him, blue-eyed as so many Moltenos have been down the generations, as 'a handsome young man with particularly good complexion. The young ladies used to envy his English cheeks.... Slight, active and in good health. And no beard.'<sup>9</sup>

Another contemporary who knew him from shortly after his arrival in Cape Town was Mr Dixon, a member of the merchant firm, Messrs Hudson, Donaldson, Dixon and Co., which in 1841 went half shares with John in despatching the schooner, *Joshua Carrall*, with a full cargo of wine. Dixon remembered how, in addition to being 'very active' and 'always rather impetuous', the youngster 'had great ideas of getting on, and used frequently to assist Henry Quinn [a fellow lodger at Mrs Ost's], the manager at Wollaston & Co., in his work.'

A lovely glimpse of the young John survives from his early days as a merchant. 'Whilst he was engaged in commerce in Cape Town, it was no unusual thing to see him in the middle of St. George's Street, breaking open cases of goods, making out invoices with one hand and selling as energetically with the other. He was one of a group of enterprising men who came to the

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<sup>6</sup> Mr Eaton, who had arrived at the Cape as a baby in 1818, talking to Frank Molteno, March 1895.

<sup>7</sup> Information from John Molteno's friend from the 1830s, Mr Dixon, as related to Frank Molteno (Frank Molteno to Percy Molteno, March 1895).

<sup>8</sup> The oldest streets in Cape Town kept their original Dutch names, and those nearest the shoreline reminded one of the ocean – *Strand* or beach; *Waterkant* – at the water's edge; and *Buitengracht* – beyond the ditch (ie outside the moat that protected the Castle in Cape Town that the first Governor, Jan van Riebeeck, built).

<sup>9</sup> When Percy Molteno decided to write a biography of his father in 1895, he asked his brother Frank to track down the handful of very elderly people still alive who had known John when he was a young man. Frank did an assiduous job and sent their recollections to Percy in London.

surface about thirty years ago, and who all succeeded in life.... Whatever he undertook he carried out to a successful issue, or he would know the reason why.’<sup>10</sup>

John’s closest friend was a Dutch wine merchant, Dirk de Jongh (known in later years by John’s children as Oom Dirk). He lived nearby and his ‘old wine stores’ could still be seen on Strand Street as late as 1895. And it was he and his wife whom John invited to join his family party on their 18-month trip to England and the Continent in 1860-61.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the extreme slowness of communications, John kept in touch in these early years, and indeed throughout his life, with his family in England, in particular his mother and sister, Nancy, who later married Mr Bingle. One of the earliest letters to survive is from his grandmother, Mrs Jane Bower, who tells him (20 May 1838): ‘I wish you could just behold your Mother and Sister. You could not fail to be delighted by their appearance.’ But John was not at all as frequent or informative a correspondent as his mother wanted. ‘I confess I am often at a loss in writing private letters,’ he wrote her in April 1842, ‘and it accounts perhaps for the brevity of my letters, my dear mother.’ What’s more, while she had ‘an inexhaustible fund of interesting matters to communicate to me, I have in return nothing to write about myself.’ And a few years later, he apologised to her again: ‘Your letter has caused me much painful feeling. I must plead guilty to having allowed an unusually long time to elapse without writing.’ But ‘you must not suppose that I forget you or am indifferent to your welfare.’ (May 1849) In fact, he felt constantly worried that he could not support her financially: ‘Nothing that I know of in this world could give me greater pleasure than to have it in my power to place you in a comfortable position.’

## **Cape Town**

Cape Town was still a very small town at the time of John’s arrival. It nestled at the foot of Table Mountain in the horseshoe formed by Devil’s Peak on the one side and Lion’s Head and Signal Hill on the other. Its tiny commercial class was still mainly Dutch although a growing number of English immigrants were beginning to join them at the time of John’s arrival. In the absence of any manufacturing or mining, the main business was trade, particularly import-export, with Cape brandy and wine being the only significant products to find a market in London. A little wool, tallow and the like, however, were also beginning to be exported and wool rapidly replaced wine as the Colony’s main export from the 1840s until the discovery of diamonds a generation later.

## **The Cape Colony**

[INSERT FIRST MAP FROM PERCY’S BIOGRAPHY OF HIS FATHER]

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<sup>10</sup> *The Lantern*, 4 Sept. 1886.

<sup>11</sup> See Chapter 9.

The colony was the only European-controlled state in the region. It sprawled over a huge area stretching up towards the Orange River in the North, and the Great Fish River and some way beyond in the East. But its population, though heterogeneous, was tiny. In 1820 there were about 44,000 European colonists (mainly Dutch burghers but including 5,000 newly arrived British settlers in the eastern districts), 30,000 indigenous Khoisan (often called 'Bushmen' and 'Hottentots'), 32,000 slaves (drawn from many different places outside Southern Africa and all emancipated just two years after John's arrival), a Malay community that the Dutch East India Company had brought in from Java, and various roving bands who were of mixed European and indigenous ancestry (Griquas, Basters and so on) who later were called 'Coloured'.<sup>12</sup> As the boundaries of the British-controlled area stood at this time, there were very few Xhosa- or other Bantu-speaking Africans living inside the Colony, although this situation was being rapidly transformed as British military forces and local Whites pushed the boundary further and further east during the century.

Beyond Cape Town lay a region of vineyards, wheat lands and other farms. Only there and in the new eastern districts did anything like a modern agricultural economy exist focussed on production for the market. Beyond these areas – Namaqualand to the north and the Karoo to the northeast – the land became increasingly desert-like, inhabited by itinerant *trekboers*<sup>13</sup> and Khoisan.

### **Shipwreck in Table Bay – John Molteno plays his part**

In the years following Vasco da Gama's first rounding of the Cape of Good Hope in 1497, Table Bay gradually became an essential way station for ships to take on fresh water and food during the long sea voyage between Europe and the riches of Mughal India and the Spice Islands in the Indies. The Dutch East India Company eventually occupied the area beneath Table Mountain in 1652 and settled some Dutch farmers there in order to grow fresh fruit and vegetables to supply its vessels. A century and a half later Britain took advantage of the Napoleonic Wars to seize several Dutch colonies; it took control of the Cape in 1795 and made its occupation permanent by formally annexing it in 1806.

Extraordinary as it may sound, neither the Netherlands nor Britain spent any money making Table Bay a more secure anchorage. The Bay lay open to the Northwesterly storms that swept in every winter. If ships anchored far out, they had no protection, but if they moored close to the sandy beach, they could be wrecked if they dragged their anchors.

John became involved in one such tragedy. The winter of 1842 was particularly severe. He told his mother:

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<sup>12</sup> Shula Marks, Introduction to 'Government Publications relating to the Cape of Good Hope, to 1910. Group II: Statistical Registers. Index to the Microfilm', Microform Academic Publishers, Wakefield, UK, 1980.

<sup>13</sup> Dutch farmers who did not own land, but followed an itinerant pastoral existence, supplemented by hunting.

‘Ten ships have been wrecked in Table Bay, driven from their anchors and stranded. One was a large ship with troops, in all about 700 persons on board. The whole were fortunately saved; but another vessel with convicts went on the shore soon after and, out of upwards of 300 souls, only about 100 were saved, near 200 lost their lives – it was an awful sight, the ship went to pieces not 200 yards from the shore with the miserable people drowned or dashed to pieces among the broken fragments of the ship. Although thousands of people were collected on the shore, little assistance could be rendered, as the ship went entirely to pieces almost immediately.’<sup>14</sup>

What John didn’t tell Caroline was his own courageous part in trying to save as many lives as possible. The *South African Commercial Advertiser*<sup>15</sup> reported how ‘two unofficial spectators, Mr Molteno and Mr Still, procured the assistance of a common boat belonging to a Malay which reached the *Waterloo* [the convict ship] after she was falling to pieces and brought off two men and on a second trip fastened a rope to the ship. After this, a larger boat ... was brought from the [troopship] *Abercromby Robinson* and, moving backwards and forwards along the rope [that John and Mr Still had attached], saved a good many lives.’

Despite this heroic intervention, 143 convicts drowned as well as 29 soldiers and sailors, and 18 women and children. The *Advertiser* was furious: ‘Such a great loss of life had not occurred since 1799 when “an accursed old hulk” similarly went to pieces on the shore during a storm.’ It described how in only 15 or 20 minutes the *Waterloo* was reduced to ‘a mass of rubbish’ and ‘amidst the crumbling heaps of their perfidious prison – of men, women and children 194 were crushed, disabled and drowned.’ It went on: ‘This ship apparently was built 27 years ago. No longer fit to carry logs, she is patched up like other whited sepulchres, stuffed with a living cargo by a contractor, and despatched to the ends of the earth – a voyage of more than 20,000 miles.’ Criticising the British authorities, it pointed out that there was ‘no preparation for saving life on board or on shore. No life buoys. No coils of ropes lashed to casks. No lifeboat.’

The lesson John drew from this needless tragedy was the responsibility any government has for making sure the country has the infrastructure it requires. It was something he never forgot, as we will see when, 30 years later, he was at last in a position at the Cape to do something about it.

### **Going into business on his own account**

John worked hard and rapidly built up people’s confidence in his energy, efficiency and honesty. His time in Ebden’s office enabled him to learn the export/import trade and get to know the local businessmen. In 1837, five years after arriving and still aged only 23, he started his own firm, Molteno & Co., exporting wine to England. He bought his first premises on the corner of St George’s and Castle Streets on 27 April 1838 and the following year, with Henry Quinn, a fellow lodger at Mrs Ost’s, six other parcels of land in Cape Town from the estate of J. Van Breda. In 1840 he bought

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<sup>14</sup> John Charles Molteno to Caroline Molteno, 9 Oct. 1842.

<sup>15</sup> 31 August, and reproduced in *The Times* (15 Nov/ 1842).

three stores in Roeland Street from the estate of another Dutch merchant, W. Klerck, and turned them into a large 140-foot long, multi-storey warehouse, the top two floors of which he rented out to the Cape Colony Customs Department as a bonded warehouse.<sup>16</sup>

It is not clear how John raised the capital he needed to start in business. Mr Dixon thought that John's great friend, Mr Jones, also a wine merchant, had 'left him a house in St George's Street'. Perhaps, also, John's reputation for initiative and honesty made it possible for him to borrow. He was clearly doing well enough in the late 1830s to accumulate property. Luckily as it turned out, and always on the look-out for new opportunities, he travelled up to the Karoo in the same year he got his Roeland Street properties and bought the Nelspoort farms from the insolvent estate of C. Ackerman on 28 January 1841.<sup>17</sup>

For two or three years, he tried to combine continuing to run his business in Cape Town with starting to farm hundreds of mile away. He employed a manager and developed a range of commercial relationships, including with Mr G. Southey as his agent in Grahamstown (at that time the easternmost settlement in the Cape Colony) and with Mr Witherby in London. He was also in contact with Messrs. Edward Francis & Co. in Mauritius to whom he exported Cape wine and wheat, importing sugar in return.<sup>18</sup>

Letters to his agents and business contacts at this time were full of regret at the low prices his goods are getting on the London market and rueing the depressed conditions of trade.<sup>19</sup> Periodic recession and low prices were already realities in these early days of modern capitalism. His business correspondence lays bare a long catalogue of woes – the *Matilda* going down and without its cargo having been insured; wine spoiled on the long voyage to London; goods imported for the Cape winter arriving so late they missed the purchasing season (while one ship from London, the *True Briton*, arrived in 1837 in the record time of 7 weeks, another the next year took 14 weeks); and credit terms extracted from him for his exports too long for him easily to bear.

John's correspondence gives us a very graphic impression of the hazards of international trade two centuries ago. But his abiding attention to the details of bills of lading, indents, prices, percentage commissions, insurance, credit terms, and bills of exchange also conveys a very modern impression. Business in this age before the telegraph or railways or powered machinery or typewriters is already indicative of the modern economy coming into existence.

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<sup>16</sup> Handwritten sheet by Frank Molteno, summarising what he had found out at the Deeds Office, 1895. These transactions are an example of English immigrants penetrating Cape Town's tiny business community and gradually displacing already established Dutch merchants.

<sup>17</sup> Frank Molteno to Percy Molteno, March 1895.

<sup>18</sup> Percy Molteno, *The Life and Times*, op. cit., pp. 9-10.

<sup>19</sup> John Charles Molteno's papers held at Rhodes House, and now part of the Bodleian Library's collections, University of Oxford. Several volumes, incl. Molteno Letter Books, 1837-1854 (MSS. Afr. s. 23/4,5 A804; Misc. Papers, 1857-1885, MSS. Afr. s.23/1,2,3 A805, A806, A807. The British Museum also holds some of his papers: Add. MSS. 39299, Molteno pap, London.

When business became particularly depressed in 1839-40, John had to halt sending white wine to London because of the poor prices received there. But he would not give up and tried to pursue a new possibility. Along with Mr Witherby, his London agent, he chartered a brig, the *Comet*, in mid 1841, loaded it with wine, brandy, raisins and a few other items, and commissioned its captain to try out an ambitious triangular trade. He was to leave for the distant ports of New South Wales and South Australia, sell these Cape products there, and using the proceeds sail on to Java in the Dutch East Indies and buy a cargo of sugar, and finally return to the Cape and supply the market there. The venture, however, did not turn out to be profitable because the depressed trading conditions had also hit the Australian ports and it proved difficult to selling the cargo there.<sup>20</sup> The ship did return safely to Cape Town in February the following year and had sold £1,630 worth of its cargo. But it still had on board £120 of unsold brandy and had had to leave some its cargo in one Australian port still unpaid for. By the end of 1841, John owed Mr Witherby the very large sum of £2,850 and the latter actually refused to honour a payment John asked him to make in favour of a third party.

All through these difficult years John continued to live very frugally and remained single so that nothing should distract him from his efforts to become a successful businessman. The strengths of this young man who was still in his 20s shine through. His beautifully clear handwriting matches the crisp, courteous, but firm, tone of his letters. He pays endless attention to detail and the meticulous execution of every project. His neatly set out instructions, for example, to the captain of the *Comet* run to several pages. They make absolutely clear what he is to do, the limits of his authority, the fall-back position he is to adopt if something goes wrong in either the Australian ports or Batavia, and exactly what kinds of payment he is to accept (specie, government bills etc). And throughout John's courage shines through in boldly trying something new if the current line of business is not successful.

### **The big decision – to go sheep farming**

The Cape wine trade was clearly running into serious difficulties. It faced far higher transport costs to England than French wines from across the Channel. The quality of Cape wine was also often compromised by three months of slopping about in large barrels through the rough Atlantic seas. And the British Government then dealt the trade a death blow by imposing a higher tariff on strong wines that were what the Cape farmers produced. John saw the writing on the wall in time. And also a new opportunity if he changed occupations entirely. He had noticed that the quantity of wool being produced in the Eastern districts was rising and realized it was finding a growing market in England. This made the remote, drought-prone Karoo where he had just bought a stretch of land look commercially viable for the first time.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Percy Molteno, based on his father's commercial correspondence.

<sup>21</sup> W. Dicey, *Borderline*, Cape Town, Kwela Books, 2004. While wine and grain exports from the Cape fell by over half between 1828 and 1848, wool exports grew by a factor of 60.



## How John was able to buy so much land in the Karoo

A chance to buy land very cheaply beyond the fertile vineyards and wheat lands of the Western Cape had just opened up. In the years 1836 to 1838 some 15,000 Dutch farmers left the Cape Colony with their herds and servants in what became the Great Trek. Britain was just bringing an end to slavery in its colonies. Former slaves were now to become employees of a sort and newly introduced laws regulating master-servant relations limited the arbitrary power of White employers over those who now worked for them.

The exodus reduced the number of Dutch farmers greatly and land prices fell. In the vast arid area of the Karoo, the local magistrate reported that at least half the farmers had departed from the area around the Nieuwveld Mountains where Nelspoort was situated and there was a danger that the 'Bushmen', the original inhabitants of the area, might reoccupy the lands thus abandoned.<sup>22</sup>

This fear was another reason why it was possible for men like John to buy up huge tracts of land since the authorities did not want areas of the Karoo to revert to occupation by the original inhabitants. Khoisan hunters and gatherers had lived there for countless aeons before any Europeans reached the area. On John's newly acquired farm at Nelspoort one could still see on the rock walls of caves the drawings they had made of eland and many other animals. There was also a site, as Craig Elstob describes,<sup>23</sup> where 'a rock gong has been fashioned out of ironstone which, when struck, resembles the pealing of church bells'. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, nomadic Dutch farmers called *trekboere* penetrated the Karoo and for decades there was enough space and wild game for the communities to coexist. But in the early 1770s a white foreman on a farm at Sakrivier, who was known to be a brutal tyrant, began shooting Khoisan people. He in turn was killed with an assegai. The Cape authorities despatched a commando that proceeded to kill many of the people. This sparked a widespread resistance – farms plundered, stock stolen, White families killed. More commandos were sent in and a kind of guerrilla war began that, because of the huge inequality in weaponry between the two sides, involved terribly heavy casualties among Khoisan. In a single year, 1774, a commando of Boers, 'Hottentots' and Basters shot dead 503 'Bushmen'. The conflict dragged on for ten years during which time some 276 White farmers and over 2,500 'Bushmen' died. The upshot was that many of those who had survived retreated north towards the Orange River into the even more inhospitable drylands of Namaqualand.<sup>24</sup> This was part of the background explaining both the low price of land and how the indigenous people who were left on the Karoo had little option but to become farm workers.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> W. G. H. and S. Vivier, *Hooyvlakte: Die Verhaal van Beaufort-West 1818-1968*, Nasionale Boekhandel, 1969, p. 135.

<sup>23</sup> A descendant of the first Jackson who had started farming in the Karoo in the 1840s. See his Afterword to Alfred de Jager Jackson's book, *Manna in the Desert: A Revelation of the Great Karroo*, Johannesburg, Christian Literature Depot, 1920; 2<sup>nd</sup> Edn., 2006, p. 255.

<sup>24</sup> W. Dicey, *Borderline*, op. cit., gives a moving account of what happened.

<sup>25</sup> W. G. H. And S. Vivier, *Hooyvlakte*, op. cit., p. 2.

As early as 1840, as we have seen, John had made the long 360 mile trip by wagon to the tiny village of Beaufort West – at that time the northernmost urban centre in the Colony – and bought a huge tract of land. In 1842 he concluded that the sensible thing to do was close down his business in Cape Town and save what capital he had left in order go farming. In November he wrote that, ‘in consequence of the continued depression in the wine trade we have determined to abandon it, and have now taken the necessary steps to bring our business to a close at the end of this year.’ The following March he informed Mr Witherby in London that ‘it is my intention to give up, at any rate for the present, all mercantile pursuits,’ adding that he had been forced into this ‘under circumstances so painful and, to me, I might add, so disastrous.’<sup>26</sup> He sold his Roeland Street warehouse, left Cape Town and moved to his farm at Nelspoort. The Karoo now became his home for nearly 20 years – first, Nelspoort and then the village of Beaufort West where he moved in 1851 and lived for the next decade. But as his son, Percy Molteno, points out in his biography of his father, in making this huge change, John persisted in seeing the importance of continuing to export; it was just that, from now on, it was wool he looked to send overseas, not wine.<sup>27</sup>

Soon after moving, John sold a half share in his farms to ‘his great friend’ and business partner Henry Quinn on 1 August 1843. This was perhaps in order to raise the capital needed to buy stock. ‘It was arranged,’ Mr Dixon recalled, ‘that John should go up and take charge of the farms as a joint concern. The farming flourished but after some time some difference arose between Mr Molteno and Mr Quinn, and the result was that Mr Molteno took over the whole concern.’ In fact, he bought back Quinn’s half share the very next year, 1844.

### **The countryside around Nelspoort**

It is difficult to imagine quite what farming on the Karoo was like in the 1840s. The Nelspoort farms were nearly 400 miles from Cape Town. As John told his mother, ‘Here we have no made roads. We have to cross over mountains and through rivers, all in a state of nature.’<sup>28</sup> The only way to get there was on horseback – something John did almost all his life – or by ox-wagon. When on one occasion he and Mr Prince set off by wagon from the latter’s house in Rondebosch (a few miles from Cape Town), the journey took 20 days.<sup>29</sup> There were no roads through the mountains, just a rough trail.

Nelspoort lay 30 miles beyond Beaufort West near where a wagon trail passed three kopjes, the Three Sisters, which reared their heads above the level Karoo plain. The Salt River ran through the farm, in those days its water much more plentiful, even if not a reliable flow, than today.<sup>30</sup> The

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<sup>26</sup> Percy Molteno, *The Life and Times*, op.cit.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> John Molteno to Caroline Molteno, 9 Oct. 1842.

<sup>29</sup> Handwritten document, probably written by another old-timer, Mr Pritchard, in the file of Frank Molteno’s letters to Percy Molteno.

<sup>30</sup> Alfred de Jager Jackson, *Manna in the Desert*, op.cit.

climate was healthy and invigorating although the intense summer heat meant 'man as well as nature rests from 11 to 4' to the endless throb of cicadas in the trees while during the winter nights water could freeze half an inch thick.

Percy Molteno described what Nelspoort's surroundings were like at the time of his father's arrival:<sup>31</sup>

At the foot of the Nieuwfeld Mountains, indeed entangled partly among their spurs, lies Nelspoort.... It is situated on the Salt River, a torrent which runs for a short period during thunder showers, and loses itself in a marshy level, the Salt River Vlei, fifteen or twenty miles away.... The country is covered with low-lying scrub, comprised chiefly of mesembryanthemums and compositae, which are of a uniform dull brown until the thunder shower gives its infrequent moisture, when they suddenly bloom with the most gorgeous colours, and all Nature lives again so rapidly that it would appear to be touched with a wizard's wand. There are no large trees, but along the river banks, the mimosa flourishes, armed and protected by very formidable thorns from six inches to a foot long.

The country swarmed with game. There were all kinds of antelope, from the huge eland to the small *klipspringer* which frequented the rocky heights. 'To this day,' wrote Percy in 1900, 'large herds of graceful springbuck may be seen grazing on the plains, and the wild ostrich is still to be found in considerable numbers.' When John settled there, the region harboured an even greater variety of game.

The Karoo was a significantly greener landscape two centuries ago than now and if water could be found, the land was fertile. The *vlaktes* (flats) supported a variety of grasses and low bushes, including *karoobossies*, as well as *boesmangras*, *renosterbos*, *hurpuisbos*, *kriedoring*, *rooigras* and *suurgras*. If there was a river – there weren't many – its occasional pools and thick bush became a haven for 'birds, hares, *koedoe*, *springbokke*, *duiker*, *steenbokke*, *ribbokke*, *klipbokke*, and even zebra. There were also wild ostriches, baboons (sometimes in troops as big as 150 to 200 animals) and a whole variety of small animals, and in the kloofs and mountains, leopards and lions.

There was no overgrazing in the time before white farmers began to run huge flocks of sheep, and as a result little soil erosion or flash floods following rain storms. There was also more, and certainly more variegated, tree cover before the needs of a growing population for fuel and construction timber cut it down.<sup>32</sup>

Lions were just abandoning the district at the time of John's arrival, but there were many other carnivorous animals, including a particularly fierce leopard, known locally as a *tier* (tiger) from its cunning vindictiveness and strength. Equally dangerous to sheep were the smaller leopards, wild dogs, wild cats, wolves, hyenas and jackals. 'It may easily be imagined,' Percy wrote, 'what formidable difficulties the presence of these wild animals presented to the stock farmer.'

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<sup>31</sup> P. A. Molteno, *The Life and Times....*, op. cit., p. 18ff. I have drawn here on Percy's text, as rewritten in parts by Francis Hirst in his unpublished biography of Percy. To see that in its entirety, go to [www.moltenofamily.net](http://www.moltenofamily.net)

<sup>32</sup> W. G. H. en S. Vivier, *Hooyvlakte*, op.cit., pp. 37, 110, 114.

The other great threat to farmers were the occasional stupendous thunderstorms. A speck of cloud would suddenly appear in a clear sky. It would swell rapidly and the sun become 'obscured by an inky mass of darkness'. Then a cannonade of thunder, followed by a chaos of howling wind and then the rain falling in torrents – the whole accompanied by zig-zag flashes or even sheet lightning illuminating the storm clouds overhead, each flash followed seconds later by more drum-rolls of thunder. On occasion, huge hailstones would pound down, spreading death among the sheep and ostriches. And 'no summer passes without its quota of men killed by lightning; and at times a whole span of sixteen or eighteen oxen may be seen lying dead, the fluid having apparently passed along the chain to which the yokes were attached, so killing each couple in succession.'"

There was another thing about the Karoo climate John never got used to. His brother-in-law Percy Alport recalled he 'was always very much depressed when any of the customary dust storms took place. He would frequently shut himself up in the house altogether during the storm.'<sup>33</sup> This was perhaps not just because of the insufferable heat, but the reminder these dust storms were of impending drought and the loss of precious stock. John's son, Wallace Molteno, who took Nelspoort over half a century later, worried similarly, and got depressed by, the many blows Nature could deal out to Karoo farmers.

This was the country where John spent the best part of twenty years – a district twice the size of Ireland, yet with so few people your nearest neighbour might live five or ten miles away.

There are various estimates of the amount of land John acquired in the Nelspoort area. It is difficult to be exact because he bought and disposed of land at various times, and entered into partnerships with his Jackson cousins after 1847. One estimate is that John farmed about 100,000 acres.<sup>34</sup> But Phillida Brooke Simons who examined the Cape Archives and an inventory of John's estate drawn up after his death by his eldest son, Charlie, concluded the farms totalled 150,000 acres. That's 230 square miles or, put another way, an expanse 23 miles long and 10 miles wide.<sup>35</sup> There were two outstations at Nelspoort, an eastern and a western. The main farms were Kamferskraal (33,000 acres), Baakensrug (40,000 acres)<sup>36</sup> and the western outpost, Bleakhouse (25,000 acres).<sup>37</sup> An anonymous handwritten note listed additional farms – Rhenosterkop, Courlands Kloof, Salt River, Uitkyk and Grootfontein; and another said their total extent amounted to 100,000 morgen or 340 square miles.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> P. A. Alport's recollections, related to Frank Molteno, 1895.

<sup>34</sup> A. O. Jackson, *The Jacksons of Nelspoort, Cape of Good Hope, and their Descendants*, privately published, 1995, p. 35. This book is a wonderfully detailed history, generation by generation (eight in all), of the South African Jackson clan who are descended from one or other of the three brothers, John Molteno's first cousins, who settled on the Karoo in 1846 and 1860.

<sup>35</sup> Phillida Brooke Simons, *Apples of the Sun*, op. cit., p. 36. See also Cape Archives, MOOC/13/1/518, p. 73.

<sup>36</sup> Baakensrug is still in the hands of the Jackson family today.

<sup>37</sup> Alfred de Jager Jackson, *Manna in the Desert*, op. cit., pp. 251-4.

<sup>38</sup> UCT Archives: BC601, Box 5.

It is difficult to imagine farming an expanse of land like that until one realizes two things. First, the Karoo lacks adequate – let alone reliable – rainfall (*Karoo* is the Khoi word for ‘dry place’ or ‘desert’). The average rainfall in a year is only 8 inches, and droughts may mean no rain at all falling on certain farms for several years in a row. The second problem is the very stony and shallow soil which also prevents it being arable country. Indeed the Karoo is even only good pasture if the stock density is kept very low. Once John had built up his farming enterprise by the end of the 1840s, he usually ran six merino flocks of some 1,200 to 1,400 sheep each. Including a few goats and rams, the total number of stock was about 9,000, making a ratio of roughly ten acres per head. But the temptation was always to run more stock than the land could carry and by the time of his death 40 years later, he was running 22,000 sheep across five farms.<sup>39</sup>

We must also remember what John was buying was not farmland in any recognisable sense. The veld was entirely unfenced and so the sheep were prey to jackals and other predators. There were almost no farm buildings or sheep folds. No windmills pumping water from underground. No dam on the Salt River, or water storage tanks. Even after he began to remedy some of these things, the value of the land at the time of his death was probably only in the region of £40,000 (in terms of the pound at that time).<sup>40</sup>

### **Farm life on the Karoo**

We are fortunate in having a wonderful book of recollections and insights by Alfred de Jager Jackson who was born at Nelspoort in 1860 and spent his first 20 years there when John Molteno was still alive and owned the farms.<sup>41</sup> Life was tough for farm owners, and all the more so for the shepherds they employed. These were mainly Khoi (called ‘Hottentots’ by Whites in those days) although ‘some had an infusion of white blood in their veins’. They had to live with their flocks 24/7 in order to protect them from marauding leopards and jackals. It was an intensely lonely existence living out on the veld far from any other human being day after day. For shelter, Alfred says, ‘The shepherds built their own huts of a light rounded framework of poles and laths which were thickly and securely covered and thatched with ‘milk-bush’ (*melkbos*), and generally plastered on the outer side with mud. A small space was left for entrance and exit.’ They had to endure the extremes of the Karoo heat devoid of any shade in summer, and the unbelievable cold during winter nights. In the Beaufort West Division alone, some 20 shepherds died in 1885 during two days and nights of bitterly cold rain.

These shepherds got as little as 5 shillings a month – compared to the £25 John was paid by Mr Jardine at the Cape Library in 1831. Plus rations which comprised three or four old ewes each month

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<sup>39</sup> Phillida Brooke Simons, *Apples of the Sun*, op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>40</sup> This calculation is based on Arthur Soulby Jackson’s sale of 1,419 hectares for £1,125 in 1889.

<sup>41</sup> Alfred de Jager Jackson, *Manna in the Desert*: op. cit., pp. 251-4. Alfred was a son of Henry Jackson, John Molteno’s first cousin, who took over management of the farms in 1865. See below.

for the family's meat, four 25 lb 'buckets' of 'Boer meal' [presumably mielie-meal], a piece of untanned ox-hide (for making their own rough footwear), and some tobacco and salt.

Jackson also describes the farmhouse he grew up in at Kamferskraal, which must be the house my father, Donald Molteno, and his brother and sisters, grew up in the 1910s.<sup>42</sup> The main rooms had wooden floors and reed ceilings, and the others floors of clay smeared with half-liquid sheep's dung that then dried. Mats made of springbok hide were spread. The chairs had 'comfortable backs, strong cane seats and good sound legs'. The roof was made of thatch from straw which, unlike the corrugated iron sheets that replaced it in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was a wonderful protection against both the extreme heat of summer and the icy cold of winter. Heavy wooden shutters protected the windows from the occasional hail storms. And the front door was made in two sections – the lower one usually kept closed to keep out the dogs, chickens and snakes.

Almost everything had to be made, and repaired, on the farm. In Alfred's day, an Afrikaner carpenter and 'handyman' called Mr Stol made all the furniture, the finer pieces – tables, display cabinets, even a desk – being beautifully carved out of South Africa's famous stinkwood, and carefully polished.<sup>43</sup>

Next to the farmhouse were the farm buildings and stone-walled kraals for the sheep and goats, mules and horses. And alongside, a garden where fruit trees stood in profusion and the vegetables the farm's inhabitants needed were grown.

### **Merino sheep – wool for export**

Merino sheep were the key to the financial success of John's farming operation from the start. Their medium- to ultra-fine wool, and strong fibre, were much in demand overseas. They were also a dual purpose breed producing not just wool, but wonderful lamb for the local market and home consumption. They were also well adapted to the Karoo climate and vegetation.

How merinos landed up in the Cape is a fascinating story.<sup>44</sup> The King of Spain had got the first merinos in Europe from Persia and then sent some of the rams and ewes to the Netherlands which was a Spanish province at the time. But they did not do well in the Dutch climate and were eventually sent on in 1789 to the Dutch East India Company's settlement at the Cape where they thrived. Two years later, however, the authorities demanded them back, but luckily the local man in charge only returned the original number of sheep and kept their offspring! The story does not stop there. Some brothers called Van Reenen used the three merino rams to breed a flock of 300 ewes and early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the new British authorities at the Cape encouraged Dirk Gysbert van Reenen to cross-breed them with indigenous Cape fat-tailed sheep on his farm in the Zoetendals

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., Ch. 1 'The Old Homestead'.

<sup>43</sup> I remember two of these pieces of furniture, an elegant kidney desk and a display cabinet, that came down to my father from Nelspoort; perhaps they had actually been made by Mr Stoll nearly a century before.

<sup>44</sup> Denine Erasmus, 'A history of SA Merino farming', *Farmers Weekly*, 25 April 2014, pp 56-61.

valley. So began the Karoo wool industry. Exports soared – from 266,000 kg in 1839 when John started farming, to 2.5 million kg in 1851 and 48 million kg by 1872.<sup>45</sup>

### **John's struggle to become a successful farmer**

We are fortunate in having the recollections of someone who clearly knew John well during his early years as a farmer.<sup>46</sup> This friend recalled how he 'threw immense energy into all his projects – the construction of irrigation works, the building of sheep folds, and the construction of dwellings.... No one who has not seen a country of this character has any conception of the utter want of ... ordinary life or the wild conditions.... The whole country was as Nature left it.' But John 'had a nature which delighted in trials of strength of all kinds. He battled with Nature....' 'Of course, [he] had no knowledge of sheep farming. He determined, however, to master the details and threw himself into the work with the energy which characterised him in all he undertook. His neighbours laughed at the young Englishman who knew nothing of their occupation and freely prophesied a speedy failure.' He got rid of his first farm manager, Mr Naylor, and promoted an overseer, Mr Ross, 'a practical man and a good manager', in his place who taught him the skills necessary for farming on the Karoo. These came to include 'taming and subduing the wildest horses; they required his power and usually it was to him they turned; no one else could [illegible] his horses.' He also became, to cite another example, 'a wonderful hand at packing a wagon and would often take off his coat and show the men how things should be done.'

How John treated his farm workers is particularly interesting. The same informant says that: 'Among the miscellaneous ... native population, there were many who had drifted into dubious ways – lifting stock and practising other evil habits. But many of them Mr Molteno took into his service, treating them in such a manner and obtaining such an ascendancy over them that he generally reclaimed them and made them self-respecting and decent members of society.' 'At first, however, his [White] neighbours regarded with serious alarm his having these kinds of men about him, feeling as they did that they themselves could never succeed in such work.'

John was always 'an extremely early riser and all about had to accommodate themselves to this habit.' Indeed he 'worked with such energy that he was met with complaints that his servants were being worn out by his ceaseless energy.' But 'his commanding presence and powerful character, as well as his energetic habits and forcible expression of his will, had their usual effect on the native servants who naturally yielded him a ready obedience' – despite his driving them to work so hard.

He was careful never to waste any resources. 'Then and at all times he hated waste of any kind and whether it was his own or his friend's or the public funds, he was most solicitous that not a farthing should be wasted.... he regarded waste of any kind as sinful.' This was necessary in order to make the farm pay because margins were tight; in 1847, for example, he only earned 36 pence from each sheep (less shearing, transport and general farm costs). One friend told 'an amusing story illustrative

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid. , and 'Expansion of wool farming' in [www.newhistory.co.za](http://www.newhistory.co.za).

<sup>46</sup> Extracts drawn from a handwritten note by this informant of Frank Molteno's, 1895.

of his care of the least trifles. Staying at his house while he was away at the Kaffir War, she found in his wardrobe a very ancient coat and suggested in the hearing of his overseer, Mr Ross, that she should dispose of it to one of the native servants.' But Ross immediately said: 'You shall no such thing; Mr Molteno will certainly ask for it on his return.'

Other factors helped make him a successful sheep farmer in addition to his general approach and mastering all the skills involved. He spotted that Britain's rapidly growing population meant a permanently expanding market for wool beyond what its own farmers could meet. Arthur Jackson said John, when still a businessman in Cape Town and not yet a farmer, had exported some wool from the Eastern Cape already as early as 1838. He also realized right from the start of his farming career that the breed of sheep best suited to meet this demand was not the indigenous fat-tailed Cape sheep, but merino crossbreeds that could survive the Karoo's harsh extremes of heat and cold, and still provide a high quality wool clip.<sup>47</sup>

He applied the business skills he had learned in Cape Town and treated farming as a business.<sup>48</sup> This went way beyond a determination to keep costs down or getting the best out of his employees. He increased greatly the money he made from his annual wool clip by bypassing middle men and exporting his wool directly to importers in England. As early as 1847 he was getting 18 pence a pound by doing so, as compared with only nine pence in the Colony, transport to the coast by wagon costing only two pence.<sup>49</sup> And by employing competent managers whom he closely supervised and instructed, he was able to farm on a much larger scale and free himself up to engage in other lines of business which he began to do in 1852.<sup>50</sup>

The result was he became possibly the largest sheep farmer in the Karoo, and widely respected by both the Dutch and English farmers around him.

### **Marriage at last – 1844**

By the time John had been settled up-country for a few years, he was beginning to make some money again. For the first time, he could think of getting married. During the eight years he had boarded with Mrs Hoets in Cape Town, he had got to know a young woman believed to be a relative of hers, Maria Hewitson. 'According to genealogical records, Maria was the illegitimate daughter of Sara Wilhelmina Beytel and William Hewitson, assistant commissary general attached to the British garrison in Cape Town. Born at the Cape, Sara Beytel was largely of German and Swedish descent,

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<sup>47</sup> John Molteno imported his first two Saxon merino rams as early as 1841. P. A. Molteno, *The Life and Times...*, op.cit.

<sup>48</sup> See his Letter Books and other farm-related papers held in the Bodleian Library (see Footnote 19 above.

<sup>49</sup> A. O. Jackson, *The Jacksons of Nelspoort*, op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>50</sup> Percy Molteno, *The Life and Times...*, op.cit., p. 14.



although her grandmother was recorded as ‘Dorothea Arends van die Kaap’.<sup>51</sup> This has been taken to mean that Maria was of Coloured ancestry, a supposition strengthened perhaps by the fact that, while her relative’s surname Hoets is rare, it still exists in today’s Coloured community. A modern local history enthusiast asserts unequivocally that Maria was ‘a coloured woman he had met soon after arriving in Cape Town’.<sup>52</sup>

Maria and John were married in St George’s Church (later Cathedral) on 4 October 1844. As he reassured his mother, Caroline, ‘I have every reason to feel happy with my choice. She was a member of the same family I resided with for the last eight years, and consequently we understand each other’s tempers and dispositions perfectly. Although she never resided out of Cape Town, she is perfectly happy and contented with our country life; indeed, I may truly say (and in being able to do so, I humbly thank God) that we are both perfectly happy.’<sup>53</sup>

They settled on the remote Nelspoort farm. Maria was pregnant at the time John was telling his mother about her in early 1845. Tragically, however, a few months later in July, she gave birth to a stillborn child, and died a few days after. There was of course no medical help available on the farm. John, having experienced the companionship of marriage for less than a year, ‘felt this blow ... and wrote to his mother as if he had lived his life already and all happiness had left it.’<sup>54</sup> He buried Maria and her baby together in the same grave in the little Beaufort West Cemetery, and put up a tablet in the Dutch Reformed Church, which read: ‘Sacred to the memory of Maria, beloved wife of John Charles Molteno. Died at Nelspoort on 15 July 1845 aged 30 years, having a few days previously given birth to a son – stillborn – now buried with her.’ In her will dated 1 December 1844, Maria had bequeathed all that she owned to her ‘dear husband, John Charles Molteno’.

Just how dangerous childbirth could be on these remote Karoo farms was a lesson not forgotten 30 years later by John’s young cousin Arthur Soulby Jackson. At the time of his wife’s first confinement in 1874, he asked the doctor in Beaufort West if he could attend so that he could see how it was done in case he had to handle a subsequent confinement himself. This is exactly what happened with her second baby the following year; he and Sarah, or Sally as she was called, were alone on the farm Brakfontein, out of reach of doctor or midwife, and Arthur dealt with the birth.<sup>55</sup>

## **Learning the lessons of war – the Eastern Frontier, 1846**

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<sup>51</sup> Phillida Brooke Simons, *Apples of the Sun: being an account of the lives, vision and achievements of the Molteno brothers, Edward Bartle Frere and Henry Anderson*, Cape Town, Fernwood Press, 1999, p. 14.

<sup>52</sup> Jamie Arends, ‘Remembering ‘forgotten men’ of the Cape Colony: John Molteno’s legacy must be recalled’, *Cape Argus*, 17 June 2014.

<sup>53</sup> John Molteno to Caroline Molteno, early 1845, incomplete fragment.

<sup>54</sup> Handwritten note by one of Frank Molteno’s informants.

<sup>55</sup> He was a son of Arthur Jackson. See A. O. Jackson, *The Jacksons of Nelspoort*, op. cit., p. 48.

Despite the tragedy of Maria's death, John 'was not the man to allow the dead hand of the past to hinder the work of the present. He threw himself more energetically than ever into the work of developing the ... land which he had acquired.'<sup>56</sup> But before many months had passed, he faced a new crisis – a Frontier War had broken out in the Eastern Cape.

The Cape Colony saw a succession of these Frontier Wars. When farmers from the Netherlands had first settled at the Cape, the indigenous population were primarily hunters and gatherers. They lacked the numbers, political organization necessary for mobilizing men on a large scale, and firearms to mount a powerful resistance. There were skirmishes and small wars of course; but by and large they chose to retreat further and further away into more distant and less well watered regions. The situation was totally different in the eastern areas of the gradually expanding Dutch settlement. The Xhosa-speaking people there – pastoralist, numerous and organized in self-confident chieftaincies – were gradually moving westwards in search of well-watered grazing lands. From the late 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, there was constant competition between these tribes and the growing number of white settlers also wanting this territory. Hence the recurrent Frontier Wars in the Eastern Cape.<sup>57</sup>

The 1846 War was sufficiently serious for British troops to require the assistance of as many able-bodied colonials as possible. Although Beaufort West lay nearly 400 miles away, its commando (a self-defence unit comprising local, mainly white farmers) was one of those called on. John's manager, Mr Ross, had to go. But John decided it would better for the smooth running of the farm for Mr Ross to stay behind and he to go instead. Perhaps, but this can only be speculation, he also felt the need for a complete break with the farmhouse and its surroundings which everyday must have reminded him of his wife's agonising death and the sense of irreparable loss he still felt.

So it was on April 30, 1846 that, accompanied by 'two of my men' with their firearms and four horses [spare horses being essential], he rode off from Nelspoort and joined the 330-strong Beaufort commando on its long ride to the front.<sup>58</sup>

Becoming involved in this campaign had a profound impact on John. He took an active part, coming under fire on various occasions, and he learned about the realities of this type of warfare at first hand. His courage and leadership abilities impressed the men around him and they elected him Assistant Commandant. Sir Andries Stockenstrom, in overall charge of the colonial forces, was equally impressed by him and his other commandants Pringle, Joubert and du Toit. John wrote to his mother from 'Ravine Bush near Fort Beaufort' about how 'I have been in several engagements, but none of the men were hurt although the bullets whizzed about us, but the Caffirs are not sufficiently acquainted with guns, and generally fire too high, or they would do much more damage. The fifth of this month [June], my birthday, was spent by me in a very different manner to what it had ever been

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. for this and following quotes.

<sup>57</sup> A detailed and insightful account is Noel Mostert, *Frontiers: The Epic of South Africa's Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1992.

<sup>58</sup> For a detailed account of John's experiences during this war, see P. A. Moltano, *The Life and Times...*, op.cit., Ch. III.

before. On that day a party of us, 100 mounted men, made a dash into Caffirland and surprised a large party of Caffirs, killing 13 of them and capturing 5,200 sheep and nine horses which we brought off safely.'

But he was also appalled by what he saw of the British regular forces in action. They required supplies and attendant baggage trains on a scale that made them ponderously slow and vulnerable to attack. He thought their officers displayed the 'extreme rigidity of the professional military mind', besides being grossly contemptuous of the commando volunteers who understood the terrain, were accustomed to move swiftly, did much of the fighting, and were often placed in the most difficult situations on the orders of British officers. The Regulars, in contrast, had not the slightest idea how to take advantage of the lie of the land, or how to cope with the hit and run guerrilla tactics of their opponents who moved swiftly and took full advantage of the cover provided by the bush and thickly wooded kloofs. And the financial cost of deploying these thousands of regular troops – the army amounted to 15,000 men<sup>59</sup> – was enormous, and the Colony's inhabitants were expected to pay for it.

What's more, as John looked at the Khoi, Mfengu and Coloured combatants<sup>60</sup> ranged alongside the largely Dutch commandos, he saw that this kind of Frontier War was not a simple 'Black' versus 'White' conflict. Those defending the Colony's boundaries were always a mix of 'White', 'Mixed Ancestry' and 'Black' (Xhosa-speaking) men. John's granddaughter, Kathleen Murray, wrote for example of 'a very valiant Coloured Corps who refused to obey orders to retreat and drove the enemy away'.

More fundamental still, John concluded that warfare like this was the wrong way to go about handling the Xhosa-speaking chieftaincies on the Frontier. He felt that there was a better alternative – governing everyone who lived within the Cape's frontiers on a basis free of any racial distinction, and with opportunities for paid employment and Western-style education. This he believed could make more and more Africans living beyond the frontier want to be incorporated into the Colony. In the meantime, order and respect for the land and property of the Cape's inhabitants along the Frontier should be maintained by negotiation and police-style measures instead of going to war.<sup>61</sup>

John stood by this approach for the rest of his life. 'He would never consent to the Colonial forces being placed under the [British] military, of whose incompetence he had been an indignant witness.'<sup>62</sup> And this conviction became relevant to the country at large when he subsequently involved himself in the political life of the Cape and it had dramatic consequences for him personally during his premiership in the 1870s.

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<sup>59</sup> John Molteno to Caroline Molteno, 24 June 1846. This number of troops was roughly the same as the entire Boer population of the Transvaal at this time!

<sup>60</sup> Kathleen Murray, 'John Charles Molteno, 1814-1886, Extracts from a Family Memoir', typescript.

<sup>61</sup> R. F. M. Immelman, *Sir John C. Molteno, 1814-1886 – A Biographical Sketch*, unpublished, c. 1958.

<sup>62</sup> P. A. Molteno, *Life and Times....*, op. cit., Vol. 1, pp. 26-51.

John was away on the Frontier for several months and only returned home after the War ended. Paramount Chief Kreli's forces had been defeated and the Cape Colony's territory now extended to the Great Kei River, incorporating an area that was called British Kaffraria.

### **Arthur and Henry Jackson join John**

John's mother, Caroline, had a sister, Alicia Bower, who had married her husband Robert Jackson on the very same day Caroline married John's father. John kept in touch periodically with the eldest of his Jackson cousins, Arthur, who was five years younger than him. This became easier when Arthur took up seafaring and served on vessels plying the London-Bombay run. These ships always called at Cape Town and so he and John were able to meet.<sup>63</sup> On one occasion in 1842, John went on board the morning after the *Childe Harold*, on which Arthur Jackson was serving as First Mate, had put in at Table Bay, and he wrote his mother afterwards how pleased he was to find Arthur very well and in good spirits.

Looking around for someone he could trust to help manage his farms and who might even be able to put in some capital, John offered Arthur a share in his farming enterprise if he would give up seafaring and join him. Having just married, Arthur agreed and arrived in Cape Town with his wife, Priscilla Soulby, on the 623 ton *Recorder* on 12 April 1846.<sup>64</sup> Accompanying them were Priscilla's unmarried sister, Mary Ann, and Arthur's sixteen-year old brother, Henry. Henry already knew John's family in London well because he had lived with Caroline Molteno and her children in 1841 and been educated at her little school in Peckham.

John had had to leave for the War before Arthur had been able to make his way up to the Karoo. As John explained to Caroline, 'he arrived in the early part of April, and I was just about making preparations to get him up to me when the Kaffir war broke out and I, together with all the men who could be spared, moved off to the frontier with all possible haste.'<sup>65</sup>

Only once he was back from the war was Arthur able to join him. Having been earning his living for several years as a ship's officer, he was much better off than John had been when he first arrived at the Cape. Before trekking up to Nelspoort, Arthur bought his own wagon in Cape Town – and a piano for his wife. As things turned out, he was to work with, and for, John for most of the next 20 years.

When he got there, Arthur found John superintending cutting a deep furrow through solid rock to lead water from the Salt River to where some crops could be cultivated. Hewn by hand, this channel can still be seen near the farmhouse at Kamferskraal today. Arthur at once set about learning the practice and economics of sheep farming, as well as picking up some Dutch – which was the lingua franca on the Karoo farms. John lent him a wagon to transport a load of wool to Port Elizabeth which

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<sup>63</sup> John Molteno to Caroline Molteno, 9 Oct. 1842.

<sup>64</sup> Alfred de Jager Jackson, *Manna in the Desert*, op. cit.

<sup>65</sup> P. A. Molteno, *The Life and Times*, op.cit., Vol. 1, pp 27-28.

was just becoming a port through which exports could flow; Arthur presumably earning some money as a transport rider.

Very soon, April 1847, Arthur and Priscilla moved from Nelspoort to a farm of their own called Bokpoort. This was situated in the Nieuwveld on a high plateau in the mountains near Beaufort West. John saw them off and lent them a wagon in addition to their own and some men. Priscilla, Mary Ann and the piano all rode in one wagon along with 'two pigeons, three hens, one cock, four canaries and a hawk'! There were two spans of ten oxen to haul the wagons.

'They set off at about two o'clock on April 14, and were seen off by Molteno who accompanied them for the first mile. They continued on their way after dark and outspanned for the night at about ten o'clock after losing their way and finding it again, for there was no proper road. They continued ... at about ten the next morning after finding one of their oxen that had absconded during the night. All along, they approached a mountain mass through which there appeared to be no route, but eventually wound their way through a series of separate heights. They stopped for the second night of their journey at nine o'clock. The next day at noon they reached their close neighbour Mr Esterhuizen's place, where they spent a short while before proceeding, and reached Bokpoort an hour later.'

Arthur was leasing the farm since he lacked the capital to buy it. Various neighbours rallied round, helping them in various ways including bringing them vegetables at the start. Arthur had no sheep initially although he was hoping to buy 300 to 500 as soon as possible. He also didn't have a horse until September and so had to go hunting on foot when getting meat for the pot. When he was invited to join a leopard hunt, he had to borrow a horse for the occasion. In order to earn a little money, Priscilla and her sister taught some of the farmers' children English. Luckily, their farm had a garden with fruit trees – peach, fig, quince, apple, pomegranate and almonds. There was also a small dam on the nearby river from which Arthur was allowed to lead water every 4<sup>th</sup> day. This enabled him to start growing things with seeds sent out by the family in England.

September that year, 1847, was when the partnership between Arthur Jackson and John Molteno really started. The two men rendez-vous'd and on riding back to Bokpoort that evening announced they had jointly bought 2,500 sheep for about £1,000. While John clearly had put up most (or all) of the capital, Arthur was to manage the whole flock. 'Molteno had hitherto had overseers or managers on his farm, but in the arrangement between him and Arthur, he opted for a managing partner, thus establishing a new policy for his enterprises.'<sup>66</sup>

Trying at the same time to farm at Bokpoort which lay 30 miles away from Nelspoort was not possible and by early 1849 Arthur was back at Nelspoort and building a house called Mimosa Cottage for Priscilla and their first-born child, Arthur Soulby Jackson. Mary Ann said Arthur was now making some money. They were expecting his younger brother Henry to arrive soon on a visit from Cape Town where he was still working. But then tragedy struck. In a dreadful echo of what had happened to John Molteno's wife, Maria, four years before, Priscilla died in November, a week after

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<sup>66</sup> A. O. Jackson, *The Jacksons of Nelspoort*, op. cit.

successfully giving birth to her second son, Julius Henry.<sup>67</sup> John had been there trying to help. Leaving Arthur with Priscilla, he 'dashed off on that night at break-neck pace to Beaufort to find a doctor, but was too late. I always understood afterwards why he had such specially tender feeling for her child.'<sup>68</sup> The scene of this tragedy was the very same farm where Maria had died in 1845.

Young Henry rushed over to comfort Mary Ann over her sister's death. John took charge of the funeral arrangements and acted like a brother to Arthur. Priscilla's body, like Maria's before her, was transported from the farm and buried in the old cemetery at Beaufort West. 'It was the custom in those days that the ladies did not attend funerals, but all the men in Beaufort turned up... Mr Fraser [the Dutch Reformed Church minister] officiated.'

The immediate problem now was: how was the new baby to be fed? Mary Ann took charge, but years later described how 'she did not know what she would have done without John – he procured milk daily for the poor little baby – brought it or sent it to her himself.'<sup>69</sup> Later a young 'Hottentot' woman came in to be the wet nurse.

Then another question arose: was it proper for Mary Ann to stay on with her brother-in-law in the house? She was determined to look after the baby and his little brother, who was now two. And Arthur would not be parted from them. 'Some of their Beaufort friends censured Mary Ann; others, recognising her high moral quality, supported her and visited her often.' Arthur sought temporary solace in work – coming home late at night and often spending days away with the sheep. A year and a half later, he remarried, a woman called Jane Pierce. The marriage took place in Beaufort and after the wedding breakfast the couple rode off to Nelspoort, accompanied by a number of people including Mary Ann in a wagon.<sup>70</sup>

The relationship between Arthur and John was a good one.<sup>71</sup> The two cousins were often together because of their farm work. Their houses at Nelspoort were very close, with just the Salt River separating them, and John, who was still single, often came over to eat with Arthur and Jane. He could be good company. Alfred de Jager Jackson, Arthur's nephew, recounts how, while he may have been 'a man of affairs who took life seriously', he also loved a good joke and was 'an excellent dinner table companion'. One instance Alfred remembers actually dates from years later. John, already quite elderly quite elderly by this time, was 'seated at table on one of his occasional visits to our farm'<sup>72</sup> and telling them how: 'I was driving [in a Cape cart, no doubt] up the street in Beaufort

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<sup>67</sup> Sadly Julius Henry died as a child in 1856.

<sup>68</sup> Description by Mrs Tennant, as recalled by Caroline Murray, 'Reminiscences', op. cit.

<sup>69</sup> Betty Molteno wrote how Mary Ann (who later became Mrs Musto) told her this, March 1895.

<sup>70</sup> Mary Ann Soulby later married a Karoo farmer, John Musto.

<sup>71</sup> See Arthur Jackson's letters, 1846-51.

<sup>72</sup> Actually Kamferskraal was still John Molteno's farm.

West the other day, when I met a man, so drunk, that he was walking on both sides of the road at the same time, but' – a strategic pause – 'by a great effort I managed to get through between him.'<sup>73</sup>

John also enjoyed teasing people, as his parliamentary opponents later were to discover. Even in dignified old age, he sometimes could not restrain himself. One young man, Percy Southey, found himself travelling in the same train compartment in the Karoo as Sir John (as he was by then). To make conversation and knowing the area they were passing through only got half the rainfall of Colesberg further to the northeast, he turned to the grand old man of Cape politics and very politely asked: 'Sir, how come you can farm anything in this drought-prone and very dry part of the Karoo?' John paused, looked out of the carriage window as the train slowly puffed its way across the veld, and replied: 'My boy, you see that bush over there? And that one?' (pointing to another *karoobossie* a few feet away across the bare baked soil). 'Well', he said, 'the secret is this: when a sheep has eaten that first bush, it's just strong enough to walk over to the next one.'<sup>74</sup>

The close relationship between John and his Jackson cousins was strengthened when young Henry gave up working in Cape Town and joined them on the farm in 1850. A further fillip to the Jackson-Molteno connection took place ten years later when the remaining Jackson brothers, Sidney and Julius, and their families, also decided to leave England in 1860 and settle in the Karoo. When Arthur died in 1865 (aged only 46), Henry Jackson took over running the Molteno sheep farms at Nelspoort.

The relationship between the cousins continued into the next generation. Henry's son, Julius, became a partner of John Molteno's son, Charlie, on the Eastern outstation of the Nelspoort farms, a partnership which lasted until 1906. Harry, another of Henry's sons, farmed first with his father at Kamferskraal and later in partnership with Charlie Molteno on the Western outstation (he and Charlie later bought farms together). And the third of Henry's sons, George Clifford Jackson, stayed on at the Central/Homestead section of Kamferskraal and eventually farmed it on behalf of the Molteno Syndicate.<sup>75</sup>

This is the story, told here very briefly, of how the growing Jackson clan who had originally joined their cousin, John Molteno, put down firm roots in the Karoo that have endured to this day.<sup>76</sup> Both Julius and Harry Jackson became leading figures in Beaufort West, served as Town Councillors (Julius was Mayor for a time), founded the Beaufort West Club, and were prominent in the local shooting club.

John's invitation to Arthur Jackson had been the trigger that began the process. It was quite a common pattern for 19<sup>th</sup> century businessmen to employ relatives in positions of trust rather than recruit outsiders. There was little legislation controlling fraud in those days, the accountancy profession was almost non-existent, and government's ability to track down fraudsters minimal.

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<sup>73</sup> Alfred Jackson de Jager, *Manna in the Desert*, op. cit., p. 55.

<sup>74</sup> As told me by Harold Wright, a close friend of Vic Molteno, both lifelong Karoo farmers. February 2006.

<sup>75</sup> This was set up after John Molteno's death with a number of his offspring, as well as his widow, Minnie (Lady Molteno), being the shareholders.

<sup>76</sup> The account that follows rests primarily on Jackson, *The Jacksons of Nelspoort*, op. cit.

What more sensible, then, than to employ a relative? Not only did it help a family member, but the mere fact of being related meant some degree of control, making misappropriation less likely. John established this practice not just with Arthur and Henry Jackson but, as we will see, with his brother-in-law, Percy Alport, in the 1850s.

We don't know the precise terms on which John Molteno worked with Arthur or Henry. It was never just a straightforward owner/manager relationship; there was always an element of part ownership involved. Almost from the start, Arthur became a quarter owner of one of John's farms and young Henry had an eighth share in the Lower Nelspoort portion of the farms from 1856, and more after his brother's death. The arrangements gave the Jackson brothers opportunities to make money on their own account as a result of owning a share in the land or some of the stock. Gradually they were able to buy farms for themselves in the Beaufort and Victoria West districts, in particular Henry's sons, Julius, Harry and George Clifford.

The upshot of all this was both families putting down long-lasting roots in the Karoo. Two of John Molteno's sons, Charlie and Wallace, became Karoo farmers, as did Arthur's son, Arthur Soulby Jackson (who farmed at Mimosa Grove), and three of Henry's sons. Almost two centuries on, several Jacksons, but only one Molteno (a great great greatgrandson of John), still farm there today.

### **1851 – John's first visit to England in 20 years**

For years, John had felt bad about not being in a financial position to support his mother in London who he knew was struggling financially while bringing up the younger children. But by the start of 1851, his new line of work as a largescale, export-oriented farmer held out the prospect of bringing him a stable prosperity. Already by 1849, he was shearing 12,000 ewes annually;<sup>77</sup> if each produced 2 lbs of wool selling at 18 pence a pound, this meant a gross annual income of £1,800, a very considerable sum in those days.

He celebrated this new state of affairs by undertaking the three-month voyage to England in order to see Caroline and his sisters Nancy and Alicia, as well as his beloved Uncle Charles Dominic Molteno who was still working in London. He timed the trip so as to take in the Great Exhibition of 1851. Sadly, we know little more about what happened, except for a dramatic glimpse of his first sight of his beloved mother again. Caroline herself described what happened – 'how she was sitting over the fire feeling very sad when the door was opened quickly and a big bearded man rushed in and was going to embrace her. She began to scream and he said: "Mother, don't you know your own son, come over from Africa?"' Of course in the 20 years that had elapsed, her 17-year old stripling of a boy had been transformed into a bronzed and powerfully built farmer.<sup>78</sup> She had had no idea he

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>78</sup> As told by Catherine (Kate) Molteno, whose mother Letitia Molteno knew Caroline, to John's daughter, Betty Molteno.



was coming since there was no regular mail service yet between the Cape and England.<sup>79</sup> But after her initial fright, it must have been an occasion of great joy. And since John Charles had now established himself as a prosperous sheep farmer, he was hopefully able from then on to support his mother to some extent after more than 20 years of her having been in seriously straitened financial circumstances. The timing was all the more fortunate because Caroline's own mother, Jane Bower, had died little more than a year before the visit.<sup>80</sup>

### **Marriage again – Maria Jarvis and John Molteno in 1851**

On landing in Cape Town, having been away nine months (six of them at sea!) and en route for Nelspoort, John took a momentous decision. He was now forty years old. He decided to marry again. He had long known one of Cape Town's most prominent businessmen, an Englishman named Hercules Jarvis, and he now asked to marry his daughter, Maria.<sup>81</sup> She was twenty, so 16 years younger than he was. Her mother was Dutch, the language of the Jarvis household was Dutch, and the whole family, including Hercules, worshipped in the Dutch Reformed Church.

Maria had been about to sail for India to see her elder sister who had married Major Blenkins of the Indian Army a couple of years before. The India plans were now broken off. And instead, by special licence, John and Maria were married by the Rev. Abraham Faure, the Dutch *dominee* at the Grootte Kerk, in Cape Town on 20 October 1851.<sup>82</sup> Of the witnesses present two were English and two Dutch.<sup>83</sup> As for the special licence, presumably John was in a hurry to get back to his farms!

For Maria, the sudden move must have been, her daughter Caroline reflected years later, 'a hard parting' from the home she had grown up in, and to leave behind the 'society and gardens and flowers' of the Cape that she loved and embark on a three week journey by wagon to 'the wilderness of the Great Karoo'. Her view of the region was very different from how her husband felt; he 'seemed, to the end of his life, to breathe inspiration from immense spaces – even the desert aspects of the Karoo had a fascination for him'.

Their marriage transformed the lives of both of them; it was the start of quarter of a century of happy companionship and a rapidly growing brood of children. John realized Maria might find it difficult to leave the relative comfort of Cape Town and get used to living in the comparative desolation of the Karoo. He was possibly also mindful of how the tragic death of his first wife had

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<sup>79</sup> The first contract to carry mail between England and the Cape was signed by the Union Line only in 1857. Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Union-Castle\\_Line](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Union-Castle_Line).

<sup>80</sup> Jane Bower's will, dated 24 December 1849, is in the National Archives.

<sup>81</sup> Maria's full names were Elizabeth Maria Jarvis. To avoid confusion with her mother, also Elizabeth Maria, I have called her Maria. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to be certain that this is name she was called by.

<sup>82</sup> Caroline Murray, John Molteno's second eldest daughter, 'Early Recollections'.

<sup>83</sup> Thomas Watson, W. Gadney, O. J. M Bergh and A. De Kock.

occurred. He decided that his new family should not endure the primitive conditions and isolation of the farmhouse at Nelspoort but live instead much of the time in the little village of Beaufort West. This is where their first children were born and spent their childhood. As for running the farms at Nelspoort, this he now entrusted to Arthur Jackson who ran them until his death in 1865. Henry Jackson then took over and managed them until his own death in 1888, just two years after John himself had died.

The consequences of this move to Beaufort West proved momentous. Living in what was the Karoo's principal town (even if that is much too big a word to describe Beaufort in those days), John was able to engage again in various lines of business. The process increased his affluence, made him better known locally, and resulted in his first involvement in local affairs and political activity.