

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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First Impressions:  
A Trip to Namaqueland

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29 Bay View Avenue  
Tamboer's Kloof  
Cape Town, South Africa

Mr. Richard Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
366 Madison Avenue  
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Water or mineral divining is questionable as a science, at best. But in Namaqueland, that part of the western Cape south of the Kalahari Desert, where water is a precious necessity, the diviner is much respected and his ability strenuously defended.

I recently returned to Cape Town from a trip to Namaqueland with a dowser who this time was searching for diamonds!

Margaret Seal is in her early thirties and the mother of two small children. She has been a professional dowser for about ten years. She can feel, she says, the radiations given off by water and minerals in the earth. Her accuracy comes from concentration and years of experience. This unusual sensitivity has been a part of her life since childhood and she considers it a quite natural phenomenon.

This special talent has enabled her to enter the lives of South Africans who have been generally reluctant to communicate with English-speaking outsiders. The Afrikaner farmers of Namaqueland with whom she has worked for many years have now come to respect her for herself, as well as for her water-finding ability. They were at first suspicious of her English-speaking parentage, but have come to accept her as a South African, as she has accepted them and their Afrikaans language.

She regrets that her formal schooling was cut short. While this fact disturbs her, it has not limited her education. She is an avid reader of the most serious non-fiction, and an understanding student of human relations. She is not only sensitive to inanimate materials, but also to people. All of this made her an excellent sponsor and companion on my trip.

A few weeks ago she called to see if I would be interested in accompanying her on a dowsing expedition, and I

said yes immediately. I welcomed this opportunity of seeing Namaqueland and meeting its people.

Leaving at five in the evening, we travelled northward as far as we could go by train. It was not South Africa's best train. When I was a boy I came across an old book of jokes by, I believe, Thomas W. Jackson. A large part of the book, as I now remember it, contained stories about the "slow train through Arkansas". This was the train on which, when people were tired of riding, they could get off and walk awhile, but then they would have to wait for the train to catch up. The train to Namaqueland, if anything, was slower. It carried no provisions, except some slightly warm water and plenty of sooty smoke. This train is the only one into the territory. It comes from Cape Town and goes no farther than an isolated town in the southern part of the area.

The distance from Bitterfontein, the end of the line, into South West Africa, where the railroad begins again, is, in a straight line, about 250 miles. This intervening area, I was told, is controlled by a single trucking company with an influential government lobby. It has prevented successfully the continuance of the railroad line, making it necessary to break a journey to South West Africa by a bus ride over dirt roads to the resumption of the railway. It has further strengthened its position by selling some 10% of the company stock to Namaqueland's most prominent farmers, making it to their advantage to keep the railroad out.

This has helped to keep Namaqueland isolated from the commercial traffic which a through railroad might bring. It has left this region much as it has been for the last century.

Namaqueland is named for the Hottentot tribe which originally inhabited the area. It begins about 200 miles north of Cape Town, stretching some 300 miles northward to the Orange River, and eastward into what is called "Bushmanland" or Northwest Cape. These bordering areas have much in common. They share a semi-arid isolated vastness, and are inhabited mainly by sheep farmers who live a sometimes-nomadic existence in their constant search for water. The white people who live in Namaqueland are Afrikaners. They speak little or no English. Their world is the veld; they have been separated from most of the events and activities of modern life. The roads are few, and these, except for a small number of mainly-travelled gravel-dirt roads, are only roughened paths. There is no electricity on most farms or in most towns, except for those places which have some kind of generator of their own.

Here and there the material products of modern society are beginning to be found. While these are welcomed, the welcome seems strangely mixed with sadness. Most of the people I met prefer their isolation. They find a certain freedom in being alone.

As we left the train in the early morning hours, I was immediately conscious of the much vaster distance we were from the cosmopolitan culture of Cape Town than could be measured by mere miles. The railroad station and the few buildings of the town appeared as a small oasis of light. I heard not a word of English among the people gathered to meet the train. Every sign was in Afrikaans. The elderly farmer who had made arrangements for Mrs. Seal's dowsing trips, took us off in the pre-dawn darkness in his old but reliable Opel with one-candle headlamps, and we were on our way. We were to travel a hundred miles farther north in the next few hours, and cover some 600 to 700 miles in the few days we were there.

The roads we travelled were neither tarred nor smooth. Yet they were main roads. Later, in order to get to farms or possible diamond sights, we had to leave the main roads for rough water-washed dirt tracks. And sometimes, in the course of our searching, the driver would take his car off into the open veld itself. Riding in the back of an open truck across the veld is perhaps the most difficult way of getting the 'feel' of the country!

During our stay, most of our time was spent thus bumping over the open veld. At meal time, we would stop, gather a few dried bushes, build a fire, and have our 'braai vleis' on the hot ashes. It was usually roasted lamb or sausage which we took hot into our hands to eat. It equalled, with a brandy appetizer and hot coffee afterwards, the best meals I have ever had. The air was fresh, the sun comfortably warm, and vast distances could be seen in all directions with nothing to obstruct the view. No traffic, smoke, or wearisome noise. I felt refreshingly alone, and could understand something of what the people there cherish about their country.

At night we would stay at one or another tiny hotel, often the one place in the town with self-generated fluctuating electricity. The towns were uniformly Dutch Reformed Church-centered. The large church building would dominate the center of town, with the town's most modern house, the parsonage, on one side, and on the other, the school, which boarded farm children during the week. A petrol station, a butchery, a tea room-grocery store, and some kind of general store would complete the picture. Some people have a wireless, but aside from this, a visit with friends, an occasional weekend drinking session at the hotel, and church on Wednesday nights and twice on Sunday, made up the total recreation of the town.

### The people

The people I met gave the impression that this environment has produced hardy, outwardly moral (our Afrikaner guide shared a room with me, not to save expense, as I first assumed, but to guard Mrs. Seal from my possible nocturnal attentions), and devout Afrikaners. They care as little for the British today as they did a hundred years ago.

On a recent trip when Mr. Seal accompanied his wife they were caught in a suffocating sand storm. Seeing the bell-tent of a shepherd's family, they struggled through the sand toward its shelter. Mrs. Seal, known for her water-finding, was quickly welcomed into the tent, but Mr. Seal was forced to wait outside in the storm while his wife convinced the family that he was no longer "British" but was trying to be a good South African. Only then did they grudgingly allow him relief from the stinging sand.

Our guide, an amiable companion as well as an excellent guard, told me that he used English so seldom that once he startled his son by speaking it in his presence. "Why Dad," his son cried, "I didn't know you could speak the Red Imperialist tongue!"

Another story is told of a school supervisor, on an unexpected visit, overhearing a teacher announce the English lesson to the class, "And now, children, we'll wrestle with the enemy's tongue."

Ingrown in an isolated Afrikanerdom, these Namaquelanders show also a lack of any deep understanding of the many Coloured people who live beside them. They may know Coloureds by their first name, but the recognition is one of master and servant. An awareness of a Coloured person as a separate individual personality, apart from his racial characteristics, is non-existent; he is seen only as part of a racial group.

Our farmer-guide expressed this kind of "group" thinking when he talked about non-whites. He reflected, in what he said, attitudes which are widely accepted. "He thought of all dark-skinned people living in Africa as one group; he made no distinction between Africans of the Congo and Coloured people of Namaqueland; they were all black.

He believed missionaries were doing the Africans harm. "Look at the Congo," he said. "The missionaries educated the Africans and then, when the country was given independence, the educated ones led the massacre of White people. Education doesn't do the Blacks any good. You can't educate them."

Where had he obtained this knowledge about the Congo? He didn't know anyone there, but he felt it was true from his own experiences with non-whites. It seemed to him that education upsets the Black person and gives him strange ideas. It seemed that he had been influenced by some of the statements made by leaders of both major political parties (The United Party and the Nationalist Party). These politicians have pointed fearfully again and again to the Congo as an illustration of what will happen in South Africa if the Blacks take over.

I asked him what missionaries should do and teach. He replied, "Let them teach only spiritual things: teach the Bible and preach about God."

### Isolation: the price of freedom

It is hard to picture the isolation in which these people live. Almost no outside ideas gain access to do battle with ingrained prejudices. People in the towns have some contacts. They are able to receive publications from the English (if they wish) and Afrikaans Press. Of course, the primary source of information about the outside world, if they have a radio, is government-controlled Radio South Africa.

Books are uncommon. The only book I saw in a home was the Afrikaans Bible.

These hardy Afrikaaners think of their lonely life as the essence of "freedom". A braai vleis companion told of tending the sheep as a boy alone on the veld. "Here, in this land," he said with quiet reverence, "is real freedom." There is freedom, he continued, to move about, to do anything you want. You have the brilliant stars at night, the immensity of heaven, the sun, the vastness of the earth, the wind and the rain to enjoy without interference.

There is this kind of freedom, but there is evidence that the price for it is high. Poverty doggedly follows the farmer's footsteps. About half of the farmhouses we passed had been abandoned. Perhaps it was due to old age or illness, but more likely the water ran out.

This area of South Africa, in which water has never been plentiful, had suffered a severe drought for four years. Last year and earlier this year heavy rains came. But the ground, hard caked from years of nothing but the sun's heat, was not prepared to keep the water and it ran off down inlets and kloofs, turning dry streambeds into raging rivers and washing away the precious top soil. Erosion has become common.

Trees, unfortunately, are as scarce as books. The very few I did see on the veld were small and guarded by wire fences to keep the animals away.

On a treeless wind-swept hill we visited the farm home of the van Zyl's. The drought had weakened their flocks and the heavy rains had not brought relief. We were most hospitably greeted by the couple and their small son, wind-dried and sun-baked, in front of their home, a clay and cement box (A Bushman hut in the yard seemed better constructed). Five chairs around a rectangular wooden table dominated the main room, although there was a sideboard on which was displayed their most precious possession, a can of peaches. They had no books and used home-made candles for light. Dried biltong (dried and salted mutton), which they prize as a food, was not kept to eat, but with the hope they might be able to sell it. They have five children, but four are away at boarding school. The nearest school was a half day away by car, and the van Zyl's have no car.

Life in this area was formerly a more nomadic one, but wandering families are still to be seen. There was the young man I saw scraping the road. This is a constant job, since dust is forever shifting the contours of the veld. This boy clears a few miles of road, then returns and pulls his trailer home, with his wife and baby, to where he will begin again. He and his wife and family, with a Coloured helper, live endlessly inching their way up and down the lonely roads of Namaqueland.

Some of the nomads are families who have never owned land. Others have lost their homesteads because of the drought. These people live in tents and drive whatever herds they may have from place to place with their ox-carts, making use of whatever water supply they can find. They still dress as did their predecessors, the Voortrekkers, who spent their entire lives in this area and Bushmanland, roaming constantly over the veld.

#### Diamonds - bonanza for the farmer?

Every farmer we visited talked hopefully of finding diamonds on his land. It reminded me of my grandparents who were farmers in the Mid-West, and continually talked of finding oil. Their expectations would rise everytime someone gambled a drilling on land near theirs.

Namaqueland does have diamonds. Its shore on the Atlantic has been called the Diamond Coast. Those farmers who have land near and along the coast receive a good portion of their yearly income from prospectors paying for annual options and digging rights. Most of the possible valuable diamond fields

have been leased and are controlled by large corporations like De Beers. Newcomers to the area have little chance of getting rich by finding uncontrolled diamond land. Mrs. Seal's job was to locate pockets of diamonds beneath the ground for the men who held the options.

Every precious stone which is uncovered, no matter how small, must be registered with the government. However, I was told that many farmers in the area have unreported diamonds. They are often used in bartering, in buying and selling sheep and land, in place of money. Stories of arrests appear periodically in the newspapers, but obviously illegal diamond-dealing continues.

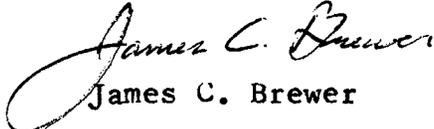
Diamonds are not really any answer for Namaqualand. The future depends on water. It is far more precious than the diamonds in the soil or along the coast.

The Olifants River Irrigation Project, one successful effort to channel the available water, presents a remarkable picture of what Namaqualand could be. The grain and corn fields and the foliage of the trees, the fruits of a productive earth, are a striking contrast to the brown of the veld.

If Namaqualand is ever to be brought up to the level of more accessible parts of South Africa, it will depend on additional irrigation projects. There is talk now of developing the resources of the Orange River. Such projects, with rural electrification, while bringing some unwanted elements of a modern world, will be the only thing, perhaps, which can keep the land alive.

Nothing has been heard about the results of Mrs. Seal's dowsing expedition. If results are good, she will be asked to go to South West Africa to look for more. For me, however, the expedition was definitely a success. What I learned to admire and respect, to pity and regret, all helps me understand something more of South Africa, its land and people.

Sincerely,

  
James C. Brewer