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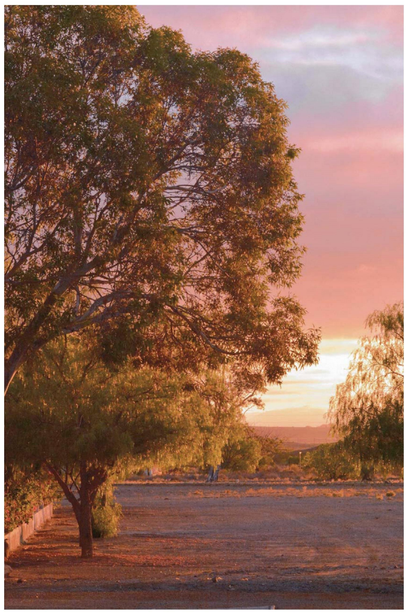
# Raise a glass to two Imperial gentlemen



ATMOSPHERIC: Early morning in Matjiesfontein and the grave of cricketer George Lohmann.

JIM FREEMAN

SOME years ago, sitting and swigging a pint in the pub of the Swartberg Arms Hotel in Prince Albert, an Anglo-Boer War historian suggested I stop in at the tiny cemetery outside Matjiesfontein because there were "some interesting graves".

I'd passed the place often enough and remarked upon both the discreet roadside sign saying "war graves" and the stark monument on the side of the koppie but I'd never turned off the highway to have a look.

Needless to say, I'd often turned off the N1 a few kilometres further – in the direction of Laingsburg – to down a beer or two in the Laird's Arms, which is adjacent to the Lord Milner Hotel … the hub of life in Matjiesfontein for the last century.

This time, on the return trip to Cape Town, I went for a look and was intrigued by the monument to Major-General Andrew Gilbert Wauchope and two graves in particular – Wauchope's and that of George Alfred Lohmann. The latter bears the inscription "one of the greatest all-round cricketers the world has ever seen", while that of the departed British general notes that he fell in the battle of Magersfontein more than 700km away.

What brought the two to this desolate spot of the Karoo, where just about the only sound is the creak of a derelict windmill, the wind in the grass and all-too-constant drone of heavy transport on the highway? Did they have something in common?

Well, yes, they did. But they never met.

The link, says author Dr Dean Allen, was the man people called the "Laird of Matjiesfontein", James Douglas Logan, whose epitaph, on an austere and rough-hewn granite Celtic cross, says just: "Born at Reston, Berwickshire, Scotland 26 November 1857. Died at Matjiesfontein 30 July 1920."

Logan was an entrepreneur and a self-promoting social climber of note, says Allen, talking admiringly of the subject of his newly published book, *Empire, War and Cricket in South Africa*. He was a friend of Cecil John Rhodes but dodgy dealings left the prime minister of the Cape Colony severely embarrassed occasionally.

He was a railwayman back in Scotland and the first job he secured after landing in South Africa in May 1877 was as a porter on Cape Town station. His hard work, competence and ambition brought him quick promotion.

According to Dr Allen: "It was not long before the young Scot was offered the position of district superintendent of the railway section between Hex River and Prince Albert in the Karoo …

"For Logan, however, the appointment carried with it an unexpected problem. The Karoo was isolated territory and the railway authorities … decreed that the incumbent for the post must be married within three months of being appointed."

CONVIVIAL: Relaxing in The Laird's Arms.

# Matjiesfontein remembers its golden days

Logan married Emma Haylett, a prominent Cape Town hotelier's daughter, well within the stipulated period: he was clearly as charming, charismatic and persuasive as he was hard-working.

James Logan moved to the Karoo, to Touws River, in August 1879.

Trains needed to be provisioned as they headed into the interior of South Africa and Logan cornered the market – quickly, as Dr Allen writes, creating a business empire "which stretched from Bulawayo to Cape Town".

He resigned from the railways in 1883 "to devote his full attention to his burgeoning catering activities".

While the above quotes come from his book, Allen tells the story in broad brushstrokes to an audience in Lord Milner's library of the Lord Milner Hotel – often said to be haunted. The problem, he says, is that Logan acquired the monopoly of railway-catering concessions without the contract going out to tender … and the resulting controversy forced Rhodes to dissolve his Cape Colony government in 1893. But that's getting ahead of the story.

Money was never enough to Logan. His desire to create an empire was not to create wealth for its own sake but for social status and recognition.

Shortly before leaving Touws River, he bought three farms just up the railway line around a dilapidated little siding called Matjiesfontein.

He proceeded to turn it into the almost perfectly preserved Victorian village it is today, primarily because he was able to find a permanent subterranean water source, the rights of which he immediately sold to the burgeoning railways service for £2 000 so they could refill their locomotives. The water also nourished his vegetable gardens and orchards that provided sustenance to rail travellers.

One of the first things he did was lay a first-class cricket pitch – because playing cricket was one of the things British (specifically English) gentry did. It was at Matjiesfontein that the first international cricket match took place in the (now) Western Cape: it was between England and South Africa in 1892, and Logan paid for the English to tour the country.

Allen writes: "Logan was aware of the distinct relationship that existed between cricket, business and politics within the Cape's colonial community. If he couldn't play the game at a high level, then at least he could finance it."

But the story of Wauchope (pronounced "war-chop") precedes that of cricketer George Lohmann.

Logan determined to transform Matjiesfontein into a health spa; a destination rather than just a meal- and leg-stretch interlude. He built a hotel which, in typical imperialist toadying fashion, he named after the governor of the Cape, Milner.

Just after it was completed, the first Anglo-Boer war broke out. It was perhaps the "golden" period of Matjiesfontein's history because over 10 000 British soldiers were billeted in the vicinity. The hotel was given over to the officers and the veld to the troops and their 20 000 horses – imagine the smell and flies!

Logan briefly met Wauchope … a fellow Scot who had been gravely wounded in four previous campaigns.

The opportunistic Logan told the British high command that Wauchope had been so taken with Matjiesfontein that he'd expressed the wish that, should he fall in battle, he be buried there. Logan was allowed to have the dead general exhumed and reinterred at the foot of a hill.

Logan even got a letter of approval from Queen Victoria.

Lohmann, on the other hand, was perhaps a genuine hero. He still holds the honour of the fastest bowler to take 100 Test wickets; in just 16 matches.

His career was shortened by tuberculosis and he moved to South Africa for the "therapeutic climate". Logan waylaid him on disembarkation in Cape Town in 1896 and urged him to move to Matjiesfontein because it provided him with the best prospects for health.

Of course, Logan offered handsome financial inducements.

Lohmann played for Western Province for two seasons and returned to England in 1901 as manager of a South African side sponsored by Logan. It was a controversial tour as the two countries were still at war with one another.

Following Logan's death, Matjiesfontein became one of those quirky, crumbling features of South African living history till the village was taken over in 1968 by hotelier David Rawdon and restored to former glory. He died in 2010 after being in charge of the wellbeing of Matjiesfontein and its residents for more than 40 years.

The property was taken on by Liz McGrath, at the request of Rawdon's family in their capacity as custodians of the village.

Current general manager and former right-hand man to McGrath, Johan Dippenaar, says there are no plans to elevate the hotel beyond its current three-star status. "It just wouldn't be right for Matjiesfontein.

"We have every intention, however, of turning it into the finest three-star hotel in the country."

ECHOES OF EMPIRE: Cricket on the village green at Matjiesfontein.

General Andrew Wauchope's memorial.

The venerable 3-star Lord Milner Hotel.