

# THE "SMALL GREEK CITIES" OF THE CAPE PENINSULA\*

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An issue facing many an expanding municipality in this age of urbanisation is that of the absorbing of its neighbours in the process of growth. On the one hand, common interests and administrative efficiency point the way to amalgamation; on the other, local loyalties bitterly resist any loss of independence. In South Africa the factors contributing to the development of the great urban agglomerations of the Witwatersrand, greater Durban and the Cape Peninsula, where so many of the nation's population live, have been little studied. To most of us, like Topsy, they "just grew". This article, in an examination of certain aspects of the Cape Peninsula Commission of 1902, is an attempt to shed some light on the creation of one South African metropolis.

In 1902 the Cape Peninsula was a unique amalgam of local authorities. Bounded largely by the sea and separated from the rest of the Colony by the wastes of the Cape Flats, it formed a single geographical entity; yet within this small area there existed no less than ten municipalities (Cape Town, Woodstock, Green Point and Sea Point, Maitland, Mowbray, Rondebosch, Claremont, Wynberg, Kalk Bay, and Simon's Town), a divisional council responsible for the rural districts, and the Table Bay Harbour Board, which had certain independent jurisdiction. The fortunes of all were in one way or another intimately linked, yet each was fiercely jealous of its special privileges and proud of its individual accomplishments. Moreover, there were at least two more incipient municipalities in Camps Bay and Milnerton which, although still in the hands of property developers, showed every sign of being as separatist as the others.

Such a situation was clearly absurd. When the Cape was first settled by Whites, the communities scattered through the Peninsula pressed little upon one another. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the position had changed radically. The introduction of the tram and the railway in 1863 had first linked the villages and made true suburban development possible. In the succeeding years the discovery of gold and diamonds, and immigration both from overseas and from the rural interior rapidly increased the population until it had reached an estimated 141 608 by 1902. This growth meant not only that many of the suburbs now ran into one another — indeed the boundary sometimes ran down the middle of a street or divided single properties — but the physical resources of the region were stretched to the utmost. The supply of water was especially critical and it was this issue, together with the patent need for better co-operation which the bubonic plague outbreak of 1901 had demonstrated, which led the government in 1902 to set up a commission of inquiry into the working of the Cape Peninsula municipalities and the divisional council with a view to future amalgamation.<sup>1</sup>

The commissioners did their work well. They sat, sometimes daily, for nearly a year, from 17 March 1902 to 27 January 1903, holding ninety-eight meetings in all. They interviewed sixty-five witnesses and took hundreds of pages in evidence. The result is a detailed insight into conditions in the Peninsula which the historian can ob-

tain in no other way. Finally the commissioners concluded that the eight municipalities in the Cape Town area, Kalk Bay and Simon's Town being excluded, should be amalgamated into one giant municipality. The divisional council of the Cape Division, they recommended, should be abolished. Care for municipal roads should be consigned to the municipality and in the country districts there should be a rural council with increased powers in regard to public health. Draft bills to legislate for these changes were also published. There was one dissenter, Dr A.J. Gregory, medical officer of health for the Cape Colony, who put in a minority report arguing that such a unification would be unworkable, and suggesting instead that Wynberg, Claremont, Rondebosch, Mowbray, and part of Woodstock should form one municipality, and that Sea Point and Green Point, and Woodstock No. 1 should be joined to Cape Town in another. Maitland should be excluded altogether.

The recommendations of the commissioners did not take effect until 1913 when the municipality of greater Cape Town at last came into being, and it was not until 1927 that Wynberg finally threw in its lot with the rest of the city. Why, when the need for union was so obvious, was it so slow to take place? Much of the answer may be found in the evidence and recommendations of the commission itself.

Claremont, Rondebosch, and Mowbray were, above all, candidates for amalgamation. Physically, together with Woodstock, they formed part of the same hydrographic basin draining Table Mountain. They therefore, of necessity, participated in the same water supply provided by the Suburban Municipal Waterworks Board on which they were all represented. They were joined in the same extensive scheme for increasing this supply from the Steenbras River rising in the Hottentots Holland mountains and they shared the electricity sold by the Cape Peninsula Lighting Company. Moreover, they were all so small, and so heavily populated, that their boundaries were virtually indistinguishable. Nor were they entirely averse to unification. Several of the witnesses admitted that it would be logical. Thus Henry Beard asserted: "There is no great distinction between the three Municipalities of Claremont, Rondebosch and Mowbray.

\*"When I first entered the Council of Claremont there was a continual feeling of alienation from Rondebosch. It might have been as though we were two small Greek cities. As soon as one proposed a thing the other was in arms against it." — Mr Henry Beard to the Cape Peninsula Commission, 28.5.1902.

G.21-1902 *Report of a commission to enquire into and report upon certain matters affecting Cape Peninsula municipalities and the Cape divisional council* (3 Vols.) The commissioners were Sir William Bisset Berry (chairman), Drs A.J. Gregory and A.J. Anderson, James Lawrence, Thomas Dyer, Thomas Stewart, W.E. Gurney, and J.E. Reenen de Villiers.



Sir William Bisset Berry, Chairman of the Cape Peninsula Commission (1902).

PHOTOGRAPH: MEN OF THE TIMES (JOHANNESBURG, 1906)

They are on a long line of road that has been cut up and has a certain nomenclature but with no real barriers between the Municipalities."<sup>2</sup> In general, however, such views were not held by incumbent local councillors. They had been united once before, together with Wynberg, in the Liesbeeck Municipality which had been established in 1882 and dissolved only four years later in 1886. The reasons for the dissolution of the Liesbeeck Municipality are obscure, and the efforts of the commissioners to elucidate the matter met with little success. Two factors seem to have been that the villages making up the municipality never abandoned their individual identities or quarrels over rural water schemes.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately this unhappy experiment had made them wary of co-operation. Rondebosch suggested that an amalgamated municipality might have difficulties. The Liesbeeck Municipality, it pointed out, had not lasted very many years.<sup>4</sup>

Mowbray, the smallest and least viable of the three, was most conscious of the benefits of separatism. In his account of the breakup of Liesbeeck Municipality the Mayor, Mr Samuel Tonkin, explained: "I think it would have worked if it had gone on, although as far as Mowbray is concerned it benefited very considerably by the change. They hardly did anything for us, which was the same thing when we were a portion of Rondebosch, and we only made headway when we became a Municipality ourselves."<sup>5</sup>

The central issue was water, for the Peninsula had no major river and the streams running off Table Mountain were becoming inadequate for a growing industrial

population. During the previous summer there had been a severe drought when several districts had suffered from a water shortage which inhibited building and promoted poor sanitation. In such circumstances Wynberg, with an independent supply derived from Orange Kloof on the southern side of the mountain, with a different drainage flow from the suburbs on the eastern flanks, and with room to expand, was relatively self-sufficient; self-consciously so in fact.

When Mr Theodore Vollmer of Wynberg was asked by the commissioners whether amalgamation would not make it easier to carry out large drainage or water schemes for the Peninsula, he replied that Wynberg would gain nothing. "Our natural position is such that we cannot join with the other Municipalities. We cannot have a drainage scheme common with the others because our town dips the other way." Wynberg's interests, he felt, were different from those of the other municipalities and it would not be fair to force Wynberg to share her surplus of water with them.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, Wynberg interests might suffer in a greater union. "If a Wynberg matter cropped up on a large body, of which Wynberg was but a small part, we would have no guarantee whatsoever, that the whole of the Council would be friendly disposed to Wynberg, and our representative might be out-voted. In that way a matter of great importance to Wynberg would be shelved." The time had not come, he concluded, for amalgamation. "The various bodies of the Peninsula could not work well together".<sup>7</sup>

Water might ensure municipal independence. It could also be a saleable asset. This was the view of Woodstock. That suburb was the fastest-growing municipality in the Colony and the third largest after Cape Town and Port Elizabeth.<sup>8</sup> It was a member of the Suburban Municipal Waterworks Board but was making heavy demands on the limited resources of the Albion Spring. For this reason the Woodstock councillors, who envisaged their town as the premier industrial city of the Colony, conceived their own scheme for draining water from Olifants Hoek near Fransch Hoek. They were extremely proud and possessive of this project. Mr W.E. Moore explained that as a councillor of Woodstock he was strongly in favour of the council's controlling its own supply of water because, if properly administered, it could be a source of profit. This would enable the council to carry out the remainder of its obligations on the assessment of a lower rate. But water, he held, was only an asset as long as it was sold. Once it ran into a drain it became waste. To the commissioners' suggestion that drainage was also a source of profit since a rate could be levied on it, he retorted, somewhat obscurely, "The one [water] is an article from which you can derive a profit, and the other [drainage] is an article for which you have to pay."<sup>9</sup>

2. G.21-1902, Vol. 2, p.485.

3. Very little has been written on the Liesbeeck Municipality. The only recent research appears in J. LINNEGAR, *From village to municipality: a history of Wynberg to 1903* (Honours dissertation, U.C.T., 1975), pp.65-69.

4. G.21-1902, Vol. 2, p.419.

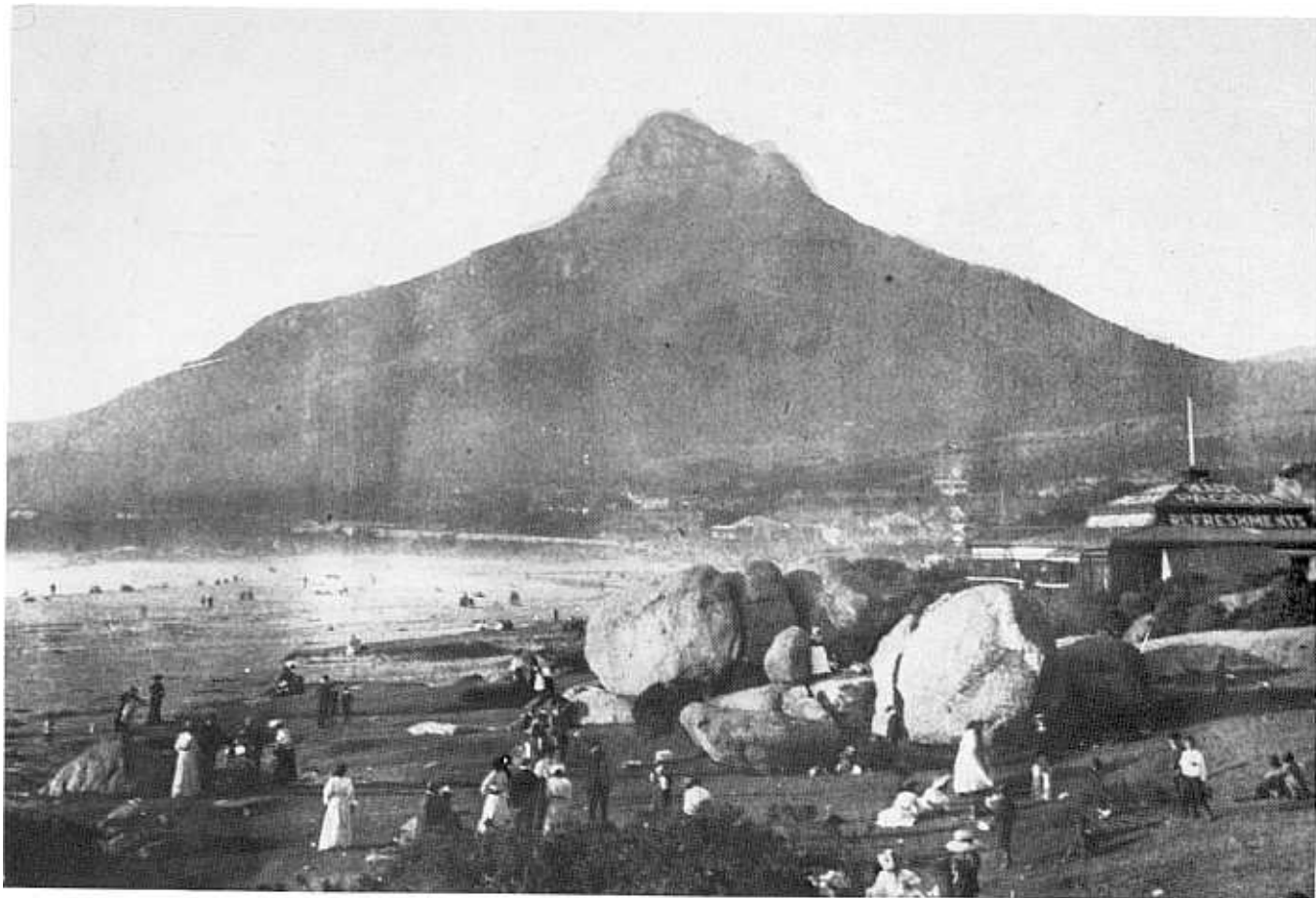
5. G.21-1902, Vol. 2, p.67.

6. G.21 1902, Vol. 2, p.351.

7. G.21-1902, Vol. 2, pp.349-350.

8. The population of Woodstock increased from 4 974 in 1891 to 28 990 in 1904. This did include a change of boundaries to take in part of Maitland, but the numbers involved were not large.

9. G.21-1902, Vol. 2, pp.259-260.



*Camps Bay before its development, c. 1902.*

PHOTOGRAPH: CAPE ARCHIVES DEPOT

Like Wynberg, Woodstock was sharply aware of the need to defend its own interests. It, too, believed that if the municipalities were joined together no councillor would interest himself in a particular district, for he would consider himself elected for the whole area. Woodstock also cited the unsuccessful Liesbeeck Municipality experiment as an example of the undesirability of amalgamation.<sup>10</sup> Above all, however, Woodstock dreaded being absorbed by its neighbouring giant, Cape Town. This it firmly resisted. No argument of the commissioners could persuade it to abandon its stand of "splendid isolation." Although Dr Gregory urged that Woodstock would gain from participating in Cape Town's large markets, its Infectious Diseases Hospital, its drainage scheme, its wash-houses, and other municipal facilities, Woodstock was unconvinced. Cape Town, it believed, would not object to amalgamation with Woodstock but most of Cape Town's amenities would be of no use to the former.<sup>11</sup>

Nor was Woodstock the only body to fear being swallowed up by Cape Town. The Cape Marine Suburbs, Ltd., which was seeking to develop Camps Bay as an exclusive residential suburb, was equally anxious to avoid incorporation, as their lawyer Mr R.P.L. Wahl told the commissioners. The owners, he said, had no desire to be handicapped by the debts of other places, from which they would derive no benefit. The owners of the Camps Bay property believed that they would have more time to attend to local affairs than would a municipality with responsibility for larger areas and no special interest in Camps Bay. Above all, a development of this kind needed cherishing. It required a constant hand and an ever watchful eye to make it an ideal watering-place.<sup>12</sup>

Even so eminent a witness as W.P. Schreiner, ex-prime minister of the Colony, was opposed to large-scale amalgamation, recognising that the suburban municipalities would resent being "blotted out" by Cape Town. Like many of the others, he preferred the idea of a centralised board of works which would be responsible for such common utilities as water supply, and sewerage and drainage, while allowing the local bodies a measure of autonomy.

Only the city of Cape Town was at all in favour of a giant municipality. Certainly it was opposed to a further proliferation of administrations and was, at the time, attempting to bring in a bill to include Camps Bay within the city limits. The ex-mayor, Thomas Ball, pointed out: "If we had not so many Municipalities better water and drainage schemes would have gone through long before this, and now, after having seen the mistakes, a proposal comes to establish a new Municipality, and to that we decidedly object. The principle of extending existing Municipalities, rather than creating new ones, is being adopted everywhere."<sup>13</sup> While maintaining that its attitude to union was entirely altruistic, Cape Town was as anxious as the smaller suburbs to retain its individuality. Ball agreed that there did seem to be a general consensus that a single large local authority was desirable, but that the suburbs did not want to be absorbed by Cape Town. Nor did Cape Town want to force this. He strongly resisted the suggestion, however, that Cape Town be incorporated into an entirely new body. He did not

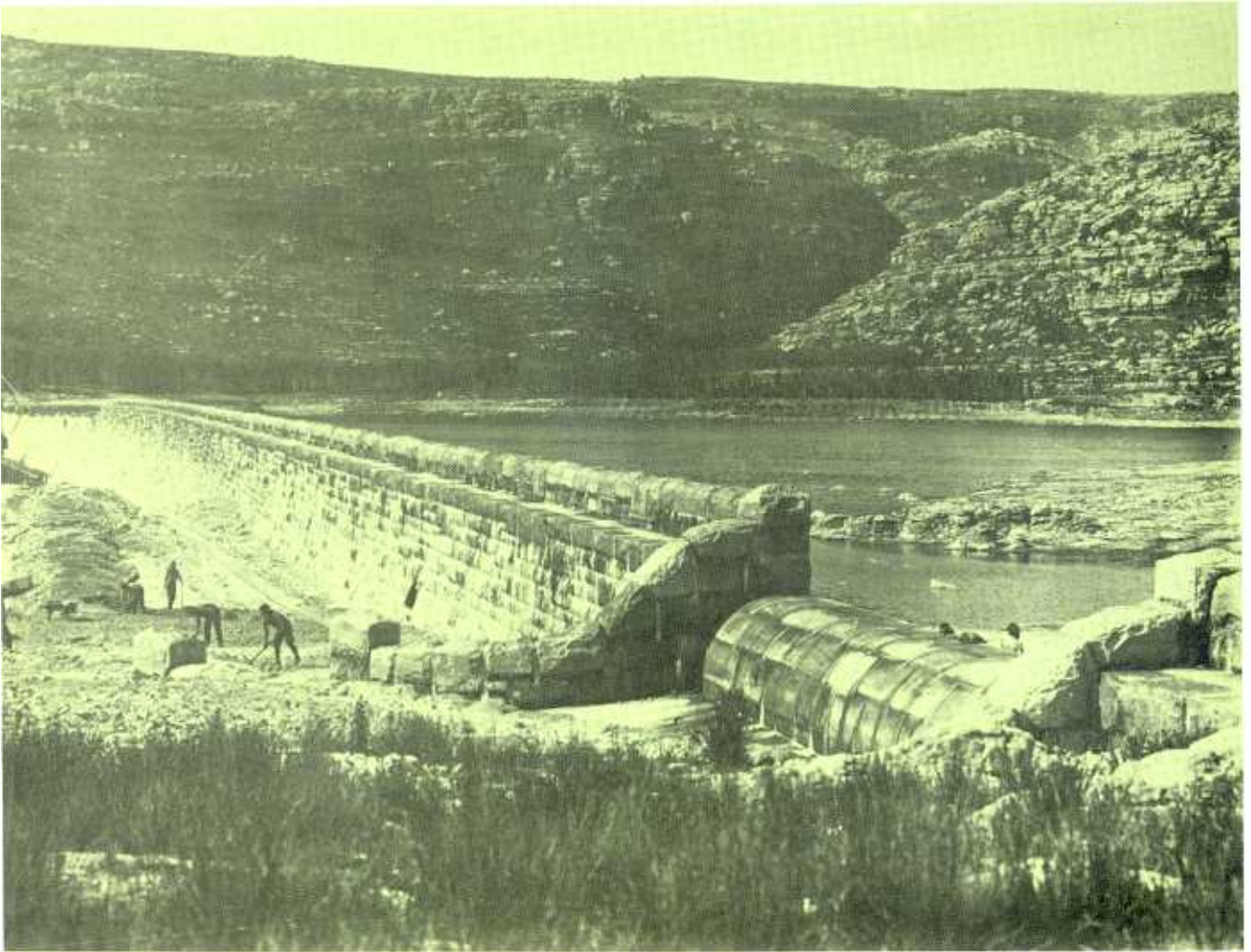
10. G.21-1902, Vol. 2, p.259.

11. G.21-1902, Vol. 2, p.265.

12. G.21-1902, Vol. 2, p.634.

13. G.21-1902, Vol. 2, p.587.





*The Hely Hutchinson Dam under construction, 1902. In the background is the Woodhead Dam.*

believe that there was any good ground for altering the city. "Has it not done its work well, and has it not been competent to do it well?" he asked. The city had shown itself capable of dealing with great questions and it would not gain anything from amalgamation. The only reason for considering it was to help others.<sup>14</sup>

After such evidence from the various municipal councillors, it comes as no surprise to find that the recommendations of the commission were not implemented. While many of the witnesses admitted that the different authorities lacked the resources to develop their potentials adequately, or to provide proper facilities for their inhabitants, few of them were prepared to submerge their individual identities in a common body. The majority report was probably too far-reaching to gain any substantial support. Would Dr Gregory's suggestions have been more acceptable? This is difficult to say. Almost certainly Woodstock would have objected to a division into two parts, and it seems likely that only a unity of Claremont, Rondebosch and Mowbray would realistically have been contemplated at this stage, for their difficulties had not yet reached crisis point. In the event, the government met with passive resistance. When questioned in the House of Assembly in 1903, Sir Pieter Faure explained that the government was still waiting to hear the views of the municipalities on the report. He understood from the newspapers that Sea Point was absolutely opposed to

unification, that Cape Town, Woodstock, and Rondebosch were in favour of the majority report, that Claremont and Wynberg were not. The government considered it inadvisable, he said, to force people by introducing legislation against their wish, and it had been decided, therefore, to give the local authorities a breathing-space. The following year the matter was again deferred for Cape Town Municipality had postponed the inter-municipal conference which the government had attempted to convene.<sup>15</sup> In the end their breathing time lasted for another ten years, and a united municipality only came with a united South Africa.<sup>16</sup> ■

14. G.21-1902, Vol. 2, p.611.

15. CAPE OF GOOD HOPE, HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY, *Debates*, 1903, pp.989–990; 1904, p.39.  
N. KAGAN, *The growth and development of the municipality of Green Point and Sea Point* (Honours dissertation, U.C.T., 1975), pp.81–109; J. PARKER, *Municipal unification in the Cape Peninsula*, *South African municipal yearbook*, 1912, pp.451–471.