

1 *Global Perspectives and Local Narratives*

A Socio-environmental History of Pioneer Tobacco Farming in Southern Rhodesia, 1893–1945

Virginia growers are heirs – not always literally, of course – to an unbroken history of tobacco cultivation that links them to the origins of the plantation and chattel slavery in North America and, by extension, to the larger consequences of both for world history.

Evan P. Bennett, 2012

An Amerindian crop – transplanted to Europe, transplanted back to America, grown by an English-Algonquian couple, and transplanted to Africa – miraculously justifies whites' position in Zimbabwe. With such aptitude for meanings and materials, surely whites could make their home in both Virginias¹ or anywhere in Africa.

David McDermott Hughes, 2006

The Agrarian Myth and Tobacco Culture in Colonial History

The colony of Southern Rhodesia was founded in 1890 by a private commercial concern, the British South Africa Company (BSAC). The basis for colonial occupation was the hope of finding the second Rand and the belief in the existence of an African *Eldorado*. In 1892, after visiting the country, Lord Randolph Churchill judged the environment hostile to farming and concluded that agriculture on a large scale, except for the feeding of a large mining population, would be a

¹ 'Virginia' is used with reference to two geographic places. The Virginia state in the USA famous in history as the place where Virginia flue-cured tobacco culture originated. The second is the name of a farming area in the district of Marondera in Zimbabwe so-named because the area had a lot of white-owned commercial farms on which Virginia flue-cured tobacco was grown before the advent of the Fast Track Land Resettlement Programme in 2000.

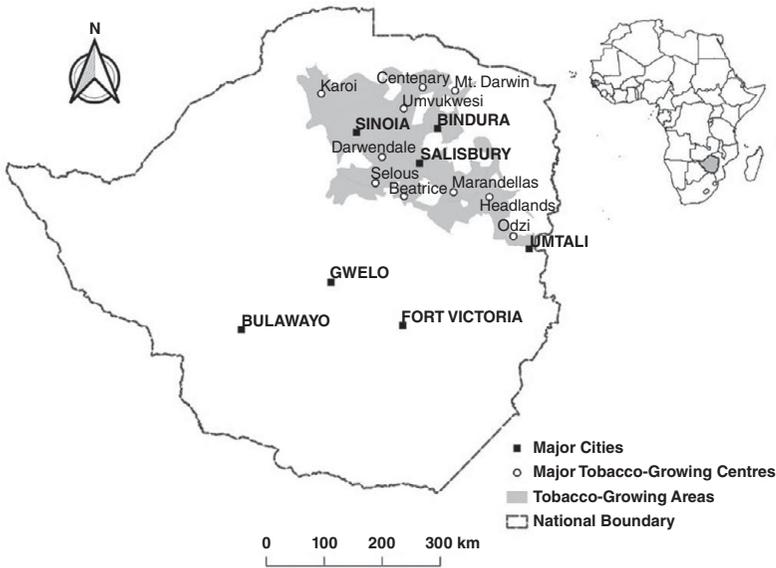


Figure 1.1 Map of Southern Rhodesia showing the tobacco belt

Source: Map by Dr. Gerald Chikowore.

‘ruinous enterprise’.² However, many of the mineral prospectors who sought the elusive motherlode were frustrated – searching in vain for the vein of bright metal. When gold disappointed them, several turned their hands to cultivating the soils surrounding the reefs. Here they found a different kind of gold: the potential to grow the rich golden leaf of tobacco.

These pioneer white settler farmers carved out farms in the sand veld virgin lands in the northern and north-eastern parts of the colony (see map on Figure 1.1) – an area that was later to assume the appellation ‘tobacco belt’.³ Between 1894 and 1945, tobacco growing expanded exponentially to become a key pillar of the colonial economy contributing a third to export earnings and becoming the colony’s major export. However, the development and expansion of the settler colonial tobacco economy in Southern Rhodesia was not a simple, triumphalist,

² M. G. B. Rooney, ‘European Agriculture in the History of Rhodesia, 1890–1907’ (Unpublished MA Thesis, University of South Africa, 1968), 35.

³ P. Scott, ‘The Tobacco Industry of Southern Rhodesia’, *Economic Geography*, 28, 3 (July 1952), 189–206.

whiggish story of success. It came at the cost of an environmental onslaught and social struggles whose import must be contextualised within the broader global narratives. Tobacco cultivation constructed new social relations, produced and reproduced new environments and ecological landscapes in Southern Rhodesia. To reconstruct a more nuanced and multi-directional narrative on the interaction between the tobacco crop, the colonial pioneer farmers and the environment this chapter draws on a global historiography and explores comparative trajectories of tobacco's early colonial history in the New World where the crop first became a global commercial commodity. The chapter engages with global histories, especially North American environmental history scholarship on early agricultural settlements, pioneer tobacco planters and the African environmental history historiography on the 1930s stimulated by the Dust Bowl storms and the Great Depression to locate Southern Rhodesia in a broader global history of tobacco farming ecosystems and global conservation discourses.⁴

In explaining the rise of tobacco cultivation in Southern Rhodesia and the tobacco economy, most local historians have looked at it as a neutral and even benign interaction of 'man' and 'nature' out of which white settler communities pioneered new productive patterns that promoted expansion, development and growth.⁵ Indeed, the historiographic traditions of the earlier works on Rhodesian tobacco centred

⁴ The focus on American scholarship is based on several similar historical reference points between America and Southern Rhodesia. The first being the parallel significance of pioneer tobacco settlements to colonial economic development and the expansion of the agrarian frontier. Second, American settlers achieved demographic, economic and political dominance establishing what Alfred Crosby calls a 'neo-Europe'. See, A. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (Cambridge, 1986), 2. Southern Rhodesia was also established based on the same model, but the whites failed to achieve demographic superiority – becoming what David McDermott Hughes called a 'failed neo-Europe'. See, D. M. Hughes, 'Hydrology of Hope: Farm Dams, Conservation, and Whiteness in Zimbabwe', *American Ethnologist*, 33, 2 (May 2006), 269–287. Third, both countries have been dominant global tobacco producers throughout history.

⁵ For historical works on early tobacco farming in Southern Rhodesia that offer lionising accounts of the enterprising spirit of the white pioneer farmers who, with private capital, hewed out the Rhodesian bushes, planted the seeds of tobacco growth as a commercial crop and established the industry with their own sweat and savvy. See, F. Clements and E. Harben, *Leaf of Gold: The Story of Rhodesian Tobacco* (London, 1962); T. Mbanga, *Tobacco: A Century of Gold* (Harare, 1991); Scott, 'The Tobacco Industry of Southern Rhodesia', 189–206.

more on a glorified and romanticised ‘virgin lands’ tradition of the role of private capital and the enterprise and ingenuity of individual (white, male) farmers captured in the glow of public relations and promotional literature.⁶ This literature ignored the exploitation of huge pieces of ‘virgin lands’ on a larger scale than before, the despoliation of fragile ecologies in the sand veld areas of the country, the extraction of forestry resources of the colony, and the linked social violence meted on African labour in the tobacco farms.

The study of pioneer settler colonial agricultural communities is extensive, conceptually challenging and controversial.⁷ The early literature from the 1920s pioneered by Frederick Jackson Turner followed an upbeat, cheerful model that glorified pioneer agricultural communities and entrenched the ‘mythical’ vision of settler farmers devoted to ploughing virgin lands, putting in crops and transforming vast untamed colonial lands into Edenic gardens.⁸ This historiography was challenged

⁶ S. Ncube, ‘Colonial Zimbabwe Tobacco Industry: Global, Regional and Local Relations, 1949–1979’, PhD Thesis, University of the Free State, 2018, 6.

⁷ Much scholarship on settler colonial societies concurs in conflating settlers and colonial forms of settler colonisation by pointing out to the collective spirit to build and plant new communities far away from home and extending the frontiers of those communities through private capital and initiative, exploiting indigenous resources and populations. See, L. Hartz (ed.), *The Founding of New Societies: Studies in the History of the United States, Latin America, South Africa, Canada, and Australia* (San Diego, 1964); K. Good, ‘Colonialism and Settler Colonialism: A Comparison’, *Australian Outlook*, 33, 3 (1979), 339–351; R. Horwitz, ‘Whites Settlement in Africa’, *African Studies*, 5,1 (1946), 63–66; A. G. Price, *White Settlers and Native Peoples* (Melbourne: Cambridge, 1950); A. G. Price, *White Settlers, in the Tropics* (New York, 1978). However, Lorenzo Veracini accuses much earlier historiography of conflating settler and colonial forms of settler colonisation and makes a critical distinction that settler colonialism only emerged as a category of analytical enquiry within the 1960s and 1970s within the context of the protracted anti-colonial struggles involving settler minorities particularly in Africa. Prior to that, Veracini argues, settlers and colonialism are entirely unrelated as the two do not occupy the same analytical field. See, L. Veracini ‘Settler Colonialism: Career of a Concept’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 41, 2 (2013), 313–333. Southern Rhodesia was, however, a settler colony because of the nature of its occupation, settlement and administration in which its relationship to the imperial government was looser than in most African colonies. It was administered for the first three decades by a commercial company the BSAC. In 1923, when company administration ended, the settlers were granted self-government.

⁸ See, F. J. Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1921). Other works after Turner that glorified the frontier and pioneers include I. Bowman, ‘The Pioneer Fringe’, *Foreign Affairs*, (27 October 1927) and W. P. Webb, *The Great Frontier* (Cambridge, 1951). Bowman anthropomorphised the pioneer as a youthful spirit intent upon winning from taming the wilderness with strong hands and building

by revisionist historians in the 1950s who criticised the frontier hypothesis as an ‘agrarian myth’.⁹ During the 1970s, this critical scholarly tradition gained greater traction and Turner was attacked by new environmental histories for not acknowledging the sinister side of the westward expansion.¹⁰ Richard Hofstadter and others criticised Turner’s romantic western history for ignoring the shameful side of westward expansion, particularly the land speculations, the arrogance of American expansionism and the stories of the conquered indigenous populations.¹¹

Within these debates about the nature of pioneer agrarian frontiers, the expansion of tobacco farming settlements in the Americas from the end of the seventeenth century attracted plenty of scrutiny from environmental historians. Tobacco had been cultivated by the ‘native’ Americans long before the so-called discovery of the Americas by European explorers.¹² Indeed, the genus *Nicotiana*¹³ is believed to have its roots in South America where it grew naturally and was cultivated by ‘native’ Indians who used it for religious, spiritual and pharmaceutical purposes.¹⁴ The European settlers displaced indigenous groups in the growing of the crop, commercialised it and transformed it from an

homes for posterity. Prescott Webb argued that the American frontier had not only shaped American institutions but was indeed a universal frontier. Also See, G. C. Fite, ‘The Pioneer Farmer: A View Over Three Centuries’, *Agricultural History*, 50, 1 (1976), 275–289.

⁹ H. N. Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, 1970) 251.

¹⁰ These revisionist historians include R. G. Athearn, *The Mythic West in 20th Century America* (Kansas, 1986) and R. Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard and Parrington* (New York, 1968). Also see, D. Worster, *Under the Western Skies: Nature, History and the American West* (Oxford, 1982), 3–18.

¹¹ Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians*, 103–104.

¹² A. M. Brandt, *The Cigarette Century: The Rise, Fall, and Deadly Persistence of the Product that Defined America* (New York, 2007), 19.

¹³ There are dozens of species of *Nicotiana* but the two most important are *Nicotiana Tabacum* L. which is largely grown for commercial industrial purposes and *Nicotiana Rustica* L. which is produced for household consumption and small-scale industrial purposes. Both species contain nicotine which has pharmacological properties that increase mental focus and reduce anxiety. *Nicotiana Rustica* though has a higher nicotine content than *tabacum*.

¹⁴ For the history of the tobacco plant see, B. Laws, *Fifty Plants That Changed the Course of History* (New York, 2010), 136–139; S. L. Gilman and Z. Xun, *Smoke: A Global History of Smoking* (London, 2004); Brandt, *The Cigarette Century*, 19–25; J. Goodman, *Tobacco in History: The Cultures of Dependence* (New York, 1993), 19–36.

Amerindian into a new 'European commodity'.¹⁵ From the Americas, the crop spread to and proliferated in other parts of the world – finding its way to Africa, India, the Mediterranean and becoming grafted into supposedly 'indigenous agrarian ecologies'.¹⁶ From the 1600s, tobacco had become an important crop for European merchants and political elites following the establishment of tobacco settlements in the American colonies.¹⁷

Tobacco became more than a crop. It acculturated itself into an integral part of the colonial culture defining a range of values, labour systems and cultural practices including the calendar itself.¹⁸ In the tobacco states life was organised around idiosyncratic rituals of making the crop from the nursery, to the lands, harvesting and curing.¹⁹ Tobacco dominated and regulated colonial life more than any other agricultural activity.²⁰ The plant not only affected perceptions of time, but also other dimensions of the colonial culture, as both human and material geography were affected by the crop as it determined settlements and social relations through its cultivation.²¹ The growing of tobacco controlled the frontier environment as farmers moved into new virgin lands as soon as their soils showed exhaustion, clearing forest and extending the boundaries of the colony.²² Most colonial historians have been critical of the agricultural practices of the tobacco farmers, the plantation economy, slavery and row crop cultivation.²³ In Chesapeake, where colonial land was opened by tobacco

¹⁵ Goodman, *Tobacco in History*, 167. ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 51–55.

¹⁷ The standard type of tobacco that was grown in the earliest settlements was dark-fired tobacco which was cultivated within the fertile lands of Virginia and Maryland. By 1800, there was a quest for a tobacco of a lighter and milder quality that witnessed the migration of tobacco culture from the traditional areas of Virginia and North Carolina into the Piedmont region. After 1812, traders began to demand a milder, light coloured and more aromatic tobacco resulting in the rise of flue-cured bright tobacco and flue-curing technology. Bright tobacco popularity witnessed the extension of cultivation into the lighter thin sterile soils of Ohio and Kentucky by 1850. For an early history of bright tobacco culture see, N. M. Tilley, *The Bright Tobacco Industry, 1860–1929* (Chapel Hill, 1948), 3–36.

¹⁸ Brandt, *The Cigarette Century*, 22.

¹⁹ R. Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill, 1982), 41.

²⁰ J. Brooks, *The Mighty Leaf: Tobacco through the Centuries* (Boston, 1952), 92.

²¹ Goodman, *Tobacco in History*, 174. ²² Brooks, *The Mighty Leaf*, 97.

²³ See, H. Bennett, *Soil Conservation* (New York, 1939); L. C. Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern States to 1860* (Gloucester, 1958); S. P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation*

farmers between 1780 and 1840, erosion of tobacco fields as a result of soil exhaustion led to the sedimentation and clogging of streams.²⁴

Although it is not clear at what point tobacco was introduced to Africa, it is generally accepted that by the end of the seventeenth century the crop had penetrated much of the continent as a result of Portuguese, French, English and Arabic trade networks.²⁵ The Dutch settlers at the Cape in what later became South Africa planted tobacco in 1652 and the crop became popular amongst the Khoisan who traded it in exchange with their labour, cattle and land.²⁶ The Yao of Malawi and Mozambique accumulated wealth by supplying coastal traders with tobacco during the 1600s, and traders in the Niger delta disposed of tobacco at higher prices during the nineteenth century.²⁷ By 1800, with the establishment of colonial settlements in Africa, tobacco became a key crop for white settler colonial agricultural development in eastern and southern Africa. Therefore, the history of tobacco production is a global narrative that cuts across different cultures and epochs. The heritage of the crop across history has etched itself on the environment, human relations and the human physical body in ways that evoke the need to write stories that reflect the transnationality of the crop across time. Indeed, Richard Foltz challenged historians to expand their gaze and write transcontinental environmental histories.²⁸ To this extent, the early story of tobacco in Southern Rhodesia must be linked with the global history of the crop and its role in the construction of new social relations and environmental landscapes.

Movement 1890–1920 (Cambridge, 1959); A. Craven, *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1606–1860* (Urbana, 1925).

²⁴ L. C. Gottschalk, 'Effects of Erosion and Navigation in Upper Chesapeake Bay', *Geographic Review*, 35 (1945), 219–238.

²⁵ See, J. E. Philips, 'African Smoking and Pipes', *Journal of African History*, 24 (1983), 303–319; C. S. Duvall, 'Cannabis and Tobacco in Precolonial Africa', *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of African History*, (2017), doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.44.

²⁶ Ibid. ²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ R. C. Foltz, 'Does Nature Have Historical Agency? World History, Environmental History, and How Historians Can Help Save the Planet', *The History Teacher*, 37, 1 (2003), 9–28.

Early Settler Tobacco Farmers, Land Settlement and the Environment in Southern Rhodesia, 1893–1928

Tobacco production in Southern Rhodesia began long before the settlement of Europeans in the country where it is believed to have been brought by the Portuguese traders in the fifteenth century.²⁹ Early accounts point out that in most parts of Mashonaland and Matabeleland Africans cultivated patches of tobacco in their gardens for their own consumption, trade and the payment of tribute.³⁰ The most popular of these pre-colonial tobacco producers were the Shangwe people who had a thriving tobacco industry that the colonialists found and later undermined.³¹ The exact date for the beginning of white cultivation is unclear, but what is evident is that by 1893, a few settler farmers had begun experimenting with commercial production on very small plots.³² The BSAC Reports from 1889 to 1892 note that tobacco cultivation had promising prospects in the colony.³³

These earliest white settler tobacco farmers were experimenting with the 'indigenous' tobacco varieties largely of the genus *Nicotiana Rustica*.³⁴ However, in 1898 the settler government distributed to white farmers, fifteen varieties of *Nicotiana Tabacum* seed bought from America. The following year the Secretary Department of Agriculture reported that the excellent samples of tobacco harvested

²⁹ H. Weinmann, *Agricultural Research and Development in Southern Rhodesia, 1890–1923* (Harare: University of Rhodesia, 1972), 12.

³⁰ See, Joseph Garbett Wood, *Through Matabeleland: The Record of a Ten Months' Trip in an Ox Wagon through Mashonaland and Matabeleland*, Reprint of 1893 edition (Bulawayo, 1974), 42; T. M. Thomas, *Eleven Years in Central South Africa* (Cardiff, 1873), 180–181; G. H. W. Knight-Bruce, *Memories of Mashonaland* (London, 1895), 100.

³¹ The Shangwe people had a thriving tobacco industry prior to the coming of Europeans which is well documented by Barry Kosmin's book chapter, 'The Inyoka Tobacco Industry of the Shangwe People: The Displacement of a pre-colonial economy in Southern Rhodesia', in R. Palmer and N. Parsons (eds.), *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa* (London, 1977). This will be more comprehensively covered in Chapter six, which solely focuses on African tobacco production from 1900–1980.

³² BSAC reports from 1892–1894 refer to these few tobacco farmers during the pioneer days. They mention a certain Father Boos, Jesuit priest who grew an experimental crop at Chishawasha mission in 1893.

³³ Weinmann, *Agricultural Research and Development in Southern Rhodesia*, 12.

³⁴ For the botanical, chemical and industrial differences between species of *nicotiana* see, footnote 24.

proved the suitability of the climate and soils for tobacco farming.³⁵ By 1902, the crop was being cultivated in most parts of the colony by Europeans, with the newly established Department of Agriculture reporting that 11, 000 lbs were exported to Kimberley in South Africa.³⁶ The 1903 Customs Agreement between the Union of South Africa and Southern Rhodesia under which animal products and crops were guaranteed duty free exchange provided a ready market for Rhodesian tobacco.³⁷ However, during much of these early days not much farming was done, and land was rather held for speculative purposes as the hunger for gold drew many of the farmers away from their farms as they sought quick fortunes in gold mining.³⁸

In 1903, the tobacco-growing industry was slowly getting established with about 100 white settler farmers cultivating the crop.³⁹ Earl Grey, the director of the BSAC, was so enthusiastic about this development that he hired George Odium, an agriculturalist from Canada as the government tobacco expert and sent him to the United States of America (USA) for a year to study tobacco culture.⁴⁰ Upon his return, the BSAC endeavoured to stimulate production and company shareholders began to actively support the cultivation of tobacco for export to build and sustain a stable white agricultural community.⁴¹ In 1904, 147,355 lbs of tobacco were harvested.⁴² In 1905, the figure increased to 500,000 lbs.⁴³ The growth of tobacco as an export crop had significant ramifications for the land settlement plans of the BSAC. The sand veld that consisted of some of the poorest soils in the colony suddenly found a unique appeal. The company took advantage of this opportunity and hyperbolically pointed to its shareholders that the entire colony of Southern Rhodesia was favourable to the cultivation of tobacco.⁴⁴ In 1904, Odium emphasised

³⁵ Weinmann, *Agricultural Research and Development in Southern Rhodesia*, 13.

³⁶ Report of the Department of Agriculture, 1903.

³⁷ V. E. M. Machingaidze, 'The Development of Settler Capitalist Agriculture in Southern Rhodesia with particular Reference to the Role of the State, 1908–1939', (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of London, 1980), 23.

³⁸ P. F. Hone, *Southern Rhodesia* (London, 1909), 195. Also see I. Phimister, *An Economic and Social History of Zimbabwe* (London, 1988), 58.

³⁹ Clements and Harben, *Leaf of Gold*, 68.

⁴⁰ S. Rubert, *A Most Promising Weed: A History of Tobacco Farming and Labour in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1890–1945* (Athens, 1998), 28.

⁴¹ V. Kwashirai, 'Dilemmas in Conservationism in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1890–1930', *Conservation and Society*, 4, 4 (2006), 541–561.

⁴² Weinmann, *Agricultural Research and Development in Southern Rhodesia*, 46.

⁴³ Clements and Harben, *Leaf of Gold*, 57. ⁴⁴ BSAC Company Reports, 1903.

that tobacco was a crop that was peculiarly adapted for a new country such as Southern Rhodesia because of an abundance of cheap virgin soils and a plentiful supply of labour.⁴⁵ In 1905, the BSAC tobacco expert retorted: 'land is cheap in Rhodesia; if you want more tobacco, plant a bigger acreage'.⁴⁶ As a result of this propaganda, flue-cured tobacco barns sprang up all over the countryside and good crops were grown and prices of 1.s to 1.s.6d per lb were obtainable.⁴⁷

The cultivation of tobacco on a more extensive scale as an export crop was yoked in tandem with the colony's general agricultural outlook that began to improve from around 1907 following the visit of the company's directors. That year, the directors declared that the outlook for agriculture in the colony was auspicious.⁴⁸ In 1908, the 'White Agricultural Policy' was launched.⁴⁹ For much of these early years from the launch of the White Agricultural Policy the BSAC pursued a policy of encouraging the introduction of large capital to open up the farms as these were envisaged as possessing the capacity to more rapidly develop the resources of the colony than the smaller individual enterprises.⁵⁰ Thus much of the earliest tobacco farming was done by big companies such as Holt and Holt Limited which was granted 30,000 acres of land in 1905 for tobacco production.⁵¹ Another company formed for the purposes of growing tobacco the Hunyani Estates had a capital of £100,000 and 30,000 acres of land but only managed to produce 4,000 lbs in 1905.⁵²

The first tobacco sales in Southern Rhodesia were conducted by private treaty and growers received lucrative prices such that profits

⁴⁵ G. M. Odlum, 'Tobacco Notes', *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal*, 2, 1 (September 1904), 19–22.

⁴⁶ G. M. Odlum, 'The Culture of Tobacco', BSAC, Department of Agriculture, 1905, 15.

⁴⁷ E. Plewman de Kock, *Various Outspans* (Bloemfontein, 1948), 83.

⁴⁸ BSAC Co. Directors Reports, 1907.

⁴⁹ Agrarian historians of Southern Rhodesia have generally agreed that the year 1908 marks a key shift in the Company administration's perception of settler agriculture as the Company became more amenable to the economic prospects of agriculture and began supporting settler farmers. See R. Palmer, *Land and Racial Domination in Southern Rhodesia* (London, 1977), 80.

⁵⁰ Hone, *Southern Rhodesia*, 197.

⁵¹ NAZ, L2/1/108, Tobacco Culture, Application for a grant of land by F.E. Mann to the Assistant Secretary BSAC, 31 July 1908.

⁵² NAZ, A11/2/2/13 Tobacco 1904–November 1909, J. A. Stevens to Administrator BSAC, 27 October 1906. (American settlers for tobacco growing).

per acre were as high as £25.⁵³ The main buyers were the United Tobacco Company (UTC) in South Africa. In 1910, the first sale by auction was conducted in Salisbury coinciding with the organisation of the growers into the Tobacco Planters Association. This later became the Rhodesia Tobacco Planter's Co-operative Society in 1913 whose objective was to find new markets outside of the traditional Union market. In 1914, however, the UTC could not buy much stock of Rhodesian tobacco because of overproduction and a glut which the South African market could not absorb. The result was the 1914 tobacco crash that bankrupted many tobacco growers who abandoned their farms.⁵⁴ More significantly, the tobacco crash eliminated the dominance of big companies in tobacco production and paved the way for the rise of small tobacco farmers.⁵⁵

So, after the 1914 crash most tobacco companies were bankrupted and the BSAC came to view the small farmer as the pillar upon which the future foundation of the tobacco industry depended.⁵⁶ Clements and Harben argue that it was these small farmers after the 1914 crash who permanently settled on the land and changed the face of the landscape as the frontier of tobacco settlements spread further and advanced into new areas.⁵⁷ Clements and Harben glorify these settler tobacco farmers as they 'tamed the land so today, unlike the bulk of Rhodesia, it reflects in its landscape more often the work of man than the savage exuberance or dull monotony which characterise Central Africa'.⁵⁸ Commenting on the early development of tobacco farming in Southern Rhodesia the Tobacco Industry Council also exhorted the passion shown by the early pioneers:

The distinguishing feature of the early tobacco pioneer was his boundless enthusiasm and energy; with no experience to draw on, little by the way of capital, new growers and their labourers hacked lands out of the Rhodesian bush, and with a simple faith put all they had into tobacco crops.⁵⁹

⁵³ Clements and Harben, *Leaf of Gold*, 64.

⁵⁴ See, Machingaidze, 'The Development of Settler Capitalist Agriculture in Southern Rhodesia', 23; Clements and Harben, *Leaf of Gold*, 76–77.

⁵⁵ R. Hodder-Williams, *White Farmers in Rhodesia: A History of the Marandellas District, 1890–1965* (London, 1983), 56.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 56. ⁵⁷ Clements and Harben, *Leaf of Gold*, 78–80. ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁵⁹ The Tobacco Industry Council, 'The History of Tobacco in Rhodesia', 1975, 2.

These pioneering whiggish ‘virgin land’ narratives were constructed around what J. M. Coetzee called ‘dream topographies’ – fantasies of viewing colonised land as empty and unoccupied spaces.⁶⁰ This reinforced the notion of the conquered territory as a pristine wilderness in which native subjects and environmental resources were raw materials for the expansion of settler agricultural communities. These ‘dream topologies’ and virgin land fantasies constituted a Jeffersonian ideology of progressive white yeomanry turning a ‘howling wilderness’ into a garden of settler nationhood in which white settlers and the land become unified and the ‘native’ is rendered invisible.⁶¹ Thus, attracted by cheap land and the lure of the golden tobacco crop, immigrants from Britain, Europe and South Africa had flocked to the colony and bought huge chunks of land. But to cultivate the most fertile soils, these pioneers had to do heavy stumping and clearing of indigenous trees.⁶² In time, the countryside began to change as the new immigrants altered the very landscape. Native woodlands and grass veld suffered. Veld fires to burn new areas of the sand veld became common, and at the meeting of the directors in 1907 the issue was brought up.⁶³ An editorial of the *Rhodesian Agricultural Journal* in 1908 complained that maize and tobacco farmers were burning grass to clear their land and, in the process, many forests were lost. The editorial mused: ‘what farmer would think of planting mealies or tobacco in soils devoid of humus, yet every year we take away by fire the only means our grasslands have of gaining any’.⁶⁴

In the American colonies the expansion of tobacco farming during pioneer days had created severe ecological problems. Tobacco being a soil nutrients’ draining crop lowered the yielding capacity of the soil, and with scarce capital for fertilisers all the burden was thrown on the soils immediately available.⁶⁵ As a result tobacco farming as practised during the early colonial days in America was an itinerant business. Newcomers to the colony would always petition to move from public

⁶⁰ J. M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven, Cape Town, 1988), 7.

⁶¹ Hughes, ‘Hydrology of Hope’, 269–287

⁶² L. H. Gann, *A History of Southern Rhodesia: Early days to 1934* (London, 1965), 71.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ ‘Editorial’, *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal*, 3 (February 1908), 153–159.

⁶⁵ Brooks, *The Mighty Leaf*, 97.

lands to which they had been assigned on the plea that their farms were depleted for further tobacco crops.⁶⁶ In the Madison County of North Carolina the boom in flue-cured tobacco during the 1870s and 1880s witnessed huge waves of tobacco cultivation that encroached on forested mountain tops and ridges.⁶⁷ The timbered sandy land was stumped and cropped with tobacco for a few years until the virgin fertility was exhausted by crop removal, cultivation and erosion.⁶⁸ Farmers cleared new lands on the precipitous steep slopes, and the cutting of fuelwood caused deforestation. The countryside was heavily gullied as a result.⁶⁹ The practice of burning the ground for seed bed preparation to kill insects and their larvae was also so common that during late winter the tobacco belt presented ‘a hazy appearance from the great number of glowing fires’ that consumed so much firewood and was so wasteful that there was a scarcity of wood fuel.⁷⁰

Similar problems abounded in Southern Rhodesia because of the activities of the pioneer tobacco farmers. In 1910, the company government of Southern Rhodesia had hired the services of Mr. J. Simms, a forest officer of experience from South Africa to visit Rhodesia and assess the condition of its natural forests. His report pointed out the haphazard and wasteful ways in which forestry resources were being exploited by farmers and miners.⁷¹ He noted that most of Rhodesia’s forests were poorly stocked and many of the trees damaged by fires caused by farmers burning early grass and not controlling the fire, with disastrous effects on the soil and the deterioration of forests.⁷² He added:

The legitimate cutting of timber for fuel, and the clearing of lands suitable for agriculture is necessary and desirable, but the felling of trees as practised in this country is so wasteful and indiscriminate that it can only be classified as destructive.⁷³

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ K. Algeo, ‘The Rise of Tobacco as a Southern Appalachian Staple: Madison County, North Carolina’, *South-eastern Geographer*, 37, 1 (May 1997), 46–60.

⁶⁸ F. A. Stinson, ‘Research and Sound Farming’, *The Rhodesian Tobacco Quarterly*, 1 (June 1953), 4.

⁶⁹ F. A. Sondley. *A History of Buncombe County North Carolina* (Spartanburg, SC, 1977), 733.

⁷⁰ Tilley, *The Bright Tobacco Industry*, 43.

⁷¹ ‘Extract from J. Simms Report on Forestry in Southern Rhodesia’, *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal*, 1, 3 (February 1911), 197–222.

⁷² Ibid. ⁷³ Ibid.



Figure 1.2 Clearing of virgin land on a tobacco farm in Marandellas in 1912
Source: A Handbook of Tobacco Culture in Southern Rhodesia, 16.

Producers of flue-cured tobacco in particular required wood for curing tobacco, and constructing tobacco barns, as well as large tracts of virgin bushes to clear every year to put up new crops.⁷⁴ Figure 1.2 shows the practice of clearing virgin bushes for tobacco farming. Seed bed preparation also required a lot of firewood to burn the ground for the control of insect pests and weeds.⁷⁵ When European settlers established farms in the virgin bush, deforestation and soil erosion became

⁷⁴ Hodder-Williams, *White Farmers in Rhodesia*, 53.

⁷⁵ This was the common practice before the advent of herbicides and nematicides in the 1940s. Also, insect pests and diseases of tobacco were not prevalent until the 1920s and 1930s when tobacco acreages expanded exponentially causing overproduction. The main pest problems during the early days were grasshoppers, cutworms and caterpillars. Chemical control was very limited during those days but in 1906 Odlum recommended Paris Green (Sodium Arsenate) for the control of grasshoppers and other leaf eaters. See, G. M. Odlum, 'Tobacco Notes', *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal*, 4, 1 (October 1906), 268–270. However, the most common means of pest control were cultural including clean cultivation and hand-picking. In 1913 farmers were recommended to use flocks of turkeys and fowl to follow behind ploughing implements and pick up caterpillars and grasshoppers. See, *A Handbook on Tobacco Culture for Planters in Southern Rhodesia* (Department of Agriculture, Southern Rhodesia, 1913), 14, 17. Also see, E. Doro, 'An Environmental History of Tobacco Pests and Diseases in Southern Rhodesia, 1893–1940', *Environment & Society Portal*, *Arcadia*, 31 (Summer 2019), Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, www.environmentandsociety.org/node/8766.

the major challenges and environmental hazards.⁷⁶ This was more accentuated in the tobacco farms as the crop typically depletes the soil more than any other crop since it has a voracious appetite for nutrients such as potassium, calcium and nitrogen.⁷⁷

The depletion of the soil was particularly deleterious in the sand veld because the soils were so light and of poor fertility that fertilisers were first used for tobacco ahead of any other crop.⁷⁸ A writer in 1898 noted of the poor nature of the sand veld soils in Southern Rhodesia that ‘they do not remain fertile unless manured’ adding that ‘at present manuring is not possible as there are no cattle’.⁷⁹ He also pointed out that another trouble caused by the sandy nature of the soil was that it was so loose a heavy shower of rain always washed it away.⁸⁰ However, in the later days of tobacco cultivation farm manure and green manure were recommended as well as wood ash supplemented with commercial fertilisers.⁸¹ In 1906, the net worth of fertilisers used was only £114, but jumped to £15, 222 in 1913, an increase of 113 fold as a result of the expansion of tobacco acreages.⁸² *The Handbook for Tobacco Planters in Southern Rhodesia* emphasised that in order to produce a profitable leaf per acre in the granitic soils large quantities of fertilisers had to be used.⁸³ In Nyasaland, where production of flue-cured had begun in the southern provinces in 1904, soil exhaustion was also becoming a serious problem because of the increasing pressure on the land from around 1910.⁸⁴ As migrants pushed into the southern province ‘less and less acreage was available’, and when planters could not find virgin land, they had to import chemical fertilisers to revive their fields.⁸⁵

In 1912, the Southern Rhodesia chief tobacco officer Mr Rice warned growers that tobacco could not be grown in the same lands

⁷⁶ Kwashirai, ‘Dilemmas in Conservationism’, 541–561.

⁷⁷ B. C. Akehurst, *Tobacco* (London, 1981), 138.

⁷⁸ ‘The Fertilisers Farm Foods, Seeds and Pest Remedies Ordinance’, *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal*, 11, 5 (June 1914), 746.

⁷⁹ Thomson, *Rhodesia and Its Government*, 68. ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁸¹ G. M. Odlum, ‘Tobacco Notes’, *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal*, 1 (1903–1904), 185–187.

⁸² ‘The Fertilisers Farm Foods, Seeds and Pest Remedies Ordinance’, 746.

⁸³ *Handbook of Tobacco Culture for Planters in Southern Rhodesia*, 92.

⁸⁴ T. Woods, ‘Why Not Persuade Them to Grow Tobacco: Planters, Tenants and the Political Economy of Central Malawi, 1920–1940’, *African Economic History*, 21 (1993), 131–150.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

for more than two years, and it would be advantageous in the third year to put in a leguminous crop such as cow peas and 'kaffir beans' to restore the fertility of the soil to a considerable extent.⁸⁶ This practice, however, was received with little enthusiasm by tobacco growers who preferred to use new lands each year thus extending opened-up lands and making them in succession very susceptible to degradation.⁸⁷ Cognisant of these emerging environmental challenges, in 1913 the irrigation officer had written an article 'The Dangers and Prevention of Soil Erosion' in the *Rhodesian Agricultural Journal*.⁸⁸ In the article he insisted that erosion was beginning to show its effects in the territory of Southern Rhodesia, and several farms in Mashonaland had suffered significantly with siltation of rivers along most of the occupied farms.⁸⁹ In October 1914, Mr. Lionel Cripps, one of the pioneer tobacco farmers moved a motion in the Southern Rhodesia Legislative Assembly exhorting the government to take steps to combat soil erosion in Southern Rhodesia, since in his words 'a stitch in time saves nine'.⁹⁰ He correctly observed that the erosion problem was being most felt in the sand veld tobacco farms that composed of light soils more liable to be washed away.⁹¹ This view was supported by another legislator Mr Cleveland who observed in 1919 of tobacco farmers that they had been growing an article which they could export or sell very profitably resulting in large areas cultivated year after year with the fertility of the soil significantly extracted with nothing being put back.⁹²

The environmental problems nascently manifesting themselves in the tobacco farms were compounded by the tobacco boom occasioned by the war. The First World War accelerated the rise of the cigarette consumer culture as patterns of use amongst servicemen increased its consumption.⁹³ The tobacco economy became more allied with the state and in the USA the Federal government recognised the tobacco industry as an 'essential' industry resulting in a huge boom in cigarette manufacturing and consumption.⁹⁴ This positive upward trend in the

⁸⁶ 'Editorial', *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal*, 9, 4 (April 1912), 510. ⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ W. M. Watt, 'The Dangers and Preservation of Soil Erosion', *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal*, 10, 5 (June 1913), 667–673.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* ⁹⁰ Southern Rhodesia Legislative Council Debates, 9 October 1914.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* ⁹² Southern Rhodesia Legislative Assembly Debates, 2 May 1919.

⁹³ Brandt, *The Cigarette Century*, 54.

⁹⁴ S. Milov, *The Cigarette: A Political History* (Cambridge, 2019), 26.

global export market for Southern Rhodesian tobacco was given another jolt in 1919 by the granting of an imperial preference of 1/6 duty free by the United Kingdom government on tobacco grown anywhere in the empire and marketed in the United Kingdom (UK).⁹⁵ The result was an expansion in tobacco acreages such that in 1920 tobacco which had hitherto taken up less land than beans became the second most important crop after maize.⁹⁶ The imperial preference offered a great export opportunity for Rhodesian and colonial tobacco to access the UK market without facing competition from old and established tobacco-growing countries such as the USA, Turkey and Greece.⁹⁷ In 1925, the British government increased the existing imperial preference from 1/6 to 1/4. The Wembley exhibition that was held during the same year in London supplied a platform to showcase Rhodesian tobacco to UK and European buyers. Consequently, from 1925 the Southern Rhodesian tobacco industry had shifted its interests from the United Tobacco Company and South African market towards the Imperial Tobacco Company (ITC) and the UK market.⁹⁸ The demand for Rhodesian tobacco on the UK market created a tobacco rush between 1925 and 1928 as well as an influx of new settlers from Britain willing to cash in on the bubble brought in by the imperial preference.⁹⁹ The policy of the Responsible government that had come to power in 1923 was to encourage many white settlers immigrating to Southern Rhodesia to grow tobacco.¹⁰⁰

Consequently, from 1925, tobacco barns sprang up all over the colony, and tobacco farming spread further into the bush in areas such as Banket and Umvukwesi.¹⁰¹ The number of white settler tobacco growers increased from 189 in 1925 to 336 in 1926, once again increasing to 763 in 1927.¹⁰² The influx of new settlers caused by the tobacco rush created a host of conditions for land settlement particularly visible in the planting of larger acreages, agricultural speculation

⁹⁵ Report of the Proceedings at the 24th Annual Congress of the Rhodesian Agricultural Union held on 14–18 September 1926.

⁹⁶ Report of the Department of Agriculture, 1920.

⁹⁷ Machingaidze, 'The Development of Settler Capitalist Agriculture in Southern Rhodesia', 177.

⁹⁸ Clements and Harben, *Leaf of Gold*, 90. ⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁰⁰ Machingaidze, 'The Development of Settler Capitalist Agriculture in Southern Rhodesia', 193.

¹⁰¹ Clements and Harben, *Leaf of Gold*, 91. ¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 98.

and the growing of low-quality tobacco.¹⁰³ Because of high prices paid for tobacco, a lot of farmers left cotton and maize to grow tobacco between 1925 and 1927 resulting in a 'startling' expansion of the tobacco industry.¹⁰⁴ In addition to planting large acreages the pioneer tobacco farmers also rarely practised crop rotations. During the 1926/1927 season 30,164 acres were devoted to tobacco, a total increase of 16,249, from the 1925/1926 season acreage.¹⁰⁵ The report for summer crop returns for 1926/1927 revealed that the expansion in acreages had resulted in single-crop systems and the neglect of crop rotations. The report noted:

It will be observed that 448 farms only grow a single crop (tobacco) and are therefore not practising crop rotation at all. The land planted to tobacco is not regularly used in rotation. It is evident therefore that this important side of agricultural practice is not given the attention it deserves.¹⁰⁶

In August 1927, the British Secretary for Dominion Affairs Lord Amery visited Southern Rhodesia during the Salisbury Agricultural Show and proclaimed that the country was producing very little tobacco as the UK market could absorb as much as ten times the amount of tobacco being produced up to 200 million lbs.¹⁰⁷ Lord Amery's statement prompted a huge increase in tobacco acreages during the 1927/1928 season. Area planted to tobacco went up from 30,164 to 46,622 acres.¹⁰⁸ Resultantly, production multiplied more than fourfold from 5,660,000 lbs during the 1926/1927 season to 24,889,000 lbs in 1927/1928.¹⁰⁹ There was a crisis of overproduction as there was no ready market to absorb the surplus leaf. Table 1.1 shows the importance of the UK and Union markets for Southern Rhodesia's tobacco industry. Between 1925 and 1929 the UK and Union of South Africa imported 49,000,000 lbs of flue-cured tobacco from Southern Rhodesia against 845,000 lbs for all the other importing destinations.

¹⁰³ Report of the director of Agriculture, 1927.

¹⁰⁴ Clements and Harben, *Leaf of Gold*, 97. Also see, Phimister, *An Economic and Social History of Zimbabwe*, 136.

¹⁰⁵ NAZ, S7878, Reports on the summer crop returns, 1926–1927. ¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Clements and Harben, *Leaf of Gold*, 100.

¹⁰⁸ NAZ, S7878, Reports on the summer crop returns, 1927–1928.

¹⁰⁹ Scott, 'The Tobacco Industry of Southern Rhodesia', 189–206.

Table 1.1 *Southern Rhodesia tobacco exports, 1925–1929*

Year	Union of South Africa	United Kingdom	Other Countries	Total Lbs
1925	2,015,507	360,502	59,498	2,435,507
1926	2,629,269	1,417,349	241,216	4,287,833
1927	7,439,103	8,160,761	157,118	15,756,802
1928	4,836,138	9,504,356	204,687	14,545,181
1929	8,355,230	3,380,819	182,005	11,918,054
Totals	25,275,246	22,823,787	844,524	48,943,377

Source: Machingaidze, 'The Development of Settler Capitalist Agriculture', 199.

The ITC relied on American leaf and could not readily take larger amounts of Rhodesian tobacco into their popular brands. The report of the Select Committee on the Position of the Tobacco Industry noted this reality and admitted that British manufacturers held a big interest in American tobacco and would be disinclined to do anything to affect those interests by pushing for brands made entirely from Rhodesian tobacco.¹¹⁰ The disaster of 1928 caused a tobacco crash that had far-reaching consequences for the industry. The implications of this disaster for tobacco farming will be discussed in a later section.

Cultivating Class, Race and Social Violence: Tobacco Farming and Labour in Southern Rhodesia, 1900–1945

The history of African labour in Southern Rhodesia's economic growth has received a great deal of scholarly attention.¹¹¹ The history of labour in tobacco farming, however, has received no other detailed attention outside the seminal work of Steven Rubert who documented various labour regimes in the settler tobacco farms and a rigorous African labour discipline and control system described as 'benevolent paternal

¹¹⁰ Southern Rhodesia Legislative Assembly Debates, 13 June 1929.

¹¹¹ See, C. Van Onselen, *Chibharo, African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia, 1900–1933* (London, 1976); D. Johnson, 'Settler Farmers and Coerced African Labour in Southern Rhodesia', *Journal of African History*, 33,1 (1992), 111–128; G. Arrighi, 'Labour Supplies in Historical Perspective: A Study of the Proletarianisation of the African Peasantry in Rhodesia', *Journal of Development Studies*, vi (1970), 198–233.

autocracy'.¹¹² While Rubert's tobacco labour history is an authoritative account, it did not integrate itself in a broader and more nuanced global frame linking labour practices in tobacco production within world-wide theories of the history of labour and tobacco production. The problems associated with tobacco production and labour exploitation have all come to be viewed in global terms through the appropriation of a global language and a global framework.¹¹³ Thus, Rubert did not connect to the broader global studies on tobacco production and labour regimes but wrote a localised history of tobacco labour practices and regimes in Southern Rhodesia that missed how these practices connect to the globalised social disruptive heritage of the crop. Tobacco farming is an 'intensive, tedious, year-round occupation' involving a series of operations carried out manually.¹¹⁴ Tobacco requires much more labour than any other crop. Tobacco requires more scrupulous management per acre than cotton, rice, or sugar.¹¹⁵ Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while the production of other agricultural products was becoming more mechanised tobacco continued to demand an even greater degree of meticulous hand labour. Consequently, the cultivation of tobacco through its huge labour demands reified cultural meanings of belonging, identity, race, class and gender within the social landscape.¹¹⁶

The demand for labour in tobacco production imposed hierarchised social order that transitioned across the centuries as the locus of production shifted from plantations to the independent yeomanry. The plantation tobacco economy in the Americas initially relied on the labour of indentured white servants, but by the late 1600s tobacco planters turned to black slave labour and this shift was accompanied by new forms of labour control and management and a racialised reordering of the social hierarchy within the tobacco estates.¹¹⁷ Tobacco cultivation absorbs about half a year of working

¹¹² Rubert, *A Most Promising Weed*, 89.

¹¹³ Issues of tobacco production and labour have come to command global attention where various international labour organisations, human rights organisations and inter-governmental organisations have developed transnational frameworks and partnerships. In that regard when historicising labour in tobacco production, there is need to adopt a holistic global historical narrative.

¹¹⁴ Brooks, *The Mighty Leaf*, 284. ¹¹⁵ Benson, *Tobacco Capitalism*, 67.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹¹⁷ See, Goodman, *Tobacco in History*, 176; Brandt, *The Cigarette Century*, 23.

time and it is often merciless with labour.¹¹⁸ Labour peak tasks¹¹⁹ include transplanting, weeding, suckering, topping, harvesting, curing and grading.¹²⁰ Tobacco cultivation was closely tied to the use of gangs of labourers who worked under rigorous and aggressive managerial strategies to maximise the quality of the leaf.¹²¹ When slavery ended, there was a renegotiation of labour relations on tobacco farms. During the twentieth century, the locus of production shifted to the household where male farmers exploited the unpaid labour of women and children.¹²² Production became centred on smaller areas of about three acres on which two thirds of women and children's labour was devoted.¹²³ The conditions for family labour in American tobacco farms were so grim that one writer observed that women and children slept in bedrooms crowded with tobacco and the children were 'gummy and dirty from contact with the tobacco stalks, their youthful faces tired'.¹²⁴ Studies of contemporary tobacco-production systems have also been able to confirm the continuation of social violence as part of the historical heritage of tobacco cultivation labour regimes.¹²⁵

¹¹⁸ The tobacco production cycle from the seedbed to grading of the leaf for sale to the auction floors usually takes at least six months.

¹¹⁹ Tobacco tasks include suckering, topping, harvesting, curing and grading. Topping is the removal of the flower head or the terminal bud to concentrate nutrients on the leaves. It is a tedious process as it must be administered to every plant. After topping, the shoots that develop must be removed periodically to maintain the supply of nutrients to the leaves in a process called suckering. The harvesting process is done in various stages by 'priming' which is the picking of ripe leaves from the tobacco stalk individually. Harvesting usually takes two months. The harvested leaves are hung in the barns for curing. After curing each leaf is meticulously graded according to colour and texture and subdivided according to quality and colour. The graded leaves are then tied into small bundles called 'hands' consisting of fifteen to twenty leaves. The hands are then packaged for marketing in bales. For a description of the tobacco labour process see Brooks, *The Mighty Leaf*, 279–293; *A Handbook of Tobacco Culture for Planters in Southern Rhodesia*, 20–25.

¹²⁰ Goodman, *Tobacco in History*, 173. ¹²¹ Benson, *Tobacco Capitalism*, 65.

¹²² P. Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana, 1985), 23–31.

¹²³ Tilley, *The Bright Tobacco Industry*, 102.

¹²⁴ Tilley quotes a writer in *Progressive Farmer* F. H. Jeter writing on 23 October 1928. See Tilley, *The Bright Tobacco Industry*, 102.

¹²⁵ See, 'A State of Fear: Human Rights Abuses in North Carolina's Tobacco Industry', Oxfam Report (2011); B. Gamlin, 'My Eyes are Red from Looking and Looking: Mexican Working Children: Perspectives on How Tobacco Affects Their Bodies', *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies*, 6.4 (December 2011), 339–345; M. G. Otañez, M. E. Muggli, R. D. Hurt and S. A. Glantz,

From the earliest pioneer days, the major problem that confronted settler tobacco farmers in Southern Rhodesia was perennial shortages of African labour. In 1906 at its Annual General Meeting the Mashonaland Farmers Association pointed out that the lucrative potential for tobacco production was going to waste as a result of the unwillingness of 'natives' to be engaged as labourers in the farms.¹²⁶ The position of most tobacco farmers with respect to labour was reported in the *Rhodesia Herald* as being so bad that many growers were obliged to suspend operations until the necessary labour had been procured.¹²⁷ In 1911, the 'native' labour question was described as the 'most acute crisis' in Southern Rhodesia, and in several districts the lack of labour had been so great that tobacco farmers were without 'boys' (meaning African adult men in the demeaning nomenclature of the time) for reaping their crops.¹²⁸ The labour crisis was endemic and was particularly caused by the unwillingness of Africans to work for wages in European farms because they could grow their own crops and sell surplus to earn enough for subsistence and pay their taxes.¹²⁹ The report

'Eliminating Child Labour in Malawi: a British American Tobacco Corporate Responsibility Project to Sidestep Tobacco Labour Exploitation', *Tobacco Control*, 15, 3 (June 2006), 224–230; A. K. Ramos, 'Child Labour in Global Tobacco Production: A Human Rights Approach to an Enduring Dilemma', *Health and Human Rights Journal*, 20, 2 (December 2018), 235–248. Also, in May 2019, *The Guardian* reported that there was rampant exploitation of African immigrants in the tobacco farms of Campania in Italy. These immigrants included children and adults who were forced to work up to 12 hours a day without contracts and enough health and safety equipment. They were also under-paid and most of them complained of body pains and lack of proper rest. See www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/may/31/i-had-pain-all-over-my-body-italys-tainted-tobacco-industry, accessed 5 July 2019.

¹²⁶ 'The Labour Problem', *Rhodesia Herald*, 11 May 1906.

¹²⁷ J. S. Loosley, Secretary of the Rhodesian Agricultural Union in a letter to the Editor, *Rhodesia Herald*, 27 November 1908.

¹²⁸ 'Editorial', *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal*, 9, 1 (October 1911), 3.

¹²⁹ The African peasant economy in Southern Rhodesia expanded between 1900 and 1908 because of the market opportunities afforded by the colonial economy. For a discussion of African peasantries and the colonial economy in Southern Rhodesia see, I. Phimister, 'Peasant Production and Underdevelopment in Southern Rhodesia, 1890–1914', *African Affairs*, 73, 291 (April 1974), 217–228; G. Arrighi, 'Labour Supplies in Historical Perspective: A Study of the Proletarianisation of the African Peasantry in Rhodesia', *Journal of Development Studies*, 6 (1970), 197–234; T. Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness and the Guerrilla War in Zimbabwe* (London, 1985); R. Palmer, 'The Agricultural History of Rhodesia', in R. Palmer and N. Parsons

of the Native Labour Committee (1927–1928) acknowledged this inconvenience with regret:

Considerable inconvenience and in some cases, loss is suffered yearly by many farmers during the months of November to January owing to a large percentage of indigenous labourers going to their homes for the purpose of ploughing and planting at the very time when farmers require additional labour.¹³⁰

The few Africans willing to be employed for wages preferred working in mines where they were paid higher wages.¹³¹ The importance of African labour as a raw material for tobacco cultivation was captured by one colonial official:

Natives resemble tobacco in as much as they love veld where tropical and sub-tropical conditions make the struggle for a livelihood comparatively easy, and consequently they avoid the watersheds and are found in their numbers on the low veld, and a good supply of native labour is essential to the tobacco planter.¹³²

Between 1910 and 1914, the average labour required for cotton in Southern Rhodesia was 60–100 man-hours per acre, for maize 37–100 man-hours per acre and for tobacco of all kinds 356 man-hours per acre.¹³³ Before the advent of extensive mechanisation in the post–World War II era, seventy acres of tobacco needed a labour requirement of about 150 ‘native’ boys.¹³⁴ Consequently, African labour expended a lot of capital resources as an expenditure item on the tobacco farm. The cost of African labour fluctuated across the years but by the post–World War II years as a single item, it accounted for 27 per cent of total costs on the farm while expenses for European labour gobbled up 18 per cent of total costs.¹³⁵ The Select Committee appointed in 1949 to investigate the reasons for labour shortages in

(eds.), *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa* (London, 1977), 221–245.

¹³⁰ Report of the Native Labour Committee, 1927–1928.

¹³¹ Hone, *Southern Rhodesia*, 75.

¹³² *Handbook of Tobacco Culture for Planters in Southern Rhodesia*, 92.

¹³³ NAZ, 982/T/2F– Rhodesia Tobacco Association General, 1 July 1954– 13 March 1955, Labour cost for tobacco.

¹³⁴ Captain I. H. Morten, ‘Rhodesia Flue Cured Tobacco’, *Empire Journal*, *XLI*, 6 (1950), 6.

¹³⁵ See W. E. Haviland, ‘The Use and Efficiency of African Labour in Tobacco Farming in Southern Rhodesia’, *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, 20, 1 (1954), 100–106.

Table 1.2 Labour requirements in agriculture in Southern Rhodesia, 1940–1949

Crop or Stock	Unit	Unitary Labour Requirement
Tobacco	Per acre	10.0
Grain	"	1.3
Groundnuts	"	5.0
Potatoes	"	5.0
Cotton	"	3.0
Other Crops	"	1.0
Dairy Cows	Per head	1.5
Other Cattle	"	0.3
Pigs	"	0.5
Sheep and Goats	"	0.2

Source: Native Labour in Agriculture, 246.

agriculture and its maldistribution noted the huge disparities in labour requirements between tobacco and other agricultural commodities and enterprises.¹³⁶ It pointed out that tobacco absorbed more work units per acre than other crops as shown by Table 1.2.¹³⁷

The mechanisation of agriculture between 1900 and 1945 did not have a significant impact in changing the labour demands in tobacco production as most of the later stages in the production process of tobacco such as priming, topping, suckering, reaping and grading could not be successfully mechanised. Therefore, despite headway in mechanisation that had been made particularly in securing traction, the average man-hours per acre for tobacco production in Southern Rhodesia was estimated to be as high as 1600 hours.¹³⁸

The perennial labour crisis within the colony led to the creation of the Rhodesian Native Labour Bureau (RNLB) in 1903 mostly to supply mine labour, but it became a very useful conduit for the supply of *chibaro* labourers to tobacco farmers.¹³⁹ During periods of critical

¹³⁶ V. M. Wadsworth, 'Native Labour in Agriculture', *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal*, XLVII,3 (May–June 1950), 234–253.

¹³⁷ A work unit represent the work performed by one African labourer in one day under average conditions.

¹³⁸ NAZ, 982/T/2F- Rhodesia Tobacco Association General, 1 July 1954– 13 March 1955, Labour cost for tobacco.

¹³⁹ Van Onselen, *Chibharo: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia*, 116. Also see, J. M. MacKenzie, 'Colonial Labour Policy and Rhodesia', *Rhodesia Journal*

labour shortages some white settler tobacco farmers would coerce the company administration to use more effective methods of procuring labourers faster than the RNLB.¹⁴⁰ As the demand for tobacco farm labour rose, the bureau (RNLB) recruited labourers from Nyasaland, Northern Rhodesia and Mozambique and distributed them to tobacco farmers at prescribed rates and fees. A transport service system called *Ulere* was established for smooth transportation of labour from Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia.¹⁴¹ The cost of procuring each labourer for twelve months service including cost of return journey was £1.10s.¹⁴² The labour crisis compelled tobacco farmers to adopt nefarious labour recruitment methods that included kidnappings and coercion. Tobacco farmers set up offices in various parts of the country and used all forms of shrewd means to snatch up labourers from maize and cattle farmers.¹⁴³ In one of the cases of recruitment by coercion, two African labourers were hoodwinked by a white tobacco farmer to travel from Bulawayo to Salisbury (a distance of 430 kilometres) upon being promised work in a Salisbury factory only to find out that they had been forcibly recruited as tobacco labourers for a farm in Umvukwesi:

I was contracted by Mr Morrison in Bulawayo, he offered us £2/ month if we agreed to work in Salisbury, we agreed to his terms and 8 natives came to Salisbury with him. We were taken before the Native Commissioner Salisbury and we were told we would be required to work in his tobacco farms in the Umvukwesi for £1/month for 12 months. We refused the

of Economics, 8 (1974), 12–13. The word *chibaro* was used in Southern Rhodesia to refer to the colonial system of forced and contract labour enforced by the Rhodesia Native Labour Bureau from 1903–1933. The word was used differently in various regional colonial contexts to refer to systems of coercive labour recruitment. In South Africa, the term was deployed as *Isibalo* to refer to forced labour in Natal during the late nineteenth century. During the mid-1920s the word *shibaru* in Mozambique was used to mean forced labour, and in Nyasaland *cibalo* was used to refer to contract labour.

¹⁴⁰ Machingaidze, 'The Development of Settler Capitalist Agriculture in Southern Rhodesia', 39.

¹⁴¹ Rubert, *A Most Promising Weed*, 38–55.

¹⁴² 'Farm Labour', *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal*, VII,1 (October 1909), 831–833.

¹⁴³ In 1925, The Victoria Cattle and Maize Farmers Association wrote a letter to the Minister of Lands and Agriculture complaining that tobacco farmers (whom they described as parasites) were coming into their districts using touts and luring their employed 'natives' away. See NAZ, S138/40, Labour recruitment, 1924–1928, Victoria Farmers to Minister of Agriculture, 4 August 1925.

offer ... Mr Morrison then said, alright you can walk back to Bulawayo where you will be arrested. We had neither money nor food, so we had to accept.¹⁴⁴

Another nefarious recruitment practice popular in the tobacco farms in Southern Rhodesia was the employment of children. In 1928, The Southern Rhodesian Legislative Assembly passed the Native Juvenile Employment Act to regulate the employment of 'native' juveniles particularly in the European farms.¹⁴⁵ The Act was simply an attempt to codify and legislate for something which was already a fact in many farms and economic sectors of Southern Rhodesia.¹⁴⁶ During the debate on the bill, one legislator Sir Ernest Montagu pointed out that on many tobacco and cotton farms women had arrived with very young and small children who had been rather useful in picking cotton and reaping tobacco.¹⁴⁷ The President of the Makoni section of the Rhodesian National Farmers Union (RNFU), however, noted that, the seriousness of the bill was clearly demonstrated by the fact that the League of Nations had laid it down that forced labour for private gain was slavery.¹⁴⁸ Sir Lionel Cripps described the bill in his correspondence with the Governor of Southern Rhodesia as representing a 'peculiarly

¹⁴⁴ NAZ, S138/40, Labour recruitment, 1924–1928, Extracts of a letter from Mr. R.K. Robinson, Forced recruitments: Tome and Pembi farms, 3 February 1928.

¹⁴⁵ The Act came at the instigation of the Rhodesian Agricultural Union's recommendation at its 1924 annual conference on the need to indenture native juveniles. The argument for the proposed Act was that most native juveniles were loafing around unemployed and could be a source of crime and trouble if not occupied with work. For a general discussion on child labour in colonial Southern Rhodesia see B. Grier, 'Invisible Hands: The Political Economy of Child Labour in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1890–1930', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 20, 1 (1994), 27–52.

¹⁴⁶ Charles van Onselen points out that child labour was used in mines since the days of the Rhodesian Native Labour Bureau (RNLB) when young boys in the rural areas were recruited forcibly for mine labour. This practice had become pervasive by as early as 1905 and the 'native' juveniles so recruited conducted such tasks as sweeping and cooking. On Asbestos mines, child labour was used to separate mineral fibre from the rock. In the mica mines half the labour force composed of children aged from ten to fifteen years. These children cut, split and sorted the mica. See Van Onselen, *Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia*, 124–125. Van Onselen though does not discuss the nature and prevalence of child labour on the farms.

¹⁴⁷ Southern Rhodesia Legislative Council Debates, 2 November 1928.

¹⁴⁸ NAZ, S138/255, The Native Juveniles Employment Act, 1926–1928, A. C. Parkinson to the Chairman Peace Committee of the Society of Friends, 13 May 1927.

odious form of child slavery'.¹⁴⁹ In the House of Commons in Britain the bill received a lot of scrutiny and attacks from British law-makers. One speaker who spoke in opposition to the bill pointed out that the law was being enabled and given succour by the profits being realised by Rhodesian tobacco farmers because of the imperial preference on empire-grown tobacco.¹⁵⁰ The imperial preference was now spurring Rhodesian growers to produce much tobacco at low labour costs and exploit African children.

On 29 December 1927, the Chief Native Commissioner noted that there was a growing entry of small children into the tobacco industry, and children were being employed on a larger scale.¹⁵¹ He admitted that child employment was already a common practice and during the past thirty years children had been 'regularly employed' on tobacco farms.¹⁵² A concerned missionary pointed out in a private letter to the Chief Native Commissioner that in his view the tobacco industry was factory work, calling for factory work precautions with respect to children.¹⁵³ Children were employed in the tobacco farms because their labour was cheaper amounting to three or four pence a day and five shillings for a month.¹⁵⁴ Children were considered better suited than adults for such tasks as grading and stringing of tobacco as they were considered 'nimble-fingered' and 'sensitive to touch'.¹⁵⁵ The report of the Native Labour Committee vindicated the use of child labour on the tobacco farms and noted that the light nature of several branches of work in the tobacco industry provided very suitable conditions for the employment of the 'native' youth and would 'undoubtedly attract more and more in the near future'.¹⁵⁶ In 1949, the report on native labour admitted that children of about eight years upwards were employed on both casual and permanent basis on tobacco farms for lighter seasonal work.¹⁵⁷ By the late 1940s, juveniles constituted a significant proportion of labour on most tobacco

¹⁴⁹ NAZ, S138/255, The Native Juveniles Employment Act, 1926–1928, Sir Lionel Cripps to Governor Southern Rhodesia: Objections to the proposed bill, 29 August 1926.

¹⁵⁰ NAZ, S138/255, The Native Juveniles Employment Act, 1926–1928, Extracts from the House of Commons official report of 5 December 1927.

¹⁵¹ NAZ, S138/255, The Native Juveniles Employment Act, 1926–1928, CNC to the Secretary to the Premier, 29 December 1927.

¹⁵² *Ibid.* ¹⁵³ *Ibid.* ¹⁵⁴ Rubert, *A Most Promising Weed*, 164.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁵⁶ NAZ, S235/473, Report of the Native Labour Committee, 1927–1928.

¹⁵⁷ 'Native Labour in Agriculture', 234–253.

farms in Southern Rhodesia varying from between 15–25 per cent of the total labour force.¹⁵⁸

Conditions of Tobacco Farm Labourers in Southern Rhodesia, 1900–1945

Eurocentric social histories of tobacco farm labour in Southern Rhodesia framed the white settler tobacco farmer as a benevolent patron presiding over ‘primitive’ but happy and contented ‘native’ labourers.¹⁵⁹ The African tobacco farm labourer is cast as distinctively better off than his companion in African townships and urban centres who was overcrowded and restricted.¹⁶⁰ However, Rubert’s work illuminated on the grim conditions of African labour that extended from the tobacco fields to their social lives on the farm compounds. Tobacco farming activities in Southern Rhodesia took much of the year and revolved around three production phases. The low-level labour period ranging from May to August and September to November was for grading and nursery respectively; the high level (peak) period from February to April involved harvesting and curing; the middle level period from December to January was the phase for planting and field culture.¹⁶¹ The work hours on a tobacco farm varied depending on the nature of the work and tasks but on average male employees worked for 265–285 days in a year with a typical workday varying between six and eighteen hours and labourers working from dawn to dusk.¹⁶² Labour organisation and efficiency on tobacco farms was based on the notion that Africans responded to a rigid form of

¹⁵⁸ W. E. Haviland, ‘The Use and Efficiency of African Labour in Tobacco Farming in Southern Rhodesia’, *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, 20, 1 (1954), 100–106.

¹⁵⁹ See, Haviland, ‘The Use and Efficiency of African Labour’, 100–106 and Clements and Harben, *Leaf of Gold*, 186–197. Clements and Harben narrative of African tobacco labourers is distinctly upsetting as they view Africans as primitive. These views of the African as raw, primitive and childish were part of how Europeans imagined Africans and it became entrenched within the native policy of Southern Rhodesia in the 1920s. See D. Jeater, ‘Imagining Africans: Scholarship, Fantasy, and Science in Colonial Administration, 1920s Southern Rhodesia’, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 38, 1 (2005), 1–26.

¹⁶⁰ See, Clements and Harben, *Leaf of Gold*, 186–197.

¹⁶¹ See, Haviland, ‘The Use and Efficiency of African Labour’, 100–106.

¹⁶² *Ibid.* Also see, Rubert, *A Most Promising Weed*, 109.

discipline and that ‘natives’ understood force and coercion.¹⁶³ There was the use of physical violence sometimes to instil discipline through caning, whipping and clouting.¹⁶⁴ There were two forms of labour organisation on tobacco farms in Southern Rhodesia – task work and gang labour. Contract or task work involved the allocation of daily work to each employee. Contract work was more commonly used for the annual stumping of virgin lands, collection of wood fuel, weeding, untying cured tobacco and grading.¹⁶⁵ Gang labour was used for tasks that required intensive use of labour such as planting, suckering and reaping.

Tobacco farm labour in Southern Rhodesia was very gendered. Most of the work was done by adult males and women were not seen as ‘actual workers’.¹⁶⁶ Globally, the history of labour in tobacco production reveals that gender roles were distinct, and much of the labour-intensive work on the farm was the domain of men while women played at most complementary roles. In America for instance the role for women labourers in tobacco farms during much of the nineteenth century was to prepare food and cook meals for gangs of male labourers.¹⁶⁷ In Southern Rhodesia women and girls were usually only hired during the busy and peak periods of farm work. They were employed as casual labourers during the period February or March to June and July usually only when male labour shortages were acute.¹⁶⁸ Even then, female labourers would receive less wages (usually two thirds of what males were getting) than their male counterparts and were not allocated rations. Women’s tasks involved weeding, suckering, untying tobacco and grading.¹⁶⁹ The average wages for African labour varied across the years but they were generally below the cost of living as testified by the 1927/1928 Native Labour Committee.¹⁷⁰ In 1913, the average wage

¹⁶³ A. S. R. Richardson, ‘Farm Labour in Rhodesia’, *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal*, III,5 (June 1906), 537–541.

¹⁶⁴ Rubert, *A Most Promising Weed*, 90, 95. ¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 90. ¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁶⁷ R. Beusaert, ‘From Kitchen to Kiln: Women’s Culinary Labour on Ontario Tobacco Farms, 1950s–1970s’, Available at https://niche-canada.org/2020/08/04/from-kitchen-to-kiln-womens-culinary-labour-on-ontario-tobacco-farms-1950s-1970s/?fbclid=IwAR0VZTEf6rIV_xAmhO9b_HfYleY75iXyuOoYU74VdksNUoCovgLtl4zqwm0, accessed 14 September 2020.

¹⁶⁸ Haviland, ‘The Use and Efficiency of African Labour’, 100–106.

¹⁶⁹ ‘Native Labour in Agriculture’, 234–253.

¹⁷⁰ NAZ, S235/473, Report of the Native Labour Committee, 1927–1928.

was 20s, in 1923/1924 17s.5d, then 19s.16d for 1925/1926 and 21s.4d during the 1926/1927 season.¹⁷¹ There was a discernible and conspicuous social and wage hierarchy on tobacco farms. In 1947, European managers were being paid between £20–£40 per month plus a percentage of net profits varying from 10 to 25 per cent.¹⁷² Keep and accommodation were also provided in addition to the average gross wages. Boss boys (task supervisors) were at the top of the social hierarchy on a tobacco farm and earned £3.2s.6d/month by 1945, and tractor boys earned an average wage of £3.¹⁷³ The rates for general labourers fluctuated even on the same farm between £1.5s and £2.5s in 1945. Young children were paid anything between 2s.6d and £1 with an average rate running at 14s. To justify the poor salaries, white farmers and colonial officials often argued that the wage incentive was weaker with African labourers as they had fewer wants and needs which could be satisfied by other non-monetary incentives.¹⁷⁴ Rations – weekly supplies of food items were the most popular incentives used by tobacco farmers to keep African labour on the farms. Although the quantities and variety of rations differed from farm to farm the standard weekly ration on a tobacco farm usually consisted of 14–16 lbs mealie meal, 2 lbs of beans or monkey nuts, 1–3 lbs meat or 1 lb dried fish and 4 oz of salt.¹⁷⁵ Sometimes tobacco and soap would be added to the rations.¹⁷⁶ The supplies of rations were inadequate for subsistence and farm labourers had to supplement with growing their own food in small pieces of land, hunting game and brewing and selling beer.¹⁷⁷

The compound was the centre of farm social life on a tobacco farm. The compound as the living space for working Africans has been explored in labour history of southern Africa as not only physical space but denoting a system for labour control and discipline.¹⁷⁸ The

¹⁷¹ Report of the Native Labour Committee, 1927–1928.

¹⁷² ‘Native Labour in Agriculture’, 234–253.

¹⁷³ ‘Native Labour in Agriculture’, 234–255.

¹⁷⁴ See Clements and Harben, *Leaf of Gold*, 190; Haviland, ‘The Use and Efficiency of African Labour’, 100–106.

¹⁷⁵ Haviland, ‘The Use and Efficiency of African Labour’, 100–106.

¹⁷⁶ ‘Native Labour in Agriculture’, 234–255.

¹⁷⁷ Rubert, *A Most Promising Weed*, 106.

¹⁷⁸ See Van Onselen, *Chibharo*, 128–136; R. Turrell, ‘Kimberly: Labour and compounds, 1871–1888’, in S. Marks and R. Rathbone (eds.), *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa: African Class Formation, Culture, and Consciousness, 1870–1930* (Essex, 1982), 45–76; S. Moroney, ‘The

compounds on tobacco farms were much adopted to conform to the tribal aspects of African life so that the ‘native’ would have access to the conveniences of his ‘primitive’ lifestyle. The compounds resembled African villages and composed of mud and straw huts. The farm compound was constructed around colonial prejudices about Africans being happier and contented living in conditions akin to their kraal life.¹⁷⁹ These prejudices became an alibi for not constructing proper housing facilities in the compounds as ‘brick-built cottages’ were not always to the liking of Africans who ‘preferred a snuggery without windows’.¹⁸⁰ The houses for tobacco labourers were poor. The report of the Native Labour Committee in 1927 observed that most of the conditions in the farming compounds were deplorable. There was lack of proper sanitary accommodation on almost all farms and most compounds had ‘grass shelters and leaky hovels’ detrimental to the health of the employees.¹⁸¹ The Report on labour shortages echoed this and noted that housing provided on most tobacco farms was of poor quality and made from pole and dagga.¹⁸² The farm compounds also lacked the basic sanitary infrastructure and tobacco farmers were reluctant to spend money on lavatories for their workers such that they had to defecate in the bushes around their living areas.¹⁸³ However, from the 1940s as a result of the tobacco boom which is explored in the next chapter some tobacco farmers had started to offer some more social amenities on their farms. A survey of eighty tobacco farms in 1949 revealed that twenty employed a native schoolteacher and one farmer provided a private clinic, school hall and recreational hall for a staff of 100 boys.¹⁸⁴ Three farms had laid aside football pitches and organised teams for leisure.

Development of the Compound as a Mechanism of Worker Control 1900–1912’, *South African Labour Bulletin* 4, 3 (May 1978), 29–49.

¹⁷⁹ See, Rubert, *Most Promising Weed*, 126. Rubert cites two tobacco farmers E. D. Palmer and Michael Howell who observed that Africans were contented living in their villages and loosely supervised compounds.

¹⁸⁰ Clements and Harben, *Leaf of Gold*, 190. Some farmers argued that brick houses made their African labourers sick while grass huts reduced the danger of diseases amongst their African workers. See Rubert, *Most Promising Weed*, 130.

¹⁸¹ Report of the Native Labour Committee, 1927–1928.

¹⁸² ‘Native Labour in Agriculture’, 234–255.

¹⁸³ Rubert, *A Most Promising Weed*, 131.

¹⁸⁴ ‘Native Labour in Agriculture’, 234–255.

The Global Depression and the Tobacco Crisis in Southern Rhodesia, 1930–1934

The 1930s witnessed two momentous global developments that markedly impacted the patterns of settler agriculture in colonial Africa – the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl disaster.¹⁸⁵ The Great Depression riled settler and African agricultural economies as export markets collapsed and farmers went bankrupt. The Dust Bowl disaster chastened colonial officials over the ecological crisis that could ensue from unbridled agricultural expansion and instigated concerns about environmental stewardship at a time when overproduction of cash crops was causing land degradation and soil erosion.¹⁸⁶ To this end, there is a consensus amongst historians that state intervention in agricultural economies in colonial Africa during the 1930s was influenced by the financial pressures of the Depression and the ecological apprehensions evoked by the dust storms in the USA. The Dust Bowl amplified ecological concern and thrust soil conservation within the precincts of colonial intervention resulting in several ambitious conservation programmes prioritising the construction of contour banks and

¹⁸⁵ From 1930 to 1936 droughts accompanied by heat waves, locust outbreaks and dust storms and land degradation precipitated low farm commodity prices and great distress in most parts of the USA southern plains. The drought resulted in the loss of 4,500 human lives, US\$25 million in farm losses per day such that the financial cost amounted to one-half the money America put into World War I. American environmental history scholarship points to an analytic link between the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression as both revealed the fundamental weaknesses of American consumption and production culture in ecological and economic terms respectively. The literature argues that the Dust Bowl came about because of the expansionary energy of agricultural capitalism encountering a ‘volatile marginal land, destroying the delicate ecological balance’. See, D. Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford, 1979); R. Douglas Hurt, *Dust Bowl* (Chicago, 1981); L. Hewes, *The Suitcase Farming Frontier: A study in the Historical Geography of the Central Great Plains* (Lincoln, 1973); R. Lowitt, *The New Deal and the West* (Bloomington, 1984); D. Worster, ‘The Dirty Thirties: A Study in Agricultural Capitalism’, *Great Plains Quarterly*, 6, 2 (Spring 1986), 107–116.

¹⁸⁶ See, D. Anderson, ‘Depression, Dust Bowl, Demography, and Drought: The Colonial State and Soil Conservation in East Africa during the 1930s’, *African Affairs*, 83, 332 (1984), 321–343; O. M. Wapulumuka, *Conservation Song: A History of Peasant State Relations and the Environment in Malawi, 1860–2000* (Cambridge, 2010); H. Hollerman, *Dust Bowls of Empire: Imperialism, Environmental Politics, and the Injustice of ‘Green’ Capitalism* (New Haven, 2018).

protection of arable land with storm drains. This became much pronounced as the twin conditions of overpopulation in African areas and overproduction in white settler areas were contributing to land degradation.¹⁸⁷ Intensive cash cropping in both the settler areas and African reserves had resulted in overproduction and a deep crisis in the colonial agricultural economies. However, although white settler farmers and African peasants were both equally to blame for land degradation and soil erosion due to overproduction and monocropping, Africans' wasteful agriculture was always used as a convenient scapegoat to marginalise African rural producers during the 1930s.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ There is plenty of literature on colonial conservation in Africa that concurs on the influence of the Dust Bowl disaster in shaping patterns of state intervention in settler and African agriculture from the 1930s. See, D. Anderson, 'Depression, Dust Bowl, Demography, and Drought: The Colonial State and Soil Conservation in East Africa during the 1930s', *African Affairs*, 83, 332 (1984), 321–343; J. McGregor, 'Conservation, Control and Ecological Change: The Politics and Ecology of Colonial Conservation in Shurugwi, Zimbabwe', *Environment and History*, 1 (1995), 257–279; K. Showers, 'Soil Erosion in the Kingdom of Lesotho: Origins and Colonial Responses, 1830s–1950s', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 15, 2 (1989), 143–162; K. Showers, *Imperial Gullies: Soil Erosion and Conservation in Lesotho* (Athens, 2005); S. Maravanyika, 'Soil Conservation and the White Agrarian Environment in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1908–1980' (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Pretoria, 2013); W. Beinart, *The Rise of Conservation in South Africa: Settlers, Livestock, and the Environment, 1770–1950* (Oxford, 2003); W. Beinart, 'Soil Erosion, Conservation and Ideas about Development: A Southern African Exploration, 1900–1960', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 11, 1 (1984), 52–83. In 2003, Beinart, however, revised the importance he had attached to the USA experiences as a model for intervention in South Africa. He, however, still maintained that South African environmental consciousness had grown from the eighteenth century within the international and imperial context. He points to American influences such as dry farming and soil conservation committees.

¹⁸⁸ The banner and sceptre of conservation and land degradation and protecting the environment was often invoked by the colonial state in its interventionist agenda to pursue land centralisation in African areas. See, D. Anderson and D. Throup, 'Africans and Agricultural Production in Colonial Kenya: The Myth of the War as a Watershed', *The Journal of African History*, 26, 4, World War II and Africa (1985), 327–345; W. Beinart, 'The Politics of Colonial Conservation', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 15, 2 (1989), 143–162; J. A. Elliot, 'Soil Erosion and Conservation in Zimbabwe: Political Economy and Environment' (Unpublished PhD Thesis, Loughborough University of Technology, 1989); J. A. Tropp, *Natures of Colonial Change: Environmental Relations in the Making of the Transkei* (Athens, 2006); D. Anderson and R. Grove, *Conservation in Africa: People, Politics and Practice* (Cambridge, 1987).

The global agricultural recession that intruded agricultural economies in colonial Africa during the 1930s and drew the attention of the state was a result of overproduction that had created a glut.¹⁸⁹ New areas had been opened for agricultural expansion spurred by a rise in global agricultural commodity prices during the 1920s. The cash crop boom witnessed much intensive exploitation of grasslands and marginal areas that culminated in soil erosion and land degradation in many countries.¹⁹⁰ In 1931, the International Economic Conference of the League of Nations pointed out that low agricultural prices in comparison with production expenditure were a result of overproduction stimulated by improved technical methods and the cultivation of new areas.¹⁹¹ In the USA, the agricultural crisis hit the tobacco sector so severely that prices fell dramatically between 1928 and 1931 precipitating an acute crisis in most tobacco-producing states and resulting in conditions of poverty, homelessness and unemployment.¹⁹²

When the Great Depression arrived in Southern Rhodesia; it found a tobacco sector that was already struggling – facing overproduction, insufficient markets and a concomitant dramatic fall in prices. While tobacco exports had contributed 46.4 per cent and 42.7 per cent of all agricultural exports in 1927 and 1928 respectively, the figure had dropped precipitously to 17.1 per cent and 17.4 per cent in 1929 and 1930 respectively ruining most of the commercial farmers, who were forced to close shop.¹⁹³ The disaster of the 1928 and 1929 crop claimed the scalp of three quarters of the total producers and saw production falling sharply to 5,500,000 lbs in 1930 from a record high

¹⁸⁹ The global dynamics in agricultural production in the late 1920s reflected an acute drop in profit margins because of falling commodity prices, exacerbated by the Great Depression of 1929 to 1930. Prices for agricultural commodities had been maintained in the post-World War I years until the spring of 1921 but had begun to drop in 1922 by a margin of approximately 30 per cent. See *The Report on the Economic Position of the Agricultural Industry in Southern Rhodesia*, 1934. The report discusses the background to the global agricultural crisis of the 1930s and gives interesting perspectives.

¹⁹⁰ See, D. Worster, 'The Dirty Thirties: A Study in Agricultural Capitalism', *Great Plains Quarterly*, 6, 2 (Spring 1986), 107–116; A. Magnan, *When Wheat was King: The Rise and Fall of the Canada-UK Grain Trade* (Vancouver, 2016), 45.

¹⁹¹ *The Report on the Economic Position of the Agricultural Industry in Southern Rhodesia*, 1934.

¹⁹² A. J. Badger, *Prosperity Road: The New Deal, Tobacco and North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, 1980), 21; P. Benson, *Tobacco Capitalism: Growers, Migrant Workers and the Changing Face of a Global Industry* (Princeton, 2012), 77.

¹⁹³ Machingaidze, 'The Development of Settler Capitalist Agriculture', 183.

of 24,943,044 lbs during the 1927/1928 season.¹⁹⁴ One tobacco grower in the Umvukwesi area Mr H. J. Quinton tragically portrayed this gloomy scenario, noting wistfully that ‘in 1928, you couldn’t sell tobacco, in 1929, you couldn’t sell tobacco, and in 1930, you couldn’t sell tobacco’.¹⁹⁵ The depression obliterated all the progress that had been made in the sector during the previous ten years and many farmers abandoned tobacco and joined the ranks of the penniless unemployed.¹⁹⁶ The dissolution of the Customs Union between Southern Rhodesia and South Africa in 1930 further restricted the market for Rhodesian tobacco and exacerbated the crisis within the tobacco economy.¹⁹⁷

The crisis within the agricultural economy compelled the state to begin to take an active role on an unprecedented level (mirroring developments in North America and Europe) in white settler agriculture from 1930.¹⁹⁸ Chief among these interventions was the creation of commodity control boards to regulate the production and marketing of maize, cotton, beef, and dairy products – as the state stopped its reliance on unregulated activities of private farmers.¹⁹⁹ In 1934, the

¹⁹⁴ Clements and Harben, *Leaf of Gold*, 114.

¹⁹⁵ NAZ, ORAL/QU2, Interview with H. J. Quinton, May 1977–May 1978. Also see Hodder-Williams, *White Farmers in Rhodesia*, 130.

¹⁹⁶ Clements and Harben, *Leaf of Gold*, 115.

¹⁹⁷ During the 1928 season, South Africa experienced its own surplus of tobacco production by 19 million lbs prompting the South African planters to pass a resolution demanding control of production and marketing of tobacco, and they urged the government to restrict imports from Southern Rhodesia. The Customs Union had afforded Southern Rhodesian tobacco duty free access to the South African market and disposed of 7 million lbs of tobacco annually. Thus, its collapse further compounded the marketing woes during a financial depression.

¹⁹⁸ See, D. J. Murray, *The Governmental System in Southern Rhodesia* (Oxford, 1970), 83. Also, globally, state intervention particularly through marketing boards was fashionable during the depression years to stabilise prices and salvage farmers from inevitable economic ruin. The main purpose for the control schemes were restriction of production for the purposes of balancing supply with the needs of the market and to ensure orderly marketing. In Canada, after the disastrous collapse of wheat prices in 1929 which extended into 1931, the state had to assume control of the Central Selling Agency until 1935. See, Magnan, *When Wheat was King*, 50. In France, the tobacco industry was so regulated by the state that no one was allowed to grow, import or manufacture tobacco without official authorisation and cultivation of tobacco was only permitted in areas where the soils were suitable.

¹⁹⁹ See, M. Rukuni, ‘The Evolution of Agricultural Policy, 1890–1990’, in M. Rukuni and C. K. Eicher (eds.), *Zimbabwe’s Agricultural Revolution* (Harare, 1993), 23.

state, wary of the precarity of the agricultural industry instituted a Commission of Enquiry into the Economic Position of the Agricultural Industry in Southern Rhodesia under the Chairmanship of Mr Max Danziger, then Minister of Finance to review the farming position of the colony in general and suggest measures which could be taken to enable farming to be conducted more profitably.

The position of the growing side of the tobacco industry was described as ‘parlous and insolvent’ and the prospects of meeting a successful tobacco farmer as strenuous as those of finding ‘a top hat in a nudist camp’.²⁰⁰ Most of the farmers correctly blamed the tobacco crisis on the speculative spirit that had been rampant in Southern Rhodesian agriculture where during the boom years a deluge of speculative farmers joined the industry, produced a glut, and abandoned it leaving the bona fide farmers to face the stormy years of depression.²⁰¹ The farmers contended that the land settlement policies of the Responsible Government under the Rhodesian Party, which had come into power in 1923, were much to blame for the speculative spirit destroying Rhodesian farming.²⁰² The inefficient farmer had come to try his luck on every agricultural enterprise, rolling fortune’s dice on every crop and making farming a mere game of luck.

The speculative tendencies rampant in white settler agriculture ruined more than the economy – they ruined the environment. In the tobacco farms monocultural over-cropping and soil erosion resulted in localised land degradation. Consequently, there were calls for the government to discourage settlement on virgin land.²⁰³ This was thought necessary because most of the tobacco speculators would abandon the land during times of low prices after a few years cropping.²⁰⁴ The Southern Rhodesian tobacco farmer’s carefree attitude to

²⁰⁰ NAZ, S1246/5/30 (C), Evidence of farmers on the farming Enquiry, Evidence given by Daniel Edward, 19 December 1933.

²⁰¹ See, NAZ, S1246/530(E), Statements forwarded by those unable to give evidence to the farming enquiry, Memorandum by E. C. Holmes, 14 June 1934; NAZ, S1246/530(E), Statements forwarded by those unable to give evidence to the farming enquiry, Memorandum by H. B. Cummings, 16 June 1934.

²⁰² NAZ, S1246/530(E), Statements forwarded by those unable to give evidence to the farming enquiry, Memorandum handed by Mr. H. Kneiser of Sinoa, 9 January 1934.

²⁰³ NAZ, S1246/5/30 (C), Evidence of farmers on the farming enquiry, Evidence of Albert William Vincent Crawley (Macheke farmer).

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

land and the environment was similar to that of his American counterpart who was described as a 'thrifless parasite who did no permanent work, destroyed firewood and took no thought of tomorrow'.²⁰⁵ The itinerant monocropping of tobacco was one of the major problems in Southern Rhodesia. In Hartley district for instance, not more than 10 per cent of the tobacco farmers on the land obtained a living from it, with most of the land on the farms developed with barns and houses but now deserted, yet six years before such land had been occupied.²⁰⁶ Both the long-term farmers and speculative farmers were single cropping tobacco and growing very little (if any) maize, and when they grew maize it was largely for their own domestic consumption.²⁰⁷ These single-crop farmers were a liability to the farming industry as monoculture compounded the erosivity of the soil.²⁰⁸

The report of the *Commission of Enquiry into the Economic Position of Agriculture in Southern Rhodesia* declared that Southern Rhodesian forests had long been abused by tobacco farmers with the result that the colony was now confronted with falling timber supplies. The report observed that the colony of Southern Rhodesia was eating voraciously into its forestry capital and exhorted tobacco farmers to protect indigenous timber by less wasteful felling, fire protection, systematic re-forestation and the employment of heat efficient furnaces.²⁰⁹ The report also referred to the problem of soil erosion as a national question that if ignored would turn the country into a desert and exhorted farmers to adopt contour ridges.²¹⁰ The report acknowledged the slow pace of tobacco research and the need for a more proactive government sponsored programme.²¹¹

²⁰⁵ Tilley, *The Bright Tobacco Industry*, 103.

²⁰⁶ NAZ, S1246/5/30(C), Evidence of farmers on the farming enquiry, Evidence of Arnold Pearson, 21 December 1933.

²⁰⁷ NAZ, S1246/5/30(C), Evidence of farmers on the farming enquiry, Evidence of Daniel Thomas De Kock, Tobacco grower, Inyazura, 19 December 1933.

²⁰⁸ NAZ, S1246/5/30(C), Evidence of farmers on the farming enquiry, Evidence of Mr Riley Bindura farmer, 20 December 1933.

²⁰⁹ The Report on the Economic Position of the Agricultural Industry in Southern Rhodesia, 1934.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ *The Report on the Economic Position of the Agricultural Industry in Southern Rhodesia*, 1934. The first tobacco research station had been opened in 1924, the Hillside experimental station in Salisbury. The station focused much attention on tobacco rotations, green manuring, use of fertilisers, variety trials and methods of planting and cropping. However, because of the government

Tobacco Culture and the Environment in Southern Rhodesia, 1930–1945

The Danziger report had established that speculative production and gambling lay at the core of the tobacco crisis that lingered from 1928. Much of the environmental problems within the tobacco farms were a result of the cultural practices in tobacco production (mentioned before) from the nursery to the curing barn that involved veld burning, stumping and clearing of virgin lands. Tobacco farmers required wood for curing tobacco, and constructing tobacco barns, as well as large tracts of virgin bushes to clear every year to put up new crops.²¹² Virgin lands were touted in official discourse as the most suitable areas for an ideal tobacco crop. Stumping virgin lands was an important routine and practice in the tobacco-production cycle and oft took much labour on the farm. Trees were felled with hand saws and axes, thick brush had to be cleared, logs were sliced for wood fuel, appropriate timber reserved for material for building tobacco barns while the rest of the brush was consumed with fire.²¹³ Stumping virgin land for tobacco production was so significant that as a cost in the mid-1920s it averaged between £1 to £1.15s an acre.²¹⁴ With vast areas of forested lands, cheap land prices, large farms measuring over 3,000 hectares the practice of stumping virgin land every year came with very low costs to the farmer.²¹⁵

The cultural practice of stumping virgin lands every year for a new crop became more prevalent because of the eel worm and nematode problem.²¹⁶ The nematodes problem was so pervasive that in 1920,

fiscal stringency during the Depression the station was closed in 1931. In 1935, because of the recommendations of the Danziger report the Tobacco Research Act was passed to propel research in tobacco. This research infrastructure, however, remained basic throughout much of the 1930s and 1940s because of poor funding and thus it failed to become a significant pillar of conservation in the tobacco farms until the late 1940s.

²¹² Hodder-Williams, *White Farmers in Rhodesia*, 53. Also for a comprehensive reading on tobacco cultural practices in Southern Rhodesia see, *A Handbook of Tobacco Culture for Planters in Southern Rhodesia* (Department of Agriculture, Southern Rhodesia, 1913) 20–25.

²¹³ Rubert, *Most Promising Weed*, 68. ²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

²¹⁵ W. E. Haviland, 'Tobacco Farm Organisation, Costs and Land-Use in Southern Rhodesia', *South African Journal of Economics*, 21 (1953), 368.

²¹⁶ Nematodes is a tobacco parasitic disease caused by eel worms. The disease attacks roots and makes them develop cysts. It is usually caused by continuous planting of tobacco in the same land and by general poor soil management. The disease

entomologist R. W. Jack had advised growers to totally abandon lands that showed heavy infestations.²¹⁷ In 1935, the problem was described by the Tobacco Research Board (TRB) as ‘the gravest danger to the tobacco-growing industry in Southern Rhodesia’.²¹⁸ In 1938, a survey by the branch of entomology revealed that nematodes were ubiquitous on all soils except newly opened virgin lands.²¹⁹ As a result of this heavy infestation, large areas of land were opened up and cleared every year in the tobacco districts such that there were hundreds of abandoned farms and derelict lands, a situation which compounded the soil erosion problem of the colony.²²⁰ Ironically, this peripatetic practice in settler tobacco cultivation was happening at a time when colonial officials were overtly critical and abhorrent over an almost similar practice of ‘shifting cultivation’ amongst African farmers which they reckoned ‘primitive’ and wasteful to the environment.²²¹ In 1934, Southern Rhodesian forester Edward Kelly pointed out that shifting cultivation was damaging to the environment, inhibited regeneration of the veld and depleted soils.²²² Consequently, the state in Southern Rhodesia had begun to enforce strict conservation principles and land centralisation in the African reserves from as early as 1925 to combat the wasteful practices of ‘kaffir farming’ that exhausted soils and destroyed grazing lands.²²³ Indeed, much scholarship on colonial conservation historiography has affirmed that while the state zealously enforced conservation on Africans during the 1930s, its hand on settler farmers was very lax and noncommittal.²²⁴ In colonial

depletes the soil to a point where cultivation of any other crop on affected lands might be costly without rehabilitation of the soil fertility.

²¹⁷ W. R. Jack ‘Tobacco Pests of Southern Rhodesia’, *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal*, 17, 1 (1920), 28–33.

²¹⁸ Report of the Tobacco Research Board, 1936.

²¹⁹ J. C. Collins, ‘Tobacco Eelworm’, *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal*, 35, 4 (April 1938), 264–278.

²²⁰ I. Phimister, ‘Discourse and the Discipline of Historical Context: Conservationism and Ideas about Development in Southern Rhodesia, 1930–1950’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 12, 2 (1986), 263–275.

²²¹ J. McGregor, ‘Woodland Resources: Ecology, Policy and Ideology: An Historical Case Study of Woodlands Use in Shurugwi Communal Area, Zimbabwe’ (Unpublished PhD Thesis, Loughborough University of Technology, 1991), 39.

²²² *Ibid.*, 40.

²²³ ‘Native Agriculture in Southern Rhodesia’, *Rhodesian Agricultural Journal*, 27, 5 (May 1930), 466.

²²⁴ This is a point that Ian Phimister vigorously pontificates noting that the patterns of state intervention in conservation in Southern Rhodesia were more

Malawi for instance, while the state had imposed a harsh conservation campaign in the Native Trust Lands, its policy on environmental degradation taking place in the tobacco estate sector in the Shire highlands was one of 'benign neglect'.²²⁵

To make matters worse for the tobacco farmlands before the introduction of nematicides during the 1940s the only practicable and effective method of control for eelworm was exploitation of virgin lands. Although preliminary research from the 1930s pointed towards the use of grass in rotation with tobacco as a palliative, the scenario for most tobacco farmers was either virgin soil or abandoning production altogether since they did not have other crops or animal husbandry lines to integrate such rotations.²²⁶ Although the ideal was for every tobacco farmer to be a mixed farmer, this did not work out well in practice during these days. The best tobacco was grown on the sand veld, and maize on the heavier soils. On the sand veld maize production was seldom a paying enterprise and when utilised as a rotation with tobacco it would deplete the soil so severely as to make the lands useless for future tobacco crops.²²⁷ Thus, as a result, thousands of

assiduously pursued on African agriculture first and then settler farmers later. See, Phimister, 'Discipline of Historical Context', 263–275. Also see, E. Kramer, 'The Early Years: Extension Services in Peasant Agriculture in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1925–1929', *Zambezia*, XXIV, ii (1997), 159–179; McGregor, 'Conservation Control and Ecological Change', 257–279. This strand of thought though is at variance with discourses popularized by William Beinart and Richard Grove that locate origins of the application of conservation thinking within white settler agricultural ecosystem at the Cape. See, Richard Grove *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1860* (Cambridge, 1996); R. Grove, 'Scottish Missionaries, Evangelical Discourses and the Origins of Conservation Thinking in Southern Africa, 1820–1900', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 15, 2 (1989), 163–184.

²²⁵ Wapulumuka, *Conservation Song*, 118.

²²⁶ Tobacco experimental trials at the Hillside station in Salisbury had revealed the fundamental value of incorporating grasses and legumes in tobacco rotations over a five-year rotation cycle. The first plantings had tobacco on virgin land and produced 366 lbs per acre yield. The second year the land was planted to Sudan grass for hay and reverted to tobacco in the third year resulting in an increased yield per acre of 418 lbs. The fourth-year green manuring with velvet beans was introduced before tobacco was planted in the fifth season and this resulted in increased yields to 545 lbs per acre. See E. A. K. Harvey, 'Tobacco Experimental Station, Salisbury; Report of General Crop Experiments', *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal*, 28, 9 (September 1931), 919–926.

²²⁷ African Explosives and Industries Limited, 'Rhodes Grass for the Rhodesian Tobacco Grower', *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal*, 32, 10 (October 1935), 700.

acres of land had to be abandoned after one-year cropping for want of a suitable rotation.

The crisis of overproduction and speculation also created other pest and disease problems in the tobacco farms particularly from the late 1920s as production spread into new areas. In 1932, *Leaf curl* the first insect borne disease in Southern Rhodesia was reported by entomologist H. H. Storey who identified the vector as white flies.²²⁸ The culture of nomadic farming prevalent in tobacco farms meant that tobacco stalks and untidy fields were left unattended perpetually and as breeding points for vectors to spread. These unhygienic practices prompted the state to pass the Tobacco Pest Suppression Act in 1933 that made it mandatory for tobacco farmers to destroy their residual tobacco stalks by 1 August of each year.²²⁹ However, unhygienic cultural practices continued leading to more disease outbreaks. In 1938, *Rosette* disease caused by aphids occurred in Umvukwesi.²³⁰ The diseases caused ‘bushy top’ – the dwarfing and stunting of growth of tobacco plants.²³¹ The result was severe losses to most tobacco farmers. From 1937 to 1944 there was a huge outbreak of *Alternaria* (or brown spot disease, a fungal infection affecting the lower and mature tobacco leaves) in most tobacco-producing areas of Southern Rhodesia.²³² From 1937 to 1940 heavy losses had followed in all parts of the colony amounting to 3.5 million lbs of tobacco.²³³ As a result of the prevalence of these tobacco diseases field-spraying experiments were conducted on a larger scale and the amount of fungicides and arsenic pesticides such as lead arsenate used annually for seed bed and field spraying steadily increased from around 1939.²³⁴ Arsenic contaminates the environment, poisons the soil, and causes sickness and death to animals and humans.²³⁵ The chemical contamination of the environment as a result

²²⁸ H. H. Storey, ‘Leaf Curl of Tobacco in Southern Rhodesia’, *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal*, 29, 3 (March 1932), 186–192.

²²⁹ Clements and Harben, *Leaf of Gold*, 118.

²³⁰ G. M. Wickens, ‘A New and Serious Disease of Tobacco in Southern Rhodesia’, *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal*, 35, 3 (March 1938), 181–182.

²³¹ *Ibid.* ²³² NAZ, S1828/PP/20A, Tobacco *Alternaria*, 1937–1944.

²³³ *Ibid.*

²³⁴ NAZ, S25101/1, TRB Tobacco pest spraying scheme, J. C. F. Hopkins, ‘Field Spraying and the Control of Leaf Diseases on Tobacco: Review Report’.

²³⁵ See, R. Carson, *Silent Spring*, (London, 1963), 15; H. S. Satterlee, ‘The Problems of Arsenic in American Cigarette Tobacco’, *New England Journal of Medicine*, 254, (1956), 1149–1154. For a further discussion on tobacco production and chemical contamination of the environment see E. Doro,

of tobacco field sprays is more comprehensively covered later in Chapter 3 of this book. However, various veterinary reports and reports from the branch of chemistry between 1932 and 1938 record livestock and wildlife mortality due to arsenic poisoning.²³⁶

The other environmental problem that arose with tobacco farming during the 1930s was soil erosion. Soil conservation had also become a concern for the colonial state in Southern Rhodesia during the 1930s.²³⁷ There is consensus that before 1930 soil erosion and conservation were not key priorities of the colonial state, and ‘rapacious settler farming’ dominated the agricultural landscape.²³⁸ However, the institutionalisation of these ideas is subject to much critical scholarly debate. Beinart locates the South African Drought Investigation Committee Report of 1921 as a key influence in shaping the development of soil-conservation ideas not only in Southern Rhodesia, but in the whole of the subregion.²³⁹ Ian Phimister, on the other hand, is

‘An Environmental History of Tobacco Pests and Diseases in Southern Rhodesia, 1893–1940’; E. Doro and S. Swart, ‘A Silenced Spring? Exploring Africa’s “Rachel Carson Moment”: A Socio-environmental History of the Pesticides in Tobacco Production in Southern Rhodesia, 1945–80’, *International Review of Environmental History*, 5, 2 (2019), 5–39.

²³⁶ See, Annual Report, Branch of Chemistry 1932, 1934; ‘Poisoning by Arsenic: Warning to Stock Owners’, *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal*, 31,1, (January 1934), 11–13; A. D Husband and J. F. Duguid, ‘The Toxicity to Grazing Animals of Grass Sprayed with a Solution of Sodium Arsenite’, *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal*, 31, 1 (January 1934), 25–39.

²³⁷ Maravanyika’s Ph.D. thesis offers a rigorous discussion on the evolution of the soil erosion and conservation ideology in Southern Rhodesia’s agrarian sector from the 1930s and links it with developments in other parts of the world particularly the United States. The Dust Bowl Storms had ruined much of the agricultural lands in the 1930s and prompted several state-aided conservation programmes during the Depression era. While Maravanyika provides a whole survey of the problem on the settler farms generally, this chapter focuses on the tobacco farm environments where a unique set of production circumstances prevailed such as the huge profit margins in tobacco farming which stultified a speculative element unseen in all the other crops, and the practice of stumping virgin lands every year for wood fuel and new lands to grow tobacco.

²³⁸ Elliot, ‘Soil Erosion and Conservation in Zimbabwe’, 54; Beinart, ‘The Politics of Colonial Conservation’, 143–162.

²³⁹ Beinart, ‘The Politics of Colonial Conservation’, 143–162. Beinart argues that in the late 1930s significant progress in construction of contour ridges had taken place such that a quarter of all settler land was contour ridged, a figure he reckons higher than had been achieved in South Africa during the same time. The length of land terraces constructed annually rose from 76 miles in 1929 to 1,742 miles in 1938. At the same time the area of land protected by terraces increased from 2,280 acres annually to 43,550 acres over the same period.

highly critical of Beinart's modest appreciation of state conservation efforts in settler farming in the 1930s and posits that significant progress only happened from 1938 when the pressures of the depression had ceded.²⁴⁰ While Beinart points to the significant progress in conservation works in Southern Rhodesia, there were several production factors that militated against the effectiveness of this practice and its institutionalisation on the tobacco farms. First, tobacco was cultivated in the flimsy sandy loamy granitic soils that were very susceptible to sheet erosion. Even with contour ridges, the traditional vertical ridge ploughing for tobacco would always catalyse the erosion problem. The straight and vertical tobacco rows which were generally adopted by farmers departed from the curve of the contour with the ridge not having the necessary ability to hold and pass on water. This resulted in a concentration of silt laden run-off into the contour ridges, choking and breaking them. The conservation officer from the Irrigation Department, noted of this practice in 1945:

Recently I visited a farm where this was causing a fantastic amount of erosion, though the land was contour ridged. To have flattened the slope of the tobacco rows to a safe gradient would have been impossible, owing to the irregularity of the ground caused by old erosion and in despair I remarked to the farmer, 'if you don't get rid of your ridging ploughs, you will get rid of your farm. . .'²⁴¹

Most tobacco lands were badly ploughed down by ridging ploughs which left behind deep furrows that made most fields vulnerable to an extended amount of gully erosion.²⁴² But, even then the practice of building conservation works was generally uncommon amongst

Cumulatively, by 1938, 4,355 miles of terracing had been constructed – protecting 114,190 acres of land. See Report of the Natural Resources Commission of Enquiry, 1938.

²⁴⁰ Phimister, 'Discourse and the Discipline of Historical Context', 263–275.

²⁴¹ NAZ, S1828/PP60, Conservation officer to irrigation department, ridging ploughs for erosion, 19 March 1945.

²⁴² In the USA, beginning from the early 1930s the department of Soil Conservation Service had replaced straight contour rows with contoured crop rows in what was termed 'crazy quilt farming' or 'contour farming'. This slowed water run-off and decreased both the severity of washing away topsoil and gullying. Contour farming was later popularised in Southern Rhodesia from 1953 by a technical bulletin on erosion called 'Conservation Farming for the Tobacco Grower' that advised against constructing ridges parallel to the contours.

tobacco farmers and this was pointed out by various agricultural conservation officials and reports from the late 1930s. Between 1931 and 1937, the colonial state had erected a rudimentary national soil erosion bureaucracy that included district conservation boards, conservation advisory councils and a soil erosion propaganda subcommittee.

Members of the Soil Erosion Propaganda Subcommittee pointed out in 1937 that the soil erosion problem was heavily linked to the rapacious farming practices of the settler tobacco growers. In their quest to maximise profits, they had adopted continuous and irresponsible cropping which was impoverishing the soil. They warned:

In Mashonaland the areas of rich virgin lands which have been opened up since the days of the early settlers have been mined and the soil impoverished by continuous cropping and erosion until many of the lands have been abandoned as useless ... in other cases farmers have continued to flog the dead horse by trying to extract a living from an impoverished soil owing to the reduced yield, the acreage is extended in order to obtain a larger crop, and this process continues whether prices are low or high.²⁴³

In Nyasaland, white settler tobacco farmers were equally irresponsible and reckless with the control of erosion in their farms. When Southern Rhodesian irrigation engineer W. E. Haviland toured Nyasaland in 1930, he was baffled to see many tobacco farms in a state of disrepair as the estate owners did not use any methods to control erosion.²⁴⁴ The lack of a robust thrust in state conservation intervention within the tobacco farming sector in both Southern Rhodesia and Nyasaland stands in contrast with the USA during the same time where the state had to assuage the financial turbulence and the crisis of overproduction with a coterie of measures that integrated production control, price support and soil conservation.²⁴⁵ In 1938, the report of the Natural

²⁴³ D. Ayles and R. H. Roberts, 'Soil Erosion Technical Bulletin', *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal*, (February 1937), 64.

²⁴⁴ Wapulumuka, *Conservation songs*, 123.

²⁴⁵ The New Deal through the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) introduced tobacco production controls through the Voluntary Domestic Allotment Plan that established a quota system in which farmers could only cultivate tobacco on a portion of their lands, plant soil-building crops and practice soil conservation in exchange for guaranteed prices. The soil conservation programmes under the New Deal created new and improved agricultural landscapes in the tobacco farming areas in the USA. See Goodman, *Tobacco in History*, 197. A. J. Badger, *Prosperity Road: The New Deal, Tobacco, and North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, 1980); Milov, *The Cigarette*, 62.

Resources Commission of Enquiry confirmed the importance of tobacco to the colony as an export crop whose receipts for the 1936/1937 season amounted close to £1 million, creating employment for many people and making possible the utilisation of large areas of the sand veld unsuitable for maize farming.²⁴⁶ However, the report deplored the restrained pace of conservation amongst tobacco growers, amongst whom anti-erosion works had made the least progress because of the prevalence of eel worm infestations in old tobacco lands:

A certain amount of indifference as to what happens in the meantime might result in the case of a careless farmer or in one attempting to plant an excessive area, but a doubt as to the effects of contour ridging on the eelworm menace possibly accounts for a hesitation on the part of many to spend on a project which might after all be found to be disadvantageous in another direction.²⁴⁷

The report further highlighted that through bad management over-cutting of indigenous timber had taken place in the tobacco farms to such an extent that with the rate of cutting that existed native timber supplies would be exhausted and there would be a break in the tobacco industry for probably fifteen to twenty years.²⁴⁸ This situation had reached a climax in the Umvukwesi area where 30 per cent of the tobacco growers had been compelled to acquire new farms abandoning old ones as a result of depletion of timber resources.²⁴⁹ In fact, in 1930, an editorial in the *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal* pointed out the imperative for re-forestation within the district to make good the wastage caused by the cutting of timber by tobacco farmers as there was a distinctive danger of ‘a timber famine’ if remedial measures were not taken.²⁵⁰ A worried conservator of forests buttressed the need for

²⁴⁶ NAZ, S2496/1080/1/5, Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Conservation of the Colony’s Natural Resources, 1939. The Natural Resources Commission was set up in 1938 under the Chairmanship of Water Court Judge Robert McIlwaine. The objective of the committee was to investigate how the resources of the colony were being destroyed by soil erosion, destruction of trees, grasses, other vegetation in the course of mining and improper and undesirable methods of farming and land use. The Commission gathered evidence across a wide spectrum of settler farmers and other entrepreneurs on the land, and compiled a report.

²⁴⁷ Ibid. ²⁴⁸ Ibid. ²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ ‘The Umvukwesi Farmers and Tobacco Growers Association’, *Rhodesian Agricultural Journal*, 27, 8 (1930), 793.

tobacco growers to adopt afforestation programmes with exotic *Eucalyptus* trees:

We are continuously getting at the tobacco farmer to look upon the product of fuel as a necessary part of ordinary tobacco operations. After all, if he has not got the fuel, he cannot cure his tobacco, and if he has not got the sufficient indigenous timber to give him his annual requirements, then afforestation with fast growing trees is needed. The situation for the tobacco grower is much simpler . . . because it is a fact that the tobacco-growing areas can grow trees.²⁵¹

By 1942, the state was facing an acute food deficit resulting from shortages of fertilisers and labour caused by overproduction of tobacco. Food production committees had to be set up to allocate resources towards food production.²⁵² In 1942, the Natural Resources Board (NRB)²⁵³ instituted an enquiry into the conditions of agriculture in the colony that were creating food shortages.²⁵⁴ The speculative tendency amongst tobacco growers was pointed out as contributing a great deal to land degradation. Captain A. D. Collins of Tsungwesi Farm in Waterfalls revealed this predatory brand of rapacious farming where land was treated with high-handed and peremptory carelessness, exploiting it for private aggrandisement by mercenary tobacco farmers:

At Inyazura you will see an outstanding example of what I call ‘the get rich quick tobacco grower’. You will see it from the Claires Estate to the Inyazura river. Every one of these farmers have acquired more land and the same thing is happening there. There is no doubt whatsoever that it has to be stopped otherwise this country has only another five or six years of tobacco life in front of it . . . the whole of the Claire Estates has been taken up now.²⁵⁵

In the Odzi district a similar pattern was also developing where tobacco farmers were fast encroaching into bigger areas with the majority of

²⁵¹ Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Conservation of the Colony’s Natural Resources.

²⁵² See, Phimister, ‘Discourse and the Discipline of Historical Context’, 263–275. Also, NAZ, S482/20/42, Food Production Committees, FPC Meeting, 23 March 1942.

²⁵³ The Natural Resources Board (NRB) was set up in 1941 by the Natural Resources Act to exercise general supervision over the colony’s natural resources.

²⁵⁴ The Enquiry was known as the Natural Resources Board Farming Enquiry.

²⁵⁵ NAZ, S987/1, Oral evidence; Farming Enquiry, Evidence by Captain A. D. Collins, 25 July 1942.

them ‘merely exploiting the land’, and if they had two or three good years of growing tobacco, they had no further use for that land.²⁵⁶ In the Umvukwesi district, mass production of tobacco and the wastage of land had created farmers in the area who denuded the land, timber and then just left the ground to be washed out.²⁵⁷ The appalling situation for the tobacco farmlands was summarised by one farmer Jacobus Petrus De Kock:

Speaking not from the tobacco market point of view, but from the tobacco soil point of view . . . I am afraid tobacco growers are mining their land. I have been in the district for 23 years and I have seen what happened here. I would prevent any tobacco grower if I had the power from planting unless the soil was contour ridged . . . We grow tobacco mostly on the ridges, the crop is reaped, and the tobacco stalks are pulled out, but land is left unploughed for years afterwards and that encourages erosion. I have preached that to tobacco growers for many years, but it does not carry much weight with them. They just want to make as much money as possible with no eye to the future.²⁵⁸

State Intervention in Tobacco Production and Control, 1935–1945

The problem of tobacco overproduction had reared its ugly head again in 1934 when production totalled 26,792,092 lbs – provoking *déjà vu* in farmers, reminding them of the disastrous record crop of 1928.²⁵⁹ Their fears of another slump drove the state’s imperative for production control during the 1935–1936 season. The RTA observed that the main cause of the depression enveloping the industry and amounting almost to actual insolvency was the fact that growers were producing more tobacco than the market could handle.²⁶⁰ The Association maintained that the aim was to place the industry on a sound economic

²⁵⁶ NAZ, S987/1, Oral evidence; Farming Enquiry, Evidence by J. T. Mungle, 24 July 1942.

²⁵⁷ NAZ, S987/1, Oral evidence; Farming Enquiry, Evidence of Mr George Grey, 26 June 1942.

²⁵⁸ NAZ, S987/1, Oral evidence; Farming Enquiry, Evidence by Jacobus Petrus De Kock, 16 July 1942.

²⁵⁹ Clements and Harben, *Leaf of Gold*, 115.

²⁶⁰ NAZ, S1194/1217, Tobacco: Restriction of output, 1934–1935, Consideration for the production and disposal of the 1934/1935 tobacco crop, Department of the Prime Minister, 19 May 1934.

basis, eliminate the fear of general insolvency on the one hand and the gambling element on the other hand.²⁶¹

The only person who would wish or could afford to take the gamble of producing more than his share would be the speculator, the chancer or the man of big money, and what might be a big gamble to him would be a very definite harm to the bona fide settled tobacco grower, and it is the economic stability of this type of producer which it is our very special business to safeguard.²⁶²

The RTA considered it necessary to reconstruct the industry and proposed for legislation dealing with production control, which would entail holding from the market all increases of production by growers over their 1933/1934 crops. It also proposed the establishment of an Appeal's Board where hardships would clearly be sustained by individuals by taking as a measure their production during the 1933/1934 season.²⁶³ The Tobacco Quota Commission of Enquiry into applications from tobacco growers for increased production during the 1934/1935 season was appointed by the Ministry of Agriculture under the Chairmanship of Mr William Brown.²⁶⁴ The RTA placed before the committee principles to be adopted regarding the quota. The Quota Commission received applications from growers, allocated quotas to every grower and made recommendations to the Ministry of Agriculture of the viable national quota capable of meeting facilities and market requirements.²⁶⁵

The principle of production control that the state and the RTA were pushing through had been adopted in the USA to control overproduction and had been effective in allaying some of the production and marketing fears brought forth by the Great Depression. In 1930, Governor of the tobacco-growing state of North Carolina, Max Gardiner had launched a 'Live at Home' propaganda campaign to exhort tobacco and cotton farmers to diversify into food crops and utilise agricultural resources more efficiently through cash crop

²⁶¹ Ibid. ²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ NAZ, S1194/1217, Tobacco: Restriction of output, 1934–1935, RTA control of production, 1934/1935.

²⁶⁴ 'The Tobacco Quota Commission of Enquiry', *Rhodesian Agricultural Journal*, 32, 2 (1935), 78.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

acreage reductions.²⁶⁶ In 1932, the New Deal looked at the problems of tobacco cultivators such as overproduction and marketing so that farmers would not suffer from price depressions that accompanied the Great Depression. The Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) was passed on 12 May 1933 and set up the requisite institutions and machinery to provide farmers and tobacco growers a route out of their economic misery.²⁶⁷ There were production controls through the Voluntary Domestic Allotment Plan that established a quota system in which farmers could only cultivate tobacco on a portion of their lands.²⁶⁸ In return for acreage and output reductions tobacco growers were offered guaranteed prices, as well as benefit support which resulted in improved prices.²⁶⁹ Those who did not sign up and produced more than their allowance had their crops taxed at between 25 to 33.3 per cent, and a sum of \$28 million was offered growers for reduced acreages.²⁷⁰

The acreages taken out of tobacco had to be left idle or cultivated with food crops.²⁷¹ The AAA became unconstitutional in 1936, but its key points were simply resurrected a month later under the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act which re-established the quota system under the regime of conservation.²⁷² The Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act added to existing soil-conservation legislation incentives for farmers to plant soil-building crops and take soil-depleting crops out of production.²⁷³ Tobacco was one such crop and production control was to be maintained through soil conservation. The New Deal encouraged better farming methods and attention to soil conservation. Tobacco cultivated lands were protected by strip cropping across with bands of grass, Lespedeza (a resilient legume that makes protein-rich hay), sorghum and other

²⁶⁶ The 'Live at Home' Campaign was necessitated by North Carolina's heavy dependence on tobacco which was grown on more than a third of the state's 280,000 farms. There was thus a wasteful dependence on tobacco characterised by a relative absence of livestock and poultry in the state farms. The state had to rely heavily on other states for food and spent \$250 million each year outside the state on foodstuffs. See Badger, *Prosperity Road*, 26.

²⁶⁷ Algeo, 'The Rise of Tobacco', 46–60.

²⁶⁸ Goodman, *Tobacco in History*, 197. ²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁰ NAZ, S1827/1245/3, Tobacco production control: 1935, RTA circular to growers, February 1935: Regulation of production.

²⁷¹ Badger, *Prosperity Road*, 74. ²⁷² Goodman, *Tobacco in History*, 197.

²⁷³ Badger, *Prosperity Road*, 123.

dense crops planted along the contours.²⁷⁴ As a result of these measures, Lespedeza – an insignificant crop in 1929 – had the second largest acreage in the state by 1941.²⁷⁵ Known as ‘poor man’s Lucerne’ (now rebranded ‘prosperity Lucerne’) it was able to thrive on the worst soils and offered forage to livestock. The number of milk cows, beef cattle, sows and poultry increased significantly, and corn acreages expanded by 2 per cent over the decade.²⁷⁶ Thus, the soil-conservation programmes under the New Deal and the AAA created new agricultural landscapes in which were planted the seeds of a reconfigured political geography that ‘helped to tie the farming communities more closely to the Federal government’.²⁷⁷

Therefore, production control in the USA under the AAA and subsidiary legislations had the net effect of reshaping the agricultural countryside and etching more indelibly the state’s imprint in shaping soil and land conservation programmes that were part of these policy interventions. To this extent, production control was an effective state tool used for conservation during much of the 1930s. Production control also led to significant improvement of farm incomes as in 1933, the average price paid to tobacco growers stood at 15.3 cents up one third from the previous year’s price and double the 1931 figures.²⁷⁸ In North Carolina, the 1933 crop brought in \$112 million, compared to just over \$56 million in 1932.²⁷⁹ Intensive use of land was also greatly stimulated as a result of acreage allotments as the ideal of the small farm was upheld; the average tobacco farm size in North Carolina for instance fell from 5.8 acres to 4 acres between 1930 and 1950.²⁸⁰

However, unlike in the USA, this extended top-down conservation paradigm tying state-sponsored tobacco-production control and conservation programmes was weaker in Southern Rhodesia. The controls failed to institute ecological changes to the agricultural landscape between 1935 and 1945 as farm sizes remained large, acreages

²⁷⁴ Extract of H. H. Bennet (Director USA Soil Erosion Service), ‘The Relation of Grass Cover to Soil Erosion Control’, *Journal of Agronomy*, (March 1935), cited in *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal*, 32, 6 (1935), 385–394.

²⁷⁵ Badger, *Prosperity Road*, 207. ²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ N. Maher, ‘Crazy Quilt Farming on Round Lands: The Great Plains: The Soil Conservation Scheme and the Politics of Landscape’, *Western Historical Quarterly*, 31, 3 (2000), 319–339.

²⁷⁸ Badger, *Prosperity Road*, 65. ²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁰ G. P. Green, ‘The Political Economy of Flue-cured Tobacco Production’, *Rural Sociology*, 52, (1987), 221–241.

expanded, production increased sharply putting more pressure on the land and natural resources. The RTA had warned growers in 1935 that if their crop exceeded 80 per cent of the 1933/1934 crop, it would be far in excess of market requirements for the Union and the UK.²⁸¹ In spite of this warning, the 1934/1935 crop was in excess leaving a disposable surplus and forcing the state to pass the Tobacco Reserve Pool Act which took off 20 per cent of every growers' crop from the Union and British markets and placed it in a reserve pool to be disposed of elsewhere at cheaper prices.²⁸² On their part, the growers were virulently opposed to government control of production through legislative means. A Mr J. B. Parham of Romsley Estates pointed out that the agitation for control was being peddled by men who either did not grow tobacco at all or who did not produce the right article.²⁸³ In his view, 'the expert tobacco grower does not ask for assistance, all he wants is to be left alone'. He added that there would not be any surplus of the leaf which the market wanted as the farmers could always sell a 'good thing'.²⁸⁴ Farmers felt that it was fundamentally uneconomic to socialise production by legislation. They argued that the proposed legislation would not have any effect on the fluctuations of trade, and for a young country like Rhodesia it was important to take advantage of the improving global conditions.²⁸⁵

Despite this, in 1936, the Tobacco Market Stabilisation Act established the Tobacco Marketing Board to register growers, organise the compulsory sale of all tobacco through licensed auction floors and buyers, and to advise the government on the requisite production quotas.²⁸⁶ The Act stipulated that should a grower grow an amount of tobacco in excess of what was allowed on his grower's certificate, the proceeds of the sale would be confiscated. The feeling was that gamblers and nomadic tobacco growers who had no strong attachment to Southern Rhodesia had been responsible for much of the reckless speculation, overproduction and land degradation, a point

²⁸¹ NAZ, S1827/1245/3, RTA circular to growers, February 1935; RTA warning to growers September 1935.

²⁸² Clements and Harben, *Leaf of Gold*, 115.

²⁸³ NAZ, S1194/1217, Tobacco: Restrictions of output legislation, 1934–1935, Papers submitted for perusal by Mr Vernall to the Department of Agriculture, 8 September 1934.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.* ²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁶ Murray, *The Governmental Systems in Southern Rhodesia*, 85.

that was stressed poignantly by Mr K. Killef in his letter to the Prime-minister Godfrey Huggins in 1936:

If he (the grower) has had enough faith in Rhodesia to buy some of its land, he is obviously of greater value than a man who grows from lease to lease, taking what he can of the soil and using up the timber reserves. Such a man may be of value to himself, but his value to the industry or colony is very questionable and is not to be compared to the man who has planted his roots in this colony, who farms his land well and replaces his timber because the farm is his own.²⁸⁷

The RTA on its part encouraged 'progressive farmers' by reminding them that the quota system allowed them the opportunity to try a rotation of crops, and rest some of their tobacco lands for two years.²⁸⁸ The encouragement was indeed relevant to conservation on the tobacco farms as crop rotations would go a long way in bringing to a halt the further exploitation of land and natural resources by limiting the amount of land under tobacco and restricting the encroachment of tobacco farms further into the land and forestry resources. Unfortunately, the war boom in tobacco prices beginning in 1939 spurred another wave of large-scale production so much that production control was drowned by the incentive of huge prices payable for tobacco.

By 1939, when World War II broke out, tobacco prices improved significantly to 10.11d. per lb as British buyers began looking at Southern Rhodesia as a reliable source of tobacco supplies.²⁸⁹ Vast acres of unutilised tobacco virgin soils and abandoned tobacco barns from the boom of the 1920s created a conducive environment for new growers to enter the industry.²⁹⁰ In 1940, a record crop of 34,500,000 lbs was produced in the colony with prices rising by 3d.²⁹¹ These somewhat improved conditions spurred the entry of many growers into the industry which created fertiliser shortages.²⁹² During the 1940/1941 season total sales of fertiliser amounted to 18,383 tonnes, of which 50 per cent were tobacco fertilisers.²⁹³ The fertiliser crisis had grown

²⁸⁷ NAZ, S482/114/39, Tobacco, 1936–1939, K. Killef to Prime Minister, 27 January 1936.

²⁸⁸ NAZ, S482/114/39, Tobacco, 1936–1939, Production quotas: 1936.

²⁸⁹ Clements and Harben, *Leaf of Gold*, 128. ²⁹⁰ Ibid. ²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² NAZ, S1215/1710/1, Fertilisers General, Chief Chemist to Controller of Supplies, 26 March 1941.

²⁹³ Ibid.

so severely that the state was forced to intervene in 1940 through the proclamation of the Fertiliser Prices Order which controlled the fertiliser market, fixed prices and made allocations to growers on the basis of special permits obtainable from the Department of Agriculture.²⁹⁴ Despite this, most tobacco farmers ordered more fertilisers than they could use creating several cases of hoarding and speculation.²⁹⁵

By 1942, the state was also facing an acute food deficit because of fertiliser and labour shortages caused by overproduction of tobacco. Food production committees were set up to allocate resources towards food production.²⁹⁶ In its interim report for the period ending May 1942, the Food Production Committee noted the need for severe restrictions on artificial fertiliser use to be imposed on the tobacco crop during the 1942/1943 season.²⁹⁷ The Secretary for Agriculture recommended that no tobacco grower should be supplied with more than 75 per cent or 80 per cent of fertiliser sold to that grower during 1941/1942.²⁹⁸ This was to ensure that enough fertiliser could be available for food production as, in his words, ‘tobacco farmers may not eat all the visible cake in one season’.²⁹⁹

The growing of tobacco on crown land³⁰⁰ was prohibited in 1942, and all crown land leaseholders were compelled to produce food crops and livestock only to meet the growing demand for food during the war years.³⁰¹ The state also came in with several initiatives to curtail production of any tobacco grown at the expense of food production. Government Notice Number 207 of 1941 made agriculture a state-controlled industry and legislated that no person who had not grown

²⁹⁴ NAZ, S1215/1710, Fertilisers General, Chief Chemist to Controller of Supplies, 26 March 1941.

²⁹⁵ NAZ, S1215/1710, Fertilisers General, Cartwright to Secretary Department of Agriculture, 22 June 1940. Cartwright complained that there was one farmer who had bought 30 tonnes of fertiliser for 300 acres of tobacco but only grew 200 acres.

²⁹⁶ NAZ, S482/20/42, Food Production Committees, FPC Meeting, 23 March 1942.

²⁹⁷ NAZ, S955/22, Food production local committees, FPC interim Report for period ending 5 May 1942.

²⁹⁸ NAZ, S482/32/42, Control of production, tobacco, 1942–1946, Secretary Department of Agriculture to the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, 26 March 1942.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁰ Crown lands were areas with unalienated land which could be leased to white settlers for farming. They were a product of the Land Apportionment Act of 1930.

³⁰¹ NAZ, S955/22, Food Production local committees, Crownlands: Use of unoccupied crown land for food production, 20 April 1942.

flue-cured tobacco during the 1939/1940 season could grow it after June 1943 without the consent of the Ministry of lands.³⁰² The legislation also stipulated that old growers were not supposed to increase their 1939/1940 acreages without seeking similar consent from the Tobacco Advisory Committee. During the latter part of 1941, three members of the Council of the RTA with the Secretary of the Department of Lands had acted as a consultative committee to which the control of industrial manpower would refer advice on the entry of new growers into the tobacco industry.³⁰³ From 1942 to 1946, a number of measures were put in place to curtail production that included ensuring that increased production was only permissible if it did not conflict with the colony's need to recruit fighters or the production of food crops, and prohibiting the opening up of new farming areas for tobacco production without the consent of the consultative committee.³⁰⁴

Despite these measures, a huge tide of tobacco farmers joined the industry during the war prompting a Mr Geoffrey Syfret of Inyazura district to complain to the Minister of Agriculture and Lands in May 1942 that he was alarmed by the number of 'Dutchmen' [Afrikaners] from South Africa who were entering the district and obtaining permits to grow tobacco.³⁰⁵ War production of flue-cured Virginia tobacco soared significantly from 35,000,000 lbs in 1939 to 47,500,000 lbs in 1944.³⁰⁶ Turkish tobacco production also grew significantly between 1943 and 1945. In 1943, there were 273 growers producing 250,000 lbs, in 1945, the number increased to 1000 registered growers with a production of 5,000,000 lbs.³⁰⁷ Subsequently, the ecological pattern in the tobacco landscape remained largely unaltered. A vast number of speculators and gamblers were still on

³⁰² NAZ, S482/32/42, Control of production; tobacco, 1942–1946, Parliamentary Secretary to Secretary Department of Agriculture: Control of entry into the agricultural industry to new settlers and particularly persons desiring to enter flue-cured tobacco production, 5 March 1942.

³⁰³ NAZ, S482/32/42, Control of production; tobacco, 1942–1946, Parliamentary Secretary to Secretary to the Prime Minister, 23 March 1942.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ NAZ, S482/32/42, Control of tobacco production 1942–1946, Geoffrey Syfret to Minister of Lands and Agriculture, 8 May 1942.

³⁰⁶ Rubert, *A Most Promising Weed*, 7.

³⁰⁷ NAZ, S482/108/39, Turkish Tobacco 1944–1948, Minutes of the special meeting of the Turkish Tobacco Cooperative Company of Southern Rhodesia, 4 October 1945.

the land eliciting the view from one observer that, ‘there are too many tobacco growers who boast openly that it is their intention to make a killing while prices are high and retire to Great Britain after the war when prices declined’.³⁰⁸ In a letter to a farming and mining magazine in 1943, a Marandellas farmer complained about the exploitation of thousands of acres of heavily timbered veld by many tobacco farmers:

I have the impression perhaps erroneously that because the tobacco industry has been prosperous for some years, the Natural Resources Board may not have examined the destruction of the country’s natural resources by the tobacco industry as closely as by the general farmer. Yet the damage is appalling and a tour of some tobacco-producing areas will show large areas of played out sand veld, timber less, lacking any form of soil conservation and simply abandoned because the owner has moved to new ground.³⁰⁹

Conclusion

Thus, beyond the triumphalist and whiggish narratives of agrarian pioneer entrepreneurship, ingenuity and industriousness, the early history of tobacco farming in Southern Rhodesia was a story of exploitation of both the environment and human beings. This sinister episode in tobacco production has often been omitted from traditional ‘virgin land’ narratives that sought to write triumphal tobacco histories glorifying settler pioneer tobacco farmers. Indeed, later historians transcended this narrow historiography and included the role of the state in the pioneering endeavours of these early tobacco farmers and the social conditions of labour in the tobacco farms, but they still missed out on the environment. These historians also did not integrate their histories within a broader global perspective on tobacco to illuminate how local tobacco-production systems are in themselves not unique but part of a global historical heritage that makes the crop carry socio-environmental historical baggage. The role of the crop in history – in defining agrarian frontiers, creating new farming settlements, precipitating dramatic environmental change, producing new social hierarchies and rigidifying class and racial relations – must be understood as one of its enduring legacies. Through human history, post the great transition from hunter-gathering/transhumant

³⁰⁸ Letter to the Editor by Huntley Wilkinson (Marandellas farmer), *Vuka*, December 1943.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

pastoralism, crops have possessed their own kind of agency that defined how humans constructed environmental and socio-political landscapes. Indeed, tobacco created Southern Rhodesia and in the words of Clements and Harben, 'it would be a foolish man who planned the future of Southern Rhodesia and who felt above all he could leave the European tobacco farmer'.³¹⁰ But it would be more foolish still to tell only the glorious story of the early pioneer Rhodesian tobacco industry and leave out the narratives of the plunder and despoliation of environment and the brutalisation of human bodies. It is all a part of one story.

³¹⁰ Clements and Harben, *Leaf of Gold*, 188.