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The Growth of Cape Town Commerce and the role of John Fairbairn's *Advertiser* (1835-1859)

Archives Year Book for South African History, 57

Pretoria: Government Printer

1994

154 pp. (fm p. 85 to p. 239 of *Archives Year Book*)

ISBN 0 7970 3089 1

In its original form, it was approved as a thesis for the degree Master of Arts by the University of Cape Town, 1989. The author has read extensively and the bibliography includes an impressive list of especially secondary sources, virtually all of which have been used intelligently in setting theories and counter-theories in context. The work is largely analytical, based on previously expounded interpretations placed in juxtaposition to the relative views of John Fairbairn as published in his *South African Commercial Advertiser* editorials, both in an economic and political sense.

The author provides a chronological outline of Cape Town's commercial expansion

between 1835 and 1859. The body of the work begins with a clear and concise outline of economic and commercial developments at the Cape prior to 1835. The influence of the emancipation of the slaves and the period of economic expansion which followed the slave compensation in 1837-1838, was reflected in increased specie circulation and imports. The elite merchant class, with connections in Britain and now with substantial liquid wealth, contributed in a large measure to market expansion, commodity production and entrepreneurial enterprise. Locally-based commerce benefitted from increased commercialization and property ownership which, according to Meltzer, stimulated spending and speculation which would impact on the economy by way of the formation of local companies and a broader-based bourgeoisie.

The 1840s saw a slump in the economy, despite Fairbairn's continued optimism, and a spurt of company formations later in the decade. Wood took over from wine as the colony's main export and the port at Port Elizabeth surpassed that at Cape Town in terms of volumes of trade. The two centres vied for supremacy, but despite the increase in importance of the wool industry during the 1850s, the social and political power of the Eastern Province's ruling class remained subservient to that of the Western Province. The burgeoning company creation in both centres are outlined, with apparent impressive statistics, but placed in perspective by way of clear and intelligent comparisons with similar trends in Britain and, of particular relevance, Australia. The impact of overseas capital, or lack thereof, is also examined in the light of merchant credit, the Usury Law and the lack of limited liability protection.

The political and social developments of the 1830s and 1840s culminated in the acquisition of representative government in 1854. The influence of the commercial middle classes, allied with the farming sector, on legislation promoting commercial interests reached its peak in this period. Fairbairn characterised the liberalism of his time in his struggle for civil rights and rule of law, but similarly maintained a belief in the inherent rights of the 'civilized' European Christian, which included a veiled paternalistic racism towards the indigenous people of Africa. The economic implication of this attitude is somewhat limited and impacts primarily on the interests of the farming community in terms of the Master and Servant Law and Xhosa immigration.

While the *Advertiser* and its editor undoubtedly played a major role in the political thinking of the time, there is a danger of overstating their influence in the economic sense. Fairbairn's sympathies with the burgeoning commercial middle class and subsequent alignment with the farming sector are, correctly, portrayed rather as reflection or mirror of economic trends. As a supporter of progressive capitalism, Fairbairn's effect on Cape Town's commerce, although subtle, is nevertheless worth documenting.

In addition to the four main chapters of the narrative, the work consists of a brief abstract, a lengthy introduction, a comprehensive conclusion, an impressive bibliography and an adequate index.

The Growth of Cape Town Commerce and the role of John Fairbairn's Advertiser (1835-1859) is an interesting, well-argued analysis of the growth of commerce at the Cape during the post-emancipation — pre-responsible government period and is a welcome addition to this section of South Africa's socio-economic history.

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