

L.S. MEINTJES: HIS IMPACT ON SOUTH AFRICAN SPORT HISTORY

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A lack of self-confidence characterised the nineteenth century colonial-born white sportsmen in South Africa. This trait was noted in young men born in the colonies elsewhere too - making the emergence of a sporting hero a most significant event in the course of a nation's history.¹ The alleged shortage of stamina in these men from far-removed settlements undoubtedly played a role in the development of sport as an integral part of a country's cultural history. One is led to speculation about whether a shabby self-esteem could in fact have inspired a promising young sportsman to heights previously unknown in his home milieu. One enterprising youngster who challenged the widespread notion that his place of birth counted against him in the sporting arena was L S Meintjes.

Cyclist Laurens Smitz Meintjes refused to have a chip on his shoulder because he was South African and defied the British attitude of superiority. His tenacity earned him a world championship - the first ever to grace South African annals. The significance of this courageous young hero's victory in the face of a sporting tradition much more sophisticated than his own, is on a par with great political events. To the Boer community, sharing the sporting triumphs of an internationally acclaimed champion was an experience of nationalism.

The actual magnitude of Meintjes' achievements should be investigated in the context of patriotism and morale as applicable to the South African Boers towards the end of the nineteenth century. This was a period of uncertainty and dissension in South Africa, especially as regards the inhabitants' claims to a mother country. Many folk preferred to be considered British born. It had been noticed by people from England that colonials did not care to recognise their place of birth. They often said that they were English born instead of colonial born. Sir Abe Bailey (Bart., KCMG), a

foremost businessman, sportsman and politician, responded to Meintjes' achievements abroad by saying that he felt proud because he was colonial born himself.²

A big surprise awaited Meintjes upon the mooring of the *Grantully*³ in Table Bay harbour, Cape Town, on Saturday, 24 November 1893. A very large crowd of Capetonian sportsman welcomed their hero upon his return from his world beating tour. He was escorted downtown on bicycles, and a fine gala dinner was organised at Poole's Hotel. Meintjes was introduced with the following address:

To Laurens S. Meintjes, Esq.

South Africa's Champion Bicyclist, on his return to South Africa, after a record-breaking tour in England and the United States.

Dear Sir and Fellow-Sportsman,

We, the undersigned, forming a Reception Committee for the occasion, representing combined sporting bodies of the Western Province, beg to extend you a hearty welcome on your return from England and America, and to warmly congratulate you on the remarkable successes you have achieved there as a cyclist, setting an example for the breaking of numerous world's records, bringing honour and fame to yourself and reflecting credit upon the country of your birth. We extend congratulations to the Wanderers' Club, of Johannesburg, to which you are attached, and trust that you may succeed in topping farther [sic] records as a Colonist and South African. Wishing you long life and prosperity,

We are, faithfully yours,

*(Signatures)*⁴

Meintjes realised that his achievement could boost sports participation in South Africa. In his reply he revealed his wish that intercolonial as well as international cycling meetings be promoted in South Africa. He declared himself available to be of assistance where needed⁵ and as such displayed a positive attitude to participation by other young locals. Meintjes quickly became an expert at public relations for sport in South Africa. This he proved a year later by

writing to the American Cycling Association regarding the possibility of holding the 1896 World Championships in South Africa.

When Meintjes moved to Port Elizabeth early in 1894 to establish the headquarters of the Whitworth Bicycle Company,⁷ his reputation gained him much goodwill. The population was looking up to this young man and was keen to hear his opinions on sporting matters. He was welcomed with a splendid reception and the fact that he ‘doted on his pet theme of cycling tracks and inter-colonial meetings’⁸ indicates that he was actively campaigning for local support. His attempts to make people realise that South Africa, too, albeit isolated, could leave its mark on international sport, boosted morale tremendously.

Meintjes’ achievements abroad put South African cycling on its feet as every important centre subscribed to new tracks and cycling grounds.⁹ *The South African Review* of 8 June 1894 noted that ‘the number of tracks to be layed [sic] in the principal towns in South Africa is an indication of a rapid progress this pastime has made here’. Sport in South Africa in general experienced a boom after 1892 and Meintjes’ successes only augmented it.¹⁰ A popular cycling journal at the time, *The Hub* (12 June 1897), declared:

Johannesburg is considered to be the greatest cycling city, as far as actual number of cyclists goes, a short time ago, it was considered second to Paris, but it has made such strides, that it must now be considered before Paris.¹¹

Upon his arrival in Johannesburg Meintjes was met by yet another reception. All the prominent sportsmen from the Rand were present and the following song was composed especially for him:

As he cycles along,
With pedals strong,
With an independent air,
You should see the Yankees stare.
When he raced at the World’s Fair,
The ladies sigh and then you cry,
And Meintjes winked the other eye.
The man who broke the record at Chicago.¹²

References to ‘Yankees’ and ‘Chicago’ clearly indicate that the Boers had started thinking in global terms. They had come to realise that they did not have to take a back seat on the international scene and basked in their hero’s glory. At the reception the captain of the Wanderers’ Amateur Cycling Club gave a summary of Meintjes’ achievements and concluded by saying that he trusted that Meintjes would be the first of many athletes to be sent abroad.¹³

He also stated that Meintjes was an important factor in the attempts to unite South Africa¹⁴ as his achievements abroad made the politicians realise how sport and politics could be linked. Jan Hofmeyr, MLA and chairman of the reception dinner at Cape Town struck the following keynotes at the reception:

Sport has almost invariably been the pioneer of diplomacy in cementing the relationships and good understanding between Great Britain and her Colonies...the sporting associations of this country, which for the most part represent combinations of sportsmen throughout the various States, have set an example which politicians are all too slow to follow in the aim for a United South Africa.¹⁵

The ring of politics is clear in these statements. Boer nationalism was beginning to be associated with sport. The significance of these words implies a wholly new approach to the history of sport in South Africa. It would from then on be an integrated struggle for both political unity and sporting recognition. Meintjes had become involved in a matter that was far more complicated than he could imagine.

At this time in the history of South Africa the country was still partitioned by internal borders as well as divided by opposing sentiments. On the one hand were the so-called Boer Republics, the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, and on the other hand were the British Cape Colony and Natal. When Meintjes mentioned at the reception given in his honour in Cape Town on his first day back in South Africa, that he would like to promote intercolonial as well as international cycling meetings in the country, he displayed his utter naivete.¹⁶

His intentions may seem insignificant, but the political circumstances of the country at that particular time made the realisation of such a dream very unlikely. Since 1893 Cecil John Rhodes and Dr Leander Starr Jameson, both Prime Ministers of the Cape Colony, had been preoccupied with the problem of establishing a British South African Federation. This left the Cape Colony and Natal on the one side, and the two Boer Republics on the other. The efforts of Rhodes and Jameson (his principal lieutenant in the Matabele War in Rhodesia) in bringing about a federation of all South Africa under the British crown eventually led to an unsuccessful revolt.¹⁷

It was merely a matter of time before the accumulation of grievances and suspicions between the Transvaal Republic and the British Cape Colony exploded into the South African War (Anglo-Boer War). Meintjes' efforts to promote intercolonial meetings thus had to wait until after the war.

In the light of the above it is clear why an overwhelming reception awaited Meintjes. He was not only the country's first major sport hero, but he put up the first performance of note by an Afrikaner against first-class foreign athletes (in this case cyclists). He had 'shown the young South Africans that it was possible for something good to come out of this country'.¹⁸ Who was this athlete and what did he achieve abroad to receive such a reception?

Meintjes, The Cyclist

Laurens Smitz Meintjes was born on 12 July 1868 in the vicinity of Aberdeen, a small village in the Cape province. His father was Jacobus Laurens Smitz Meintjes and his mother was Maria Elizabeth Rabie.¹⁹ He began his school career in Aberdeen but continued it in Queenstown after losing both his parents at the age of fourteen. It was also during this period that cycling became fashionable in South Africa.²⁰

When Meintjes settled in Johannesburg in 1890,²¹ cycling was as popular in Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) as in South Africa.²¹ All the big cities like Cape Town, Kimberly, Port Elizabeth,

Grahamstown, Durban and Johannesburg vied with one another to build the best cycle track in the country.²²

Meintjes' occupation was to supervise the lighting system of several gold mines. He made use of a bicycle to travel between the mines and soon developed into a formidable cyclist.²³ One day in 1891 W H Carlin at the 'Bicycle Exchange' persuaded Meintjes to participate in cycle racing.²⁴ His first attempt was at the July meet of the Wanderers' Amateur Cycling Club in 1891. Meintjes won three events: the one mile safety challenge cup, the three mile safety handicap, and the half mile scratch race. In the mile event he bettered the South African record with a time of 2: 42.6.²⁵ At the meeting Meintjes was the first person to ride with pneumatic tyres in South Africa.²⁶

At the time of his selection to participate in the 'World's Fair' at Chicago, he had thirty-four races behind him, of which he had won nineteen, had finished second in seven, and had come third in one.²⁷ Although Meintjes had a good reputation and was considered 'the most popular athlete of this day',²⁸ it was debatable whether he was the country's best rider. The issue could not be settled by a national championship because these were not held in cycling until September 1893, when Meintjes was already in Europe.²⁹ Division of opinion over Meintjes' merits led to sharp criticism in the press when it became known that he was selected by his club to travel to Great Britain and the United States of America. There was a heated dispute over who was the best rider in South Africa and whether Meintjes would represent his club or his country. This led to a special meeting of the Wanderers' Amateur Cycling Club on 31 March 1893, after which it was announced that Meintjes would in fact represent his club and not his country.³⁰ However, this did not prevent the overseas media from regarding Meintjes as representative of his country.

Meintjes in England

Meintjes left South Africa on 12 April 1893 on board the *S.S.Scot*.³¹ He took part in two meetings in Belgium³² before he settled in Herne Hill, England, to prepare himself for the championships to come.³³ Meintjes' first major achievement was a

new safety record of 4:37.0 for the two mile event on 15 June 1893 on the Herne Hill wooden track.³⁴ Meintjes also bettered Sanger's record for the one mile by three seconds. This took place on 29 June, also at Herne Hill, and Meintjes' time was 2:09.6.³⁵ According to a letter from I Levine to his brother in Johannesburg, Meintjes broke several records in England.

The Hull Racing Cyclists' Club sports came off yesterday (July 6th) and were a brilliant success. At a rough calculation I should say there were about 25,000 [sic] people present, and I supplied the prizes. Meintjes rode and was the attraction, as he has only just broken all records from 11 to 25 miles, including the one hour record.³⁶

The *Cyclist Year Book* of 1894 confirms Levine's report and states that on Tuesday 4 July, Meintjes broke all of the above-mentioned records during the 25 mile event on the Herne Hill track. His time for the total distance was 1:01:51.4. He simultaneously improved the one hour event by reaching a distance of 24 miles and 380 yards. Some sources, however, add four yards to the distance.³⁷ This record was improved shortly thereafter by Ernest Osborne.³⁸

Meintjes' good performances continued when he won the Brixton Bicycling Club fifty-guinea Silver Challenge Cup in a downpour on 8 July. He finished the ten mile event in a time of 24:14.4 and bettered each respective record from seven to ten miles. The previous record stood at 24:34.0.³⁹

Of course, Meintjes did not win all the events in which he participated, but it is obvious that he held his own against the best the cycling world had to offer at the time. According to one of his rivals, Zimmerman, Meintjes was at his best over the longer distances and he persuaded Meintjes to concentrate on these events.⁴⁰ In America he was proved right when Meintjes travelled to Chicago,⁴¹ the venue for the World's Fair commemorating the fourth centenary of Columbus' discovery of America.⁴²

Meintjes in America

The World's Fair Cycle Meet in Chicago took place from 7 to 12 August 1893.⁴³ Meintjes excelled only on the third and last day when he won the sixty-two mile international championship. In this race a fast pace was set by Meintjes, William Hyslop and eight Americans. Osmond led for the first mile before Zimmerman took over from mile two to five. Linneman, who led the sixth lap, set a new record for the six miles. As soon as this was announced, Meintjes took the lead and set a new record for the eight miles with a time of 20:27.0. After the sixteenth mile only Meintjes, Ulbrecht and Baker remained. Baker lasted until the 37th lap. From then on the championship lay between South Africa and America. In the 42nd lap Ulbrecht showed signs of exhaustion, with the result that Meintjes was left on his own to claim the championship title. Meintjes did 45 miles and 1530 yards in two hours and his time of 2:11:06 for the 50 mile was a new American record. Meintjes also set a new record for the 60 mile event.⁴⁴ His winning time was 2:46:12.6.⁴⁵

Meintjes' feat included a new world record for the 50 mile event but confusion exists as to how many American records Meintjes actually did break. *The Sunday Herald*⁴⁶ of Chicago differs from the *Springfield Morning Union* by stating that Meintjes won the American records only from 26 to 60 miles. Another newspaper claims the records broken by Meintjes were from the 25th mile to the 62nd:

Charles Brown of the Elizabeth Athletic Club Cyclers returned from Chicago yesterday. He says that Meintjes's performance in the 100 kilmometre race was the most remarkable he has ever seen; that Meintjes tired out all his pace-makers, rode easily, and did not seem fatigued at the finish, though he had broken all the records above twenty-five miles. He considers Meintjes the best long-distance rider he has ever seen.⁴⁷

The next important meeting was the Springfield Bicycle Club's International Championships in Massachusetts. On their way there, Meintjes and Zimmerman travelled together to participate in three more meetings. On 24 August the Zigzag Bicycle Club of Indianapolis presented a rather important meeting - from the financial

viewpoint, as a solid cup valued at \$1000 was to be presented to the winner of the one mile international race.⁴⁸ The South African reached one of the highlights of his career when he beat Zimmerman in his best event, namely the half-mile open.⁴⁹ Meintjes and Zimmerman also took part in the Hartford Wheel Club's international tournament at Charter Oak Park as well as the diamond cycling tournament of the Columbus (Ohio) Cycling Club.

The Springfield meeting took place at Hampden Park on 13 and 14 September. Meintjes did not excel on the first day as all the events covered shorter distances. His only success came in the one hour race on Thursday, 14 September.

Meintjes showed great endurance in his extraordinary run of 26 miles and 50 yards in 59 minutes and 52 seconds, which broke the record of 25 miles and 690 yards for an hour. It was a very fair speed for an express train. He had some 13 pacers, who kept him at his work every minute of the run. The South African is the only foreign rider who has cut any figure at all in America this season and while in the short distances he has met faster men, he has made good his supremacy in long distance riding.⁵⁰

Meintjes not only beat the hour's record, but also broke all the world records from the six mile to the 26 mile.⁵¹ The previous record for the one hour race belonged to J W Stocks, set on 31 August on the Herne Hill track in England.⁵² As in Chicago, Meintjes showed great endurance and finished seemingly fresh. His average speed over the total distance was 2:18.2 per mile.⁵³

On 16 September Meintjes finally raced at the Metropolitan Association of Cycling Clubs meeting at Waverley, near Newark, N.J.⁵⁴ but no record exists of his participation. He missed competing in the Fall Tournament and International Race Meet of the Maryland Bicycle Club on 21 September due to a train delay.⁵⁵ Nevertheless he could depart from America with satisfaction. He returned by ship to South Africa via England, where he was royally treated by the Whitworth Cycle Machine Company⁵⁶ and the Palmer Tyre Company.⁵⁷

Back Home

Once back in South Africa after the celebrations died down, Meintjes played an active role in cycling administration. He was chosen as chairman of a meeting at the Wanderers' Club in Johannesburg on 7 December 1894. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss the forming of a 'Racing Cyclists' Association',⁵⁸ apart from the South African Cyclists' Union founded in 1892.⁵⁹ It was felt that the Union did not look after the interests of the cyclists and monetary- and power-wise they also failed.⁶⁰

Meintjes explained to those present that cycling in South Africa was in a tangle and that the proposed association would see to the interests of the cyclists, even with the blessing of the union, if they played their cards right. Matters on the agenda were:

- The obtaining of amateur status by a professional rider once he quitted the professional ranks,
- Special hotel tariffs for members of the envisaged association,
- The establishment of a prize bank system where money would be deposited into a bank-account and would accumulate, instead of riders receiving useless prizes like 'pots, dressing cases, and odd things',
- Each centre to have its own council with one representative from each on a special national council.

The meeting voted for the proposals as put forward by Meintjes. The general feeling was that such a body could look after the interests of the cyclists and could further cycle races.⁶¹ All these efforts, however, were in vain as after the South African War, the cycling and track and field bodies amalgamated in 1904.⁶²

The Significance of Meintjes' Achievements

Laurens Smitz Meintjes was the first world champion and record holder Africa produced. Although Meintjes became an instant sport hero in South Africa, the impact of his achievements permeated various aspects of South African life.

At dinners given in his honour, Meintjes spoke of the ignorance which prevailed in England and America about South African affairs.⁶³ To a certain extent he had put an end to this '... he has for the first time indicated the right of South Africa to a conspicuous place in the world of sport.'⁶⁴

During the reception for Meintjes in Johannesburg, Sir Abe Bailey spoke of his wish that in future many other sportsmen would visit England. He specifically hoped they would send a cricket team to England as he believed such a team would do much better than people in England expected.⁶⁵ The possibility of a trip overseas to represent South Africa has always stimulated interest and raised performance levels. The success of Meintjes in England and the USA, in 1893, had much to do with subsequent decisions to send sporting teams to England.⁶⁶ Other sports that immediately benefited from the new sporting confidence, were cricket and track and field athletics.

The first cricket team visited 'home' in 1894 and displayed prowess by defeating the MCC team at Lords by eleven runs. The first track and field athletes travelled to Britain in 1895, and again in 1898.⁶⁷ In the SAAAA's first international venture four leading track and field athletes took part in the English championships in London. The brothers Philip J and Piet Blignaut, as well as H D Gradwell and P Hunter also took part in meetings in Wales and France.⁶⁸ Meintjes indirectly influenced the formation of the SAAAA. Due to his achievements abroad J Astley-Cooper invited 'South Africa' to participate in his Pan-Britannic Games. Although these failed to eventuate, the invitation resulted in the national track and field body being formed in 1894.⁶⁹

After the Anglo-Boer War (1899.1902), sport was seen as a cure for the cultural wounds left by the war⁷⁰ and more national sporting bodies were formed, including the 'General Olympic Committee' for South Africa in 1908.⁷¹

Meintjes, however, retired in 1894 after putting on a tremendous exhibition of riding at the Wanderers' Sports of that year. He blamed his fast-growing business, which was the marketing of Rudge-Whitworth bicycles, for the retirement.⁷² He thus never really succeeded in unifying South Africa by means of intercolonial and international sport competitions. This self-proclaimed task proved too

complex for him to bring to fruition, although it spurred on other sporting activity. Although he served as a catalyst at that particular moment in time, his early retirement in 1894 prevented him from becoming a really great South African sport hero in the long run.

NOTES

1. "It has so often been said that Colonial born youths and men lack stamina.' - *South African Review* (1 December 1893), p. 9.
2. *South African Review* (8 December 1893), p. 11.
3. It is possible that this ship's name was the *Grantally*.
4. *South African Review* (24 November 1893), p. 9.
5. *ibid.* (1 December 1893). p. 11.
6. *ibid.* (23 November 1893), p. 18.
7. *ibid.* (15 December 1893), p. 13.
8. *ibid.* (12 January 1894), p. 13.
9. G.A. Parker, *South African Sports* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, 1897), p. 5.
10. H.P. Swaffer, *South African Sport 1914* (Johannesburg: The Transvaal Leader, 1915). p. 81.
11. W. Jowett (camp.), *Centenary 100 years of organised South African cycle racing* (N.P.: South African Cycling Federation, [1981]). p. 18.
12. *South African Review*, (8 December 1893), p. 11.
13. *ibid.*
14. *The Star*, (25 November 1893) (in: D.V. Coghlan, The development of athletics in South Africa: 1814-1914 (Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Grahamstown: Rhodes University, 1986), p. 272.
15. *South African Review* (1 December 1893), p. 9.
16. *ibid.*, p. 11.
17. *Standard Encyclopedia of South Africa* VI (Cape Town: Nason, 1972), pp. 177-180.
18. *South African Review* (24 November 1893), p. 4.
19. Dutch Reformed Church. Certificate of Baptism. Cape Town: Archives of the Dutch Reformed Church, 10 May, 1976.
20. E. Rosenthal, 'Suid-Afrika se eerste wêreldkampioen.' *Die Huisgenoot*, 6 Augustus 1948, p. 21; *The Standard and Diggers' News*, (19 June 1893), p. 3.
21. A.A. Jonbert, in the *Dictionary of South African Biography*, IV (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1981). p. 356.

22. E.H. Little, 'When cycling took pride of place at S.A. sports meet. This country produced a world champion in Laurens Mentijes' [sic], *The Cape Argus*, (20 December 1947), p. 7.
23. *The Standard and Diggers' News*, (19 June 1893), p. 3.
24. *ibid.*
26. G.A. Parker, *op.cit.*, p. 134.
27. *The Standard and Diggers' News*, (19 June 1893), p. 3.
28. T.J. Botha, 'Cycling in South Africa (part 1); The pre-professional period: 1889-1910.' *Vigor*, 5(1), December 1951, p. 31.
29. G.A. Parker, *op.cit.*, p. 131.
30. *The Standard and Diggers' News* (1 April 1893). p. 6.
31. *The South African Review* (1 December 1893), p. 10.
32. *The Standard and Diggers' News* (19 June 1893), p. 3.
33. *South African Review* (1 December 1893). p. 10.
34. *The Times* (London) (16 June 1893). p. 11.
35. *The Standard and Diggers' News*, (3 July 1893), p. 5.
36. *ibid.* (2 August 1893). p. 4.
37. *The Springfield Daily Republican* (4 August 1893). p. 4; *The Standard and Diggers' News*, (1 August 1893), p. 4; *The Standard and Diggers' News*, (1 August 1893). p. 4.
38. *The Cyclist Year Book* (1894), p. 74.
39. *ibid.*, p. 30; *The Standard and Diggers' News*, (3 August 1893). p. 5.
40. *South African Review* (8 December 1893), p. 11.
41. *South African Review* (1 December 1893), p. 10.
42. E. Rosenthal, *op.cit.*, p. 21.
43. *The Chicago Tribune*, (6 August 1893), p. 7.
44. *ibid.* (13 August 1893), p. 7.
45. *Springfield Morning Union*, (14 August 1893), p. 3.
46. *The Sunday Herald, Chicago* (13 August 1893), p. 6.
47. *The New York Times*, (18 August 1893), p. 3.
48. *ibid.* (24 August 1893), p. 3.
49. *ibid.* (25 August 1893), p. 3.
50. *The Springfield Daily Republican*, (15 September 1893). pp. 4-5.
51. *Springfield Morning Union*, (15 September 1893), p. 1.
52. *The Springfield Daily Republican*, (15 September 1893), p. 5.
53. *Springfield Morning Union*, (15 September 1893), p. 6.
54. *The New York Times*, (13 September 1893), p. 2.
55. *ibid.* (21 September 1893), p. 2.
56. *South African Review*, (10 November 1893). p. 3.
57. *ibid.* 1 December 1893, p. 11.
58. *ibid.* p. 18.
59. *The South African Licensed Victuallers' Review*, (15 September 1893), p. 3.

60. *South African Review*, (23 February 1894), p. 7.
61. *ibid.* (7 December, 1894). p. 18.
62. G. le Roux (ed.), 90 *Golden years/goue jare* (Pretoria: SAAAU, 1984), p. 11.
63. *South African Review*, (15 December 1893), p. 13.
64. D.V. Coghlan, *The Development of athletics in South Africa : 1814-1914.* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Grahamstown: Rhodes University, 1986), p. 272.
65. *South African Review*, (8 December 1893), p. 11.
66. D.V. Coghlan, *op. cit.*, p. 271.
67. R.G.N. Sportondersoek. *Sportgeskiedskrywing en dokumentasie.* *Verslug nr. 15* (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1982), pp. 8-9, 141.
68. G. le Roux (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 10.
69. D.V. Coghlan, *op.cit.*, pp. 273-275,327,495.
70. R.W.J. Opperman and L. Laubscher, *Africa's first Olympians*, (Johannesburg: SANOC, 1987). p. 3.
71. South African Amateur Athletic and Cycling Association, Minutes of the meeting of the Sub-Committee for the Olympic Games, (23 December 1907), p. 2. For more details see F.J.G. van der Merwe, 'Formation of the South African National Olympic Association', presented to the thirteenth International HISPA Congress, at Olympia, Greece 22-28 May 1989.
72. *South African Review* (7 December 1894), p. 17.