



Marius Flemmer

MARIUS FLEMMER 1853 – 1928

ALETTA ALIDA HOPLEY 1856 – 1934



Aletta Alida Hopley

Marius is unique among the 'Danish' Flemmer children as he was the only one who was born in the Cape Colony who survived to adulthood. He had been 'carried' by his mother Betty through all the perils and hardships of the three-month voyage from Europe. When the family started on the jolting ox wagon trip from Port Elizabeth to Port Elizabeth it was February and his mother was nearly seven months pregnant. He was born in Cradock on the 8th of April 1853 and there must have been a real sense of relief and a new beginning when this healthy baby arrived.

There was a big baptismal celebration with the other Danish families and the baptism was delayed to allow his grandfather Christian Johannes von Abo to travel to Cradock. Marius was baptised at the Dutch Reformed Church in Cradock and we have details of his entry in the *doop* register:

No. 3180 8.4.1853 Marius
 Born 8.4.1853 Cradock
 Baptised 31.7.1853 Cradock

Parents: Christian August Flemmer
 Betty Camella (*sic*) Augusta von Aboo (*sic*)
 Witnesses: Töger von Abo
 Sophia Kjeldberg

The witnesses were Betty's brother and his wife Methea Sophia Kjeldberg who as we know had travelled out from Denmark with the family.

Little is known about Marius' early years in Cradock. He would have been very much the baby of the family. He had six older brothers and sisters; the oldest (Christian Ludvig) was 14 years older than him. No doubt his sisters Camilla (13) and Charlotte (9) made a huge fuss over the new arrival.

The other unique thing about Marius is that he was the only child to have tertiary education and to obtain a professional qualification – something I will come to shortly. By all accounts education in Cradock could be a hit and miss affair at this time, and it was through the efforts of his family that Marius benefited from the schooling that was available.

As a young boy he first went to the Cradock Public School – it was going through a particularly difficult time. Basically there was not enough money to pay enough good teachers. The Cradock district was growing fast and with that came more children needing schooling. Nothing much changes - the Colonial Governor appointed a School Commission in 1842, to little effect. By 1855 we find a frustrated teacher writing to the Commissioners:

There are many positions in which a man, though living, may be enveloped in all darkness and obscurity of the grave. I am so immured and pray you will not delay my exhumation !

This desperate sounding plea and many others fell on deaf ears and the problems with government schooling continued for many years. By 1877 the government grant to the public school was only £100 a year!

Marius' father died when he was only 15 and his older brothers and sisters took on the responsibility of providing a living for him and for his mother. We know that his older brother Christian Ludvig with his new bride Anna moved in with Marius and his mother. Christian who was 29 by then would have been able to provide the guidance and good counsel the young boy needed. Marius was sent to a private school in Cradock for part of his education and it was of a sufficiently high standard to allow him to enter the legal profession.

He served his articles first with Scanlen and Gifillan in Cradock. This was something of a home from home as Edward Gilfillan was married to Marius' sister Camilla and Thomas Scanlen (later Sir Thomas Scanlen K.C.M.G.) had himself completed his articles with Gilfillan. The firm had a close connection with Fairbridge and Arderne in Cape Town and it was here that Marius along with another young Cradock man, Alfred Metcalfe completed his articles. Marius was the first of the Flemmers to venture out of the Karoo and in 1875 aged 21, he was admitted as an attorney and notary.

He left Cape Town and moved to the fledgling Karoo community of Steynsburg where one of his other brothers, Hans Christian had settled a few years before. Cradock already had a plethora of attorneys, whereas there

were no legal practitioners at all in Steynsburg – an ideal opportunity for a keen young man.

As the only legal man in town it is no surprise to see him aged 22, appointed the following year as debt collector and attorney for the newly formed Town Board of Steynsburg, a position he held on and off for many years.

In his book *Gentlemen of the Law*, George Randell sums up the position of the legal man in the small *dorps* of the time:

The attorney then and in those days was the key man in the community which he served. He was truly the guide, philosopher and friend of his people. That is not to say that the lawyer today [1984] acts differently towards those who turn to him for guidance and help; but there was a time, shall we say a couple of decades before and after the turn of the century, when his place in society was vital. He loomed large in the private and business life of his clients. The legal man was the trusted guardian of his clients' welfare; all their affairs, their papers, their deeds, wills their confidential letters and papers which previous generations had entrusted to him where in his hands for safekeeping..... In those days the attorney was a personality of the utmost consequence to the populace. He was needed and he served that need.

Marius remained involved with the Board for many years in various capacities, but there was a bumpy start. The Municipal Minutes of October 1876 show

Marius Flemmer resigns his office as collector and attorney for the municipality 'as he felt he had been unfairly treated in a certain document submitted for approval to the Commissioners'
This was refuted as they had not accepted the document, but his resignation was accepted

It is not clear at all what this was about, but it was around the time his brother Hans, Chairman of the Board, had had his fall out with the Committee over the unauthorised purchase of trees for the town – this may well have been the 'certain document' referred to above. Perhaps Marius felt that there was a conflict of interest, because shortly after resigning we find him issuing summons against the Board on behalf of his brother for the recovery of a £25 promissory note. The Board were in dire financial straights, and had to arrange a £20 overdraft with the Oriental Bank to settle this amount.

Two years after this dust up he was still collecting outstanding rates, a difficult task given that many of the town's early householders were either still arguing about their rates valuation, or disputing the need for taxes in the first place. By 1878 his differences with the Board had been sorted out and it "*Resolved that Mr M Flemmer be offered the appointment of Municipal attorney and also collector of rates at a tariff of 2½ %*"

After some thought at the next meeting he accepted at a rate of 4% but wrote complaining that the records were incomplete. This may have been one of the reasons for some of the embarrassment that was to follow.

By 1879, Marius was the town's Justice of the Peace and Municipal Valuer in addition to his other duties. Perhaps he was stretching himself too thinly, or perhaps keeping books was not his forte, because in 1880 it was resolved that the collection of taxes and outstanding rates be taken away from him. When taking over the books the Board had a great deal of difficulty reconciling the figures, and specifically comment on an amount of 3/- (!) that had been double credited. Even worse in a small town, the local dominee, the Rev. Coetzee had been in to complain. He was very annoyed to have received a demand for payment for the church taxes when they had been paid months before, and he had the receipt to prove it. The Board at this time were all members of the DRC of whom Rev. Coetzee was Minister and the story would have been around the little town like wildfire.

Despite this hiccup and probably because of a lack of alternatives, within a few years the collection of arrear rates had been given back to Marius, who by now had an auctioneers business running styled Flemmer & Austin. As a small town business they dealt with matters great and small. For instance the Board asked them to auction the municipal pound on the basis that they would take 5% of the sum raised – it sold for £49, after which they were briefed to draw up the transfer and surety documents. There were private clients too; Marius writes to the Board on behalf of J L Myburgh who wanted permission to quarry stones, a request granted at 3d per load. He wrote to the Colonial Secretary on behalf of the late George Frederick Walker Field who had been field coronet for 19 years, requesting a widows' pension of £20 a year. After protracted correspondence the ever generous Government granted a pension of £5! One wonders what sort of fee would be paid for this service.

And so life in Steynsburg went on quite uneventfully. Marius had his own house in Von Abo St. (present erf 517 Venter St.).



Marius' house in present day Venter Street

He remained a bachelor through all of this time, a close companion and loving uncle to his brother Hans' growing family. If we looked at Steynsburg in 1892 when Marius was 38 we would see a small dusty farming community. The Town Board was dealing with various health problems caused by an increase in the population. Dr Herman Vermaak the District Surgeon was asked to comment

on sanitary arrangements in town, after a warning of cholera outbreaks in other towns had been received. Vermaak records his concern that the ground and hills at the east end of town are being used as toilets and that there is '*indiscriminate defecation*' in this area, and that the waste from the goal WCs is being deposited in the sluit. There are no public WCs in town and the Board decided to build more 'closets'.

Early in 1893 a warning telegram was received from the Medical Council in Cape Town about smallpox outbreaks. One of the telegram's main provisions was that a programme of vaccination and re-vaccination be started and that outbreaks of 'feverish illness and eruptions of the skin' be reported immediately'. The Commissioners agreed to a notice being put up saying that there should be a report of all fever and skin eruptions. All householders were to be requested to keep their premises clean, and servants' rooms had to be whitewashed. The 'Native' Location would to be asked to clean up. It is interesting that there was no discussion with the District Surgeon, nor any mention of vaccinations that would presumably have cost money. It is typical of the lack of knowledge of smallpox at this time that a general clean up would be thought sufficient to prevent an outbreak. In the event, Steynsburg escaped on this occasion although the Kimberley diamond fields were not as fortunate.

The Flemmer brothers both had prominent roles in town affairs at this time. Hans was a JP, member of the Licensing Court and General Agent; Marius was Attorney, Auctioneer, President of the Cricket Club and Recreation Society. The town had two hotels, a photographer, two schools, a watchmaker and even lawn tennis and quoits clubs. The Standard Bank, expanding its offices across the Colony opened a branch in the town. Whatever else he was, Marius was no sportsman. Playing for Steynsburg against Stormsberg he was out lbw for 1, and two weeks later against Molteno he was bowled for a duck.

Hard times lay ahead for the family, and indeed the whole country. In 1896 Marius' brother Hans died of bladder cancer, leaving his wife Lettie aged 40 with seven children, the youngest of whom was 18 months old. The economy was taking a battering with a terrible drought and the *rinderpest* wiping out cattle herds. On the political front the confrontation between the Transvaal Republic and Britain was beginning to reach a climax that would lead to the outbreak of the Anglo Boer War within three years.

Although there is no evidence for it, I believe that Marius had given an undertaking to his dying brother Hans that he would take care of his family. I think it was mainly for this reason that Marius and Lettie married in her hometown, Burgersdorp some time in 1899. She had inherited her husband's business and apart from having to look after her large family, there would be all sorts of difficulties for a woman in running a business on her own at this time. So the marriage killed two birds with one stone as it were; a father for the children and a manager to continue the business. What I find strange is that none of the family accounts of these early years mention the fact that Lettie and Marius were married – the impression is given that he died a bachelor.

The wedding was only a temporary distraction from the Anglo Boer War and within a week the people of Steynsburg were beginning to feel its effects. The Midland News had set up some sort of 'hot line' via telegraph in the event of a Boer commando taking the town and brief reports were published over the coming weeks:

23rd November 1899

People imagined seeing observation balloons at night and there is general panic. Only 40 children of 140 have reported for lessons at the public school. The Standard Bank has closed and sent its books to Cradock

It is not difficult to imagine the panic. There was no way of sharing news except word of mouth and the odd newspaper – rumour and counter rumour would keep the little community in a constant state of anxiety. There never were any observation balloons of course!

30th November 1899

Boer commando at Steynsburg

It was a brief stay but must have caused consternation. It highlighted a central question of the War – whose side were you on?

14th December 1899

The War Steynsburg

High winds and fearful heat add to our other troubles, war, drought and locusts are still the topics of discussion

28th December 1899

The War – Steynsburg

No news

Dr Vermaak has returned

Mr Flemmer's sale is on

These were troubled times indeed for the family – the British military eventually had the town under the protection of martial law, but life had become much more difficult. The economy ground to a halt, and the train line was cut or commandeered so that supplies of essentials like coal could not get through. Property prices were also depressed which may be why, in the midst of the war, Lettie bought 4 more erven to add to her and Marius' quite considerable property portfolio. This speculation in property may well have had a major bearing on her subsequent insolvency.

The terrible war over at last, life began to return to normal slowly. Hans and Lettie's son Waldemar had won a Rhodes scholarship and he came back to Steynsburg before starting on the long trip to Oxford. Here we see the family group, Marius as *paterfamilias* and young Waldemar a brilliant sportsman, 19, broad shouldered and immaculately dressed.



*Back: Constance, Waldemar, Wilhelmina Seated: Marius, Lettie
Front: Unknown boy, Harold, Wilfred*

By 1906 Marius was 51 and Mayor of Steynsburg when the new school buildings were opened in November with much pomp and ceremony. The little town was in a fever of excitement at the visit and attendant celebrations. Dr Muir, Superintendent General of Education arrived to officially open the buildings. Marius was said to be indisposed for this event which was followed by a lunch for 50 at the Grand Hotel. The lunch was followed as was the custom by a seemingly endless list of toasts proposed to the King, the Governor, the Secretary General of Education, the Architect, to Education, Steynsburg, the School Board and the Divisional Council. If each toast was concluded with a drink, it must have been a very convivial affair indeed!

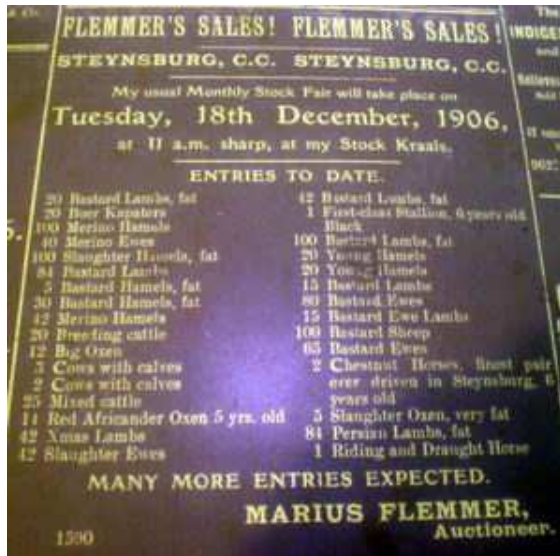
The little town was indeed moving with the times as we can see from a notice in the newspaper from the Town Clerk:

I have a mental picture of the local traffic cop, pedalling furiously in pursuit of an errant cyclist!

It may well be that Marius' indisposition was a way of avoiding the limelight. The week before the grand school opening ceremony, insolvency proceedings had been started against Lettie, and by extension Marius. As we will see, the business had been ailing for some time and there is a note of desperation to advertisements that appeared for the first time this very week.



Traffic Control Steynsburg 1906



It is more than coincidence that this appeared the very week the creditors were meeting to start the process of liquidation.

There follows a sorry tale for the family and I will quote from the archive papers extensively. No one would want their personal affairs raked over like this, never mind the financial consequences, the children still at school and university whose education was disrupted, and the embarrassment of facing whispers in every corner of the town and district. From a family history point of view there is much of interest in the papers, giving as they do a small window into the life and times of a family now facing enormous difficulties.

*Notice that appeared as
 Insolency proceedings began*

We can see from the archive papers that the family lived on quite a big property in the centre of the town. It was next to the DRC vicarage and today will be found at erven 537/542 Coetzee St. The plot, mortgage free, was more than an acre and my grandfather describes it:



Flemmer home - now a church

...we had a comfortable home with a large garden and we always had the use of four or five horses and kept cows goats and many pets.

Lettie owned eight other plots in Steynsburg at the time of her insolvency, most of which were mortgaged. Following the war the economy was in a terrible state and the burden of these properties, together with apparent

mismanagement of the business by Marius, led to their downfall. All was to be lost in the proceedings that now started.

The first meeting of creditors was called by Lettie at her office in November 1906 and auditors were appointed. By the following month Insolvency Schedules had been signed which revealed the extent of the problem. Debts were stated at £6 523 0 3d, assets at £3 972 16 2d - a deficiency of £2 550 4 0d. This was a huge sum of money at the time – about £76 000 in today's terms. All property had been valued by George Henry Bourne, a general dealer and also a creditor who stated that the fixed properties were worth £3,025 and moveable property £437 15 4d. Outstanding debts and promissory notes were divided into 'Good' and 'Bad' debt. Among the good debts were amounts owed by Marius Flemmer himself for £57 10 5d, his brothers A.S. Flemmer £247 18 7d and T. Flemmer of Cradock (promissory note) £4 16 0d and T.J. Scotland the Resident Magistrate £5 10 6d. There was a host of other small amounts. The list of creditors is huge with many of the businesses and personalities of Steynsburg owed money. Amounts varied from Helenus de Kock Vermaak of Mariasburg, a £730 0 0d promissory note to minor amounts. All of the schedules in these proceedings are signed *A.A. Flemmer assisted by Marius Flemmer*.

The insolvency of the Flemmers would of course have been the talk of the town, and the embarrassment and humiliation enormous. Things went from bad to worse for poor Lettie when an Attachment Order was issued for all of her property on the 22nd January 1907. I quote the list of items for the Flemmer home in detail here because although extensive, it gives us an idea of how a fairly well off family kitted out their home in a small Karoo town of the day:

4 horses	1 mat
1 rally cart	1 cane table
single harness	3 chairs
1 double harness	1 cane table
5 cane chairs	1 sideboard
1 cane couch	1 dinner wagon
1 music stool	4 flower stands
1 piano	1 hanging lamp
1 screen	2 curtains & pole
2 cane tables	1 silver egg stand
1 standing lamp	1 silver teapot
1 umbrella stand	1 silver toast rack
3 vases	1 silver jug
1 music stand	1 salad bowl
3 painted plates	1 grape stand
2 ornamental figures	1 dining room table
1 fender & irons	1 table cloth
4 mats	3 pictures
1 pole & curtains	1 passage lamp
6 chairs	empty fruit bottles
1 easy chair	1 coffee pot on stand
1 corner bracket	3 dish covers

1 oven mantle	1 dinner set -incomplete
1 clock	1 breakfast set -incomplete
1 carpet	1 table mantle top
2 candlesticks	1 pole & curtains
1 canister	1 mat
1 flour bin	1 double bed & bedding
3 glass dishes	1 clock
1 lot cutlery	1 wash stand
1 table	1 bedroom set
1 bin	1 ottoman
1 gas stove	1 dressing table
1 bread maker	1 wardrobe
3 pots	1 towel horse
1 scale, weights	1 double bed & bedding
3 bread pans	2 chests of drawers
2 servers	1 single bed & bedding
2 colanders	2 pictures
1 bowl	1 washstand
2 jugs	1 bedroom set
6 canisters	1 towel horse
1 egg beater	1 chair
3 trays	1 large scale &weights
2 chairs	1 ladder
4 colanders	2 tanks
1 pudding bowl	1 lot coal
5 candlesticks	2 hand tracks
1 tea pot	1 wheelbarrow
3 brooms	1 meal bin
4 water tanks	2 ladies saddles
1 meat safe	1 chair
1 ladder	1 secure ?
1 cloth basket	2 iron safes
1 hat rack	5 chairs
2 small tables	1 table
1 looking glass	1 large table
1 wardrobe	3 chairs
2 chairs	1 small table
1 washing stand	1 bedroom set
1 slop pail	1 mat

All of these items, the very framework of the family, and all of the properties were immediately put up for sale. The only small relief for Lettie was that at a creditors meeting chaired by attorney Frank Rossouw,

' It was unanimously resolved that the insolvent Aletta Alida Flemmer need not appear at the meetings of creditors as her estate had been under the management of her husband Mr Marius Flemmer'

Matters proceeded apace from now on. Marius made an offer to rent the office premises and this was rejected, along with an offer considered too low to buy the family home. In the end it was resolved that

Aletta Flemmer be allowed to keep 6 of each: cups and saucers, large and small plates, large and small spoons, tea spoons, 2 vegetable dishes, 6 knives and forks, 1 tea pot, 1 coffee pot, 4 bentwood chairs and a little writing table. The dwelling to be leased to Marius Flemmer at £8 10 0d and the stock kraals at £1 10 0d per month.

In the insolvency proceedings that followed the report is very critical of Marius Flemmer who had taken in £150 after the insolvency and used it for expenses.

The trustees go on to say:

The insolvent ascribes her insolvency to heavy losses sustained in auctioneering but as far as your trustee can make out from the books the estate has really been insolvent for the last eighteen months to two years. Your trustee is quite convinced that the above statement [of values] is wholly misleading and the assets fictitiously valued at a time when the estate was already insolvent. We suggest that M Flemmer's claim for £1,025 7 0d be rejected

and the report concludes very harshly

Your trustee would further suggest that Mr Flemmer be examined at this meeting with regard to the statement above referred to [about the valuation of assets] and with regard to his books which your trustee cannot follow very clearly and also with regard to the appointment as agent for the various insurance companies

All in all a pretty nasty business, especially bearing in mind that all of the trustees, creditors and insolvents were very well known to each other.

There are many accounts in the file. One of interest is from St. Andrew's College where Lettie's two youngest, Harold and Wilfred were at school. They would have been about 16 and 15 then and the costs of board and tuition for 4 months are £26 10 0d and £8 8 0d respectively each. There is a shoemaker's bill for £2 6 3d and both boys play soccer and cricket for which there is an extra charge. This account was not met and both boys would have come back home to complete their schooling at the local government school.

On a lighter note there is an account from *Aux Modes Nouvelle* of Eloff St Johannesburg ["Latest Novelties by every Mail"!]. It is for an 'outfit' consisting of a Coat £6 16 6d, Hat £2 12 6d, Blouse £13 0 6d, Costume £ 4 14 6d and Belt 5/4d. It is dated the 11th of August 1906. This is a lot of money to lay out on a single outfit of clothes and must have been ordered from the big city for a special occasion. This was possibly the marriage of Emma Flemmer in Cradock in January 1907 which was a lavish affair. Given the insolvency proceedings

going on at the time I doubt whether the Steynsburg Flemmers made it to Cradock for the big day.

Fortunately the children's inheritance from their father Hans' estate was protected by a Deed of Kinderbewijs, registered at the time of Lettie's marriage to Marius. The Deed was a preferrent creditor in the insolvent estate and all of the children eventually received their inheritance.

In March of 1907 the auction sales of all Lettie's properties were advertised in the Midland News, thus ensuring that anyone in the entire district who didn't know about the Flemmers plight were now brought into the *skinder* that was going on.

As ever life had to go on and go on it did. I have not been able to find out much of what happened after the sales – I suppose the family continued to live in Steynsburg in somewhat straitened circumstances. Marius was still an attorney with a practice and there is no sign that any strictures were placed on him. Lettie's children grew up and moved away and I am not altogether certain that she and Marius continued to live together. The 1916 Who's Who lists him as attorney and Deputy Mayor of Steynsburg while from another document I see Lettie was living at 32 St George's St Yeoville, Johannesburg, the home of her daughter Connie.

By 1922 Marius had moved to Nakuru in Kenya, where he lived on the farm of Andreas Salvator, his older brother. Several other Flemmer's moved to Kenya around this time and I am told that Lettie did live there for a while. He died aged 74 at Nakuru and is buried in the graveyard of the Anglican Church. Seventeen years after his death, the Steynsburg Town Council voted to name a street after him as part of the town's Pioneers Festival and so it remains to this day.

Lettie herself lived out her remaining years with her daughter Connie in Yeoville, dying there aged 77 on the 26th of May 1934. Older members of the family tell me they remember her well as very musical, a kindly warm grandmother. As we have seen she had had a very hard life. Married at 16, the mother of 13 children of whom only six survived beyond infancy. Of those six Oswald Christian died at 2, Wilfred in World War I and Harold as a young man in his thirties. Then there were the hardships of farming in the Karoo with Hans, his death at a young age and her subsequent insolvency. She must have had a special kind of strength to survive all of this into a serene old age.