
Definitions *Trek*; to move away. *Voortrekker*; one who *treks* in front of others. *Boer*; farmer, from the Dutch/Africans, or from the German *Bauer*.

It was 1488 before Portuguese explorer, Bartholomew Diaz, rounded the African Cape and landed a small party of sailors to replenish their dwindling water supplies. Curious Hottentots gathered to stare in awe at their first white men, only to have one of their number shot dead by a sailor's crossbow bolt. The Hottentots fled and the die was cast for future mistrust between the races. In 1497, fellow countryman, Vasco de Gama, sailed along the lush coastline to a point further north than that previously reached by Diaz, and on Christmas Day he named the coastline '*Terra Natalis*'. This coastline and its interior were to remain unexplored until the mid seventeenth century and the only landings made were accidental, usually involving shipwrecks; few survived such an experience, those that did were often attacked by local hostile dark skinned natives. The few survivors who managed to return to the Portuguese stations told tales that were to establish the fearsome reputation of the Bantu people. As these stations were largely established on the sites of former Arab trading posts, the Portuguese adopted the Arab word for these black natives, the word used to denote such infidels was '*Kaffirs*' which lacked the derogatory connotations of modern times. In 1652, the Chartered Dutch East India Company (1) founded a replenishment station at the Cape of Good Hope by ousting the Portuguese. Their founder leader was a Dutchman, Jan Van Riebeeck. The first settlers began arriving from Holland and were followed by over 200 French Huguenots, religious refugees from the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. In 1794, the Dutch formally took over the administration of the Cape but in the same year, they were defeated by the French in the Napoleonic Wars which opened the Cape to French warships. This caused considerable concern to the British Navy and Britain promptly seized the Cape in order to protect her sea routes to India.

Over the years, limited settlement took place and, as the Cape changed hands, those displaced by change usually settled as farmers and began to spread further inland in the quest for free unlimited land, better grazing and freedom from petty administrators. The *Freiburgers*, or freemen, were those who had worked out their company contracts and who then chose to remain or settle in the Cape. These people, together with the French, German and Dutch settlers created a new race, they co-operated with each other and collectively adopted the name 'Boer' to describe their predominately agricultural way of life. Their farms were vast by European standards as land was free and relatively unpopulated, they merely had to register their property with the supervising Chartered Company. In due course, this collection of settlers, traders, refugees and farmers became a community and eventually, a colony.

These Europeans unwillingly shared the land with the scattered local natives, the Bushmen and Hottentots, though it was to be another century and a half before they were to come into physical contact with the black skinned Bantu people living further east and to the north. Limited contact had been made with the Bushmen but due to their wildness and impossible language of clicks and glottal sounds, trade was non-existent and even when captured as children, they made impossible servants. In 1712, the Bushman people were virtually wiped out by smallpox yet the few survivors were still feared and persecuted by black and white alike due to their use of poisoned arrow tips when hunting or defending themselves. By the 1840s they were so reduced in numbers as a result of the policy of open slaughter that they faced extermination, the survivors fled towards the desolate Kalahari. It was only in the early twentieth century that Europeans became aware that these primitive people had an appreciation of music and art; fine examples of their coloured wall paintings can still be seen today on numerous rocky outcrops across South Africa. As the famous African explorer, Sir Laurens Van der Post, wrote of the Bushmen, *they were dealt a rotten hand*. (2).

The Hottentots had also lived in the area for over a thousand years and differed from the Bushmen by being taller, and in their appearance, were more like Negroes but with a distinct yellow tinge to their colouring. They lived in family and small clan groupings with a leadership hierarchy. They kept cattle and although they knew of the bow and arrow, they preferred to use the spear which enabled them to establish their dominance over the Bushmen, forcing them into the more inhospitable regions beyond the Drakensberg Mountains. The Hottentots lived predominately in two distinct groups, the *strandlopers* or beach dwellers, and those who lived off the land as nomadic farmers and hunters. It has been estimated that the five known Hottentot tribes in the Cape area amounted to no more than 15,000 people, including women and children. They were amenable to trading with the Europeans and, in time, accepted menial work and a few became soldiers serving both the British and Boer causes.

As the Bushmen were displaced by the Hottentots, so they in turn were displaced by the steady expansion of the Boers. The Boers' appetite for both domestic servants and slaves for tough manual labour grew and these had to be imported from the north eastern coast and from the Dutch East Indies. It was not until the mid

eighteenth century that the Cape whites first made contact with the dark skinned natives of the Eastern Cape area, known today as the Bantu nation. They were appreciated for their physical strength, clan and family system and above all, for their warlike reputation. During the eighteenth century, the Boers settled into their frugal existence as a widespread farming community of over 10,000 families stretching up to 600 miles inland from Cape Town. They provided for themselves and those items that they needed to purchase, such as lead and powder for their guns, they obtained from passing traders. The Boer community grew in stature and unity while, simultaneously, Dutch influence failed. Title to the Cape changed frequently between the Dutch and British in accordance with their fortunes in distant European conflicts until the Cape was finally and permanently annexed by Britain in 1806.

Meanwhile, white migration from the Cape continued relentlessly until the Boers arrived at the southern bank of the Great Fish River in 1769. To their surprise, their own migration north came unexpectedly face to face with another migration moving south, that of the Bantu people. Neither side had had much experience of the other though the Boers quickly discovered that this new race were far more defiant than the Bushmen and Hottentots.

Attempts by the Boers to cross and settle on the far bank were fiercely contested by the Bantu and the stage was set for permanent conflict. It remains true today that the origins of the Bantu are unknown but supposition leads to the conclusion that they entered Africa from the Middle East as long ago as 8,000 BC.

As their lives had always been based upon cattle they were well suited to a nomadic life and in due course, spread south and then across central Africa, eventually reaching the west coast. They then continued south east around the wastes of the Kalahari Desert until they met the Boers at the Great Fish River. One Bantu tribe, known as the Nguni, settled more extensively in the area known today as Natal leaving the predominately Xhosa tribe steadily moving south while, unknowingly and only 500 miles away, the Boers were busy founding their first colony.

The Bantu were highly civilised; they enjoyed complex social structures, were competent cattle farmers, and were able to make implements out of metal which was virtually equal to steel. One of these items ensured their ascendancy over the Bushmen and Hottentots they encountered, and badly inconvenienced the whites, namely the throwing spear. Their social structure valued marriage; its complex system of dowry payments for a wife, known as *lobola*, ensured that a man could not marry until he was established in society and possessed sufficient cattle to pay the required *lobola*. The more cattle a man had, the more wives he could buy. It was the Bantu dependency on cattle for the vital *lobola*, for social prestige and their subsequent wealth which was to bring them into permanent conflict with the trekkers. To the Bantu, the Boers had more than sufficient cattle 'for the taking' and cattle raiding was only one of their established traditions. (4).

Their post battle cleansing tradition of disembowelling a slain enemy was later to be feared, misunderstood and an anathema to the British. To the Bantu, those slain had to be ritually disembowelled to free any incarcerated spirit and to protect the victor from absorbing any bad spirits which the slain body previously possessed. As a final cleansing rite, the victor then had to have intercourse with a woman, not his wife, before returning to his clan. This practice ensured that any remaining trace of evil spirits would be left with the woman, leaving the victor clean and whole to return home. It also ensured that post battle, the impi would rapidly disperse from the battlefield for the purpose of religious cleansing. Throughout the Bantu nation warriors were only accorded any real status and in the case of the Zulu - permission from the king to marry, when they had 'washed' their spears in the blood of a defeated enemy. Medicine and superstition played such an important part in Bantu life that each clan chief was able to maintain complete control through fear - by utilising his witchdoctor's ability to 'smell out' dissenters, dissension being a crime punishable with immediate execution of the 'offender' or, in serious cases, his whole family or kraal. Every male adult was a warrior who, on the call from his chief, would join his *amabutho* (5) for a cattle raiding party or to settle a score with a neighbouring clan.

Tactics as such were then unknown and differences were resolved by each side engaging in *giya*, a process of hurling threats and some assegais until one side felt they were in ascendancy. Such conflicts rarely resulted in more than casual bloodshed, but this relatively harmless system of challenge was to be short lived.

Back along the Great Fish River border, Bantu and Boer lived as neighbours, albeit with difficulty. The Bantu prized Boer cattle and the Boers coveted Bantu lands. In 1793, a sizeable horde of Bantu crossed the river border murdering settlers and seizing their cattle. Over one hundred Boer farms were quickly abandoned and limited retaliation was undertaken, but to little effect. In 1806 Britain again annexed the Cape and this coincided with new British colonial policy of self finance, resulting in taxation of the Boer farmers.

In 1807, slavery was abolished internationally but this and taxation, had little immediate effect on the Boers, due to their isolation and the distances involved. The legal system relied on the Black Circuit, a system of travelling courts established by the British in an attempt to establish a fair system of justice for all, though the Boers looked upon it as being biased against them in favour of natives generally. The missionaries of the time enthusiastically used the system to bring Boers to trial for keeping slaves; one missionary laid twenty different complaints in just six months. This frequently led to the accused Boers having to leave their families and farms

unprotected and at the mercy of marauders to answer charges which were frequently of a political or malicious nature.

In 1815, the Schlacters' Nek incident occurred which was to drive the wedge of eternal distrust between Boer and Briton. Two brothers, Frederick and Johannes Bezuidenhout lived roughly as farmers near Schlacters' Nek. Frederick kept a Hottentot slave named *Boy* who he regularly thrashed. In return, *Boy* made a number of formal complaints to the authorities alleging illegal rough treatment. Bezuidenhout refused to communicate with the authorities and, in order to get him to answer the allegations, the Landdrost eventually issued a summons for his arrest. The summons went unanswered and Bezuidenhout was found guilty in his absence. A military detachment of one bailiff escorted by two officers, a sergeant, two corporals, and a troop of Hottentot soldiers were dispatched to arrest him. An exchange of fire took place and Bezuidenhout was shot dead. The deceased's brother, Johannes Bezuidenhout, together with a few other like minded Boers, commenced a feeble insurrection which attracted appropriate military response. In a brief skirmish, Johannes Bezuidenhout was killed and a number of his fellow conspirators were arrested. They were duly tried and convicted; the five ringleaders received the death sentence, to die on the public gallows at Schlacters' Nek, (appropriately named, meaning slaughterers' place).

The date of execution was fixed for the 9th March 1815 and sentence was ordered to be carried out in the presence of the local population under the supervision of the two local Landdrosts, Cuyler and Stockenstrom. When the lever was pulled, four of the five ropes broke simultaneously dropping four accused in a heap at the foot of the gallows. There was consternation followed by a delay while fresh rope was sought during which time the four talked with their distraught families and friends while others fervently implored for their release on the logical grounds that the broken rope was an obvious 'Act of God'. The British were not swayed by the argument and the hapless four were finally executed. The wrath of the Boers survives to this day.

After Schlacters' Nek, revolt fed the Boer subconscious and secret meetings went on late into many a night across the veldt. The Boers were a hardy new race, they called themselves *Afrikaners*, and they fiercely resented any intrusion with their way of life. They owed allegiance only to God, themselves and to Africa, (hence the name *Afrikaners*) and they were fully aware that the whole of Africa lay to the east and the north. Surely it was possible, many asked, to move there and live in peace? Being devoutly religious, they prayed for a solution, and inevitably the solution stared them in the face. Because they had sought help through prayer, the obvious answer took on a religious significance and many Boers came to believe the trek was ordered by God. The final indignity which precipitated the trek came in 1834 with yet more British legislation, namely the 'Act of Emancipation' which gave equality to all, regardless of their race, colour, creed or station in life. As prodigious users of slaves, this was too much for some of the wealthier Boers who responded by selling their farms, packing their belongings into wagons and heading for the African interior.

The purpose of the Great Trek was simply to establish their own Boer law abiding state and live totally independent of British rule. Their combined frustration led to an extraordinary and carefully considered emigration of nearly twelve thousand Boers together with a similar number of servants and apprentices. The actual trek took place over several years and many parties perished at the hands of, firstly, the Matabele and then, as they progressed further east and north, by the Bantu. Two other parties perished when they attempted to cross the Kalahari Desert, they were never seen again, and no trace of their wagons has ever been found. Several influential families initiated the trek and became known as the Voortrekkers or trek leaders. Many names are well known to students of South African history, people such as the Tregardts, who were of Swedish origin and the Van Rensburgs, who were slaughtered by the Matabele as they entered unknown territory to the north. As the trek progressed, three men came to the fore; Maritz, Uys and Retief. Maritz and Uys pressed on, seeking their promised land to the north while Retief pondered the possibility of his promised land being somewhere east of the Drakensberg Mountains.

Without doubt, the most influential Voortrekker was the aristocratic Piet Retief who was highly respected by both the Boers and British alike and who was generally considered a natural leader. He was also a wily politician, a wealthy farmer, and a Field Commandant. His eventual approval of the trek was the spark which ignited the fire of mass disaffection amongst the Boers and his own participation prompted the surge of trekkers which followed. His mind was probably made up with the passing of the 'Act of Emancipation', which finally abolished slavery but which nevertheless offered compensation - payable in London. No Boer could afford to travel to London and the loss of their slave workforce would have destroyed many Boer businesses and farms. To gain a few months grace, the Boers designated their slaves as 'apprentices' while they busily prepared for the trek.

Piet Retief wrote bitterly in his diary of the British oppression which he believed was deliberately biased in favour of non whites and wrote;

We leave this fruitful land of our birth in which we have suffered enormous losses and continual vexation and are about to enter a strange and dangerous territory. We go relying on merciful God whom we shall fear and humbly endeavour to obey. (6).

When Retief left his farm and set off with twenty five families, their wagons, servants and herds, the news spread rapidly and others rushed to join the Retief column. At the Orange River over 300 trekkers and their entourage joined Retief while others followed in the trails left by his wagons.

On the 17th April 1837, his group joined a larger column under the leadership of Gert Maritz. At a trekker meeting, Retief was elected overall leader giving him a command of nearly 5,000 trekkers with over 1,000 wagons and huge herds of cattle and sheep. Retief made rules and gave orders to control the multitude which included instructions that the local clans were not to be molested, native servants were to be properly treated, and game was only to be shot for the pot. Order was maintained by a system of field commandants and offenders were punished with fines. His policy towards the native chiefs whose territory they passed through was one of friendship and while reports from trekkers to the north indicated hostile Matebele, a section of his advance scouts were reporting most favourably on the lands east of the Drakensberg mountains.

Retief knew the reputation of the inhabitants there, a little understood nation known as the Zulu, but was confident that he would be able to negotiate land rights for his people. Accordingly he made plans to cross the Drakensberg Mountains to negotiate for settlement land with the Zulu king, Dingane. Retief and fifteen Boers rode off to meet Dingane and by early October 1837 they had crossed the Drakensberg and headed towards the small white settlement on the coast of the Indian Ocean, later to be called Durban. Towards the end of October they arrived to a most cordial welcome, the predominately English settlers were fully aware that a Boer settlement inland would afford them added security against any marauding Zulus. To smooth his route to the king, Retief wrote a warm and friendly letter to Dingane in which he expressed his wish to discuss the possibility of a peaceful and profitable Boer settlement in the vicinity of the Drakensberg Mountains. Retief knew that an English missionary, Francis Owen, lived at the king's homestead and would translate his letter to the king.

The land through which Retief and his party travelled appeared ideal for their settlement, being totally devoid of human population. What was unknown to the unsuspecting Boers was the reason for the depopulation, namely the *Umfecane* (7) and the subsequent slaughter of surrounding tribes by Shaka when he had expanded his empire some fifteen years previously. Little was known of Dingane except that he was overweight and totally in control of the Zulus. That he had killed his famous half-brother, Shaka, or murdered any opponent out of hand may not have unduly perturbed Retief with the Boers' firearms superiority; but with all events considered, more caution should have been exercised.

Dingane was also fully aware that the Matabele, with whom the Zulus had been in indecisive conflict in 1830, were being harassed by Retief's fellow trekkers to the north. Dingane's reply was friendly; he even returned some sheep which had previously been stolen from the trekkers and with Thomas Halstead, a fellow Boer linguist as his interpreter, Retief set off encouraged by events. (8)

On about the 5th November 1837, the party approached Dingane's homestead at emGungundlovu, near modern day Ulundi. Retief must have been impressed; the kraal consisted of a fortification containing over 2,000 huts each capable of housing twenty people and with another 300 huts for Dingane himself, his wives, and his senior InDunas. He was even more impressed by the eight days of celebration, feasting, dancing and displays which went on endlessly and which must have exhausted Retief and his party.

Missionary Owen was present throughout and it is due to his meticulous diary, discovered only in 1922 at the Missionary Hall in London that we now accurately know of the events which unfurled.

At the end of the eighth day, Dingane suddenly informed Retief that he would be granted permission to settle where he requested - subject to Retief first recovering cattle which had been stolen from Dingane by a rival chief, Sikonyela. Retief accepted the arrangement and returned to his settlers who, without his permission, had begun to spread out towards the Tugela River. Other trekkers, encouraged by the promising news, were enthusiastically following across the Drakensberg Mountains in the hope of bountiful grazing. Retief gathered seventy of his best fighting men to undertake the mission against Sikonyela and left the main party in the care of the youths and elderly Boers who remained, though without instructions for the remaining families to laager or prepare defensive positions.

Retief's expedition set out for Sikonyela's kraal immediately following the celebration of Christmas. Within the week they arrived and, on the pretext of presenting him with a bracelet, snapped the chief into handcuffs, and held him prisoner while the stolen cattle were collected. Sikonyela was then released and Retief headed back towards Dingane's kraal in optimistic mood and with the recovered cattle. Prior to Retief's return to emGungundlovu on the 3rd February 1838, missionary Owen had observed an unusual number of young warriors arriving at the homestead, he also recorded in his diary the rumours that all was not well as Dingane was obviously annoyed that Retief had permitted Sikonyela to live. Retief immediately returned the stolen cattle to an apparently appreciative Dingane whereupon the celebratory feasting commenced. For several days Retief and his men were again obliged to watch the continuous entertainment until, on the 6th February, following an impressive display of horsemanship and firearms salvos by the Boers, Retief was finally called to Dingane. In the presence of Dingane's senior inDunas, Dingane gave verbal permission for the Boer settlement; everything promised by the king was written down by the Boer scribe, Jan Bantjes, who then translated it back into Zulu for

the benefit of the King. The document was then signed by Dingane and witnessed by the three most senior inDunas before Retief placed it in his leather pouch for safety.

As Retief was about to depart, he and his men were invited to one final feast. Not wishing to appear discourteous or impatient, Retief reluctantly agreed. The Zulu InDunas reminded Retief that it was impolite for anyone to enter the King's royal kraal with firearms and Retief readily agreed, all their firearms were stacked outside the kraal next to their horses.

The feast commenced and hundreds of young warriors began their series of dances. Suddenly Dingane rose to his feet and a chilling silence descended on the multitude. Dingane called out *Babulaleni abathakathi "Kill the wizards"* (9). Before the unsuspecting Boers realised what fate held for them, they were seized, bound hand and foot with leather thongs, and dragged several hundred yards to the far exit of the kraal to the hill of execution. Missionary Owen was watching the whole event through his telescope just as a warrior arrived at his house with a message from the king to the effect that Owen and his family need have no fear for their lives.

At the hill of execution each Boer in turn had his arms and legs broken with knobkerries before being untied and then impaled. Retief was made to watch the orgy of torture and death, including that of his twelve year old son, before he too was executed. Owen wrote that he fainted from the shock, as did his wife.

Also murdered were the thirty or so native servants who accompanied the party. (10). Rumours still exist today that a number of Boer women were with the party and that they too were murdered. There is no known evidence that this was the case. Dingane decreed that no Boer, woman or child, should survive on his land. Owen's next record reveals that,

within two hours, a large impi was gathered and almost immediately departed the king's kraal. (11)

Disaster of a colossal magnitude was about to befall the unsuspecting Boer families gathering in the area now known as Blowkranze and Weenen; all were totally unsuspecting and eagerly anticipated Retief's return with the promised permission to settle. Under cover of darkness, Dingane's impi approached the sleeping Boer families and then launched their attack.

By dawn, the mutilated bodies of 531 elderly men, women, and children were spread over an area of twenty square miles. A handful of distraught souls desperately clambered back across the Drakensberg mountains to raise the alarm. Dingane had set the stage for Boer retribution.

Editor's note.

One curious result of the *umfecane* relates to the feared man-eating attributes of the lion. Bushmen have long related that because there were so many dead or maimed human bodies readily available, lions acquired their liking for human meat. Prior to the *umfecane*, lions avoided contact with the Bushmen.

References.

1. The *Generale Vereenigde Nederlantsche Geoctroyeerde Oostindische Compagnie* was a powerful council of seventeen members based in Amsterdam with bases in Japan, Malaysia, the East Indies, and Formosa. As trade increased, a victualling station at the Cape became essential.
2. *The Heart of the Hunter*, Van de Post, Penguin.
3. *Negro* - Member of the dark skinned indigenous peoples of Africa, Collins.
4. Several of these traditions were to have significant implications for the British invasion of Zululand in 1879.
5. *Amabutho* (*s. ibutho*) a guild or regiment of warriors. Collectively, they were a form of national service.
6. The Great Trek did not have the blessing of the United Dutch Reform Church.
7. Three chiefs, Zwide, Matiwane and Mtimkulu were principally responsible for the catastrophic internecine warfare and resultant economic destruction. This has often, but incorrectly, been attributed to Shaka.
8. The British settlers had recently inflicted losses on a Zulu hunting party; Retief was not acquainted with this- see p. 14/15.
9. Zulu folk lore reveals a little known event which would partly explain Dingane's treatment of Retief. The Boers had ridden their horses round Dingane's royal kraal, (a forbidden area) under cover of darkness. When challenged, the Boers denied responsibility but could not explain the horse-droppings and hoof-prints. The Zulus possibly thought the Boers might attempt to assassinate Dingane.
10. The Zulu unsuccessfully chased a native retainer named Lomana who was in Retief's party. He escaped the slaughter and died near Weenen in 1909, James Stuart Archives SA.
11. *The Voortrekkers*, Johannes Meintjes, 1973. This book contains a vivid account of the Zulu attack.