

The Battle of Blood River

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The ‘*Siege town Lyre*’ (Maureen’s Nom de plume) digging up old bones. Were some of Africanerdom’s greatest heroes bunglers, forgers and perjurors?

From a small leather pouch he (Retief) brought forth the precious paper, showing it to Tjaart in a kind of triumph, “Tell them you saw this. Tell them the Kaffir will sign it tomorrow and then the land is peacefully ours. J.A. Michener.

Character observations;

The Cape Burger becomes the Voortrekker, the Boer, and the Afrikaner.

It is a complex character, with multitudinous lights and shades, so subtle and yet so marked, that they are difficult to define accurately. But, regarding one fact, all writers of practical experience are inclined to agree that the Boer of the past was a very much finer fellow than the Boer of the present - finer morally and practically; and that in his obstinate determination to resist the march of progress he has allowed himself to suffer deterioration.

Louis Creswicke. *South Africa and the Transvaal War 1900*

It is strange that the Afrikaaner should form such close bonds with his leaders, he who to a great extent inherited the French tendency to individualism and the Dutch self-assuredness from his forebears. The Dutch Blood made him headstrong and obstinate; the French disposition led him to hold views of his own on any subject under the sun and to advocate them without inhibition. In his epic biography on President Paul Kruger, father of the nation, J.F.Orordt identifies the Afrikaner as someone who associated himself with persons rather than with principles. “Generally speaking”, he alleges “we do not possess the powers of imagination nor sufficient philosophy to associate ourselves with something we cannot see with our own eyes. To form a distinction between a principle and a person pursuing the principle is something of which the Afrikaner has no conception”.

The truth of these contentions is borne out by the old political designations such as the Bothe-people, Herzog-ites, and even Malan-ites. It is in fact true that whenever a powerful personality (Boer) emerged on the political front, he was soon tempted to act autocratically. We have had our strong premiers who, at times, had appropriate powers inconsistent with national interests.

Piet Meiring *Our First Six Premiers 1910 - 19*.

A definition of Boer history; ‘The never ending repetition of the wrong way of doing things’!

Piet Retief

Fifty-six years of age and of excellent French Huguenot stock, to become Governor of the united laagers, his exceptional ability to persuade others to do as he wished was undoubtedly his greatest asset, as it was to become a major liability. Initially only he and a small band of men were to take leave of King Dingane. But it was the King’s wish that all of his party, including their coloured servants, should appear before him. Muttering and discontent at the very thought of having to leave their guns outside, Retief nevertheless assured his volunteer followers that they had nothing to fear.

In those last moments of a life crowded with failures, Retief must surely have known that he alone must take the blame for the ghastly deaths of some one hundred men. How fortunate he was never to know how many others, both white and black, men, women and children, would die in the days to come as a result of his unjustified optimism and his considerable capacity for bungling. His last words to Maritz were, to the effect that he was a coward in refusing to accompany him to Dingaan...”Goodbye old scaredy pants”.

Gerrit Maritz

Explosive and only forty, was to be President of the Council. Considered a solid citizen, a man of considerable wealth, he never recorded his reasons for pulling up his roots, sacrificing his comforts, and leaving his relatives and friends to face the unknown and all its dangers and insecurity. Maritz, superior in so many respects,

surrendered his leadership of the trek to Retief. Why? Because age automatically brought respect, or because Maritz and Potgieter, both fine leaders of their respective treks at that stage, did not see eye to eye? Rightly regarded as an architect of ‘The Trek’, and in sharp contrast to Retief who hardly qualified to be classed alongside him, Maritz, his wagon’s square topped and painted blue, immaculate in his very example and a democrat, warned against pride, self interest and autocracy, thereby condemning the very actions of Retief. Maritz actively opposed Retief’s plans to return to Dingaan and thus gained the support of some two hundred men commandeered to accompany Retief reducing the final number to a mere sixty odd volunteers including Retief’s twelve year old son and thirty black servants. Maritz’s final response to Retief’s taunt was that he had repeatedly cautioned him not to go but to send a small party of five or so.... “Piet, for the thousandth time....”.

Hendrik Potgieter

Dour, but a leader, at forty-four he too was that much younger than Retief. Considered a bit of a dandy, an extrovert, he was reputed to have been strictly just to all men yet believed that blacks, as savages, should be treated accordingly. He would never have gone unarmed into the midst of thousands of Zulus (and had thus refused to accompany Retief), and also, unlike Retief, he kept his promises - something all simple, unsophisticated humans value greatly. On his deathbed the black chiefs of the neighbourhood came to take leave of a man liked, trusted, and respected by them. Potgieter was undoubtedly the first Boer leader of importance to leave the Cape, his departure final but voluntary. Two major, very unfortunate occurrences mar his record viz. his disputes with Maritz resulting in Retief being elected commandant-governor, and the fact that he was obliged to leave Natal as a result of being called a coward after Piet Uys’s death at Italeni. Potgieter, notwithstanding his reluctance to settle in Natal (“wherever you find the sea you find the English”) was, by his innate good sense and by clever diplomacy, helped to obtain, (by the Sand River Convention 1852) the recognition of the right of the emigrants in the Transvaal to govern themselves. He died a year later.

Piet Uys

Fearless, intransigent and impetuous, he and Potgieter with a small force of just over three hundred men had decisively defeated Mzilikaz’s twenty thousand Matabele prior to both coming to Natal. Highly critical of Retief, Uys was more than willing to step into Retief’s shoes, fully confident that he could fill them more effectively. But the combined influence of Retief and Maritz forced Uys to reform and agree to undertake the Oath of Loyalty to Retief as soon as he had brought his wagons down the Drakensberg. The oath was never taken. Uys was never to see Retief again.

Erasmus Smit

Sixty and from Holland, Smit was Maritz’s brother-in-law, though most of the trekkers had little education, they could read their bibles. Attachment to their faith and their church was an accepted way of life, and because they had been unable to persuade a Dutch reformed minister to accompany them, Retief suggested that Smit, a missionary, unfortunately associated with the London Missionary Society, should be made minister. Both Maritz and Potgieter were greatly upset when Retief, overriding all opposition, simply introduced Smit in his new capacity to the congregation. Smit’s diary is considered by some as the most important document to have survived the trek, only to be destroyed during the Boer War of 1899-1902.

Sarel Cilliers

Only thirty-seven, of French Huguenot stock, and not ordained as a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church, was nevertheless recognised as the Prophet of the Great Trek and as the Father of the Vow. Accepted as unquestionably straight in his lifestyle, professor De Jongh in his biography analyses Cilliers’ initiation of the Vow and questions the true state of the discovery of the Retief ‘treaty’ and the fact that Cilliers alone reported that the trekkers remains were impaled with sticks the thickness of a man’s arm. He also noticed specifically that the remains lay with their clothes still on their bodies, that they had not been touched by either animal or bird and that Retief was thus recognised by his waistcoat and the leather bag containing the treaty, slung over one shoulder. The fact that the paper was totally unmarked by weathering, as though it had been preserved in a locked safe, was considered a miracle. Cilliers’ arrival in Natal upset Smit’s pastoral reign. In open defiance of the fact that Smit had been ‘installed’ by Retief, Cilliers and his followers split the congregation. Not even in the name of the Lord could there be unity between the Boers.

Andries Pretorius

Thirty nine, and to become the Commandant General, he cut an imposing six foot tall but had “a belly on him like a brass drum!” A shrewd and sensible man, a hard worker, and a thoroughly efficient organiser, he also proved to be a very competent military tactician. Pretorius had visited Natal exactly a year prior to Blood River and had, in fact, bought ‘Somerhill’ (presently a famous stud farm), near Mooi River from one of the original British settlers in Natal, with every intention of settling there once he had packed up to finally leave Graaff Reinet. One of only three of his party to be wounded at Blood River, it was Pretorius who was purportedly to have retrieved the ‘treaty’ from Retief’s satchel.

Retief's party massacred at Kwa Matiwane

“*Bulala Abatagat!i*”. After mutilating ‘the wizards’, Retief’s heart and liver were taken out, wrapped in a piece of cloth and brought to Dingaan. This obviously followed no surgical procedure. Some two hours later, orders were issued that a large party of impi were to set off with all speed to “kill the white dogs”.

Immediately south of the Tugela River, horror and bloodshed reigned. Throughout the Friday night and the whole of Saturday, the trekkers further back from the direct line of attack fought desperately to rally whatever men they could and bring the remaining women and children to the relative safety of wagons hastily drawn up into protective laagers. Maritz and Cilliers tried their utmost to prevent thousands of head of cattle, sheep and horses from being driven off by the Zulu. Saturday night held the terror of further attack. Fortunately, early morning scouting brought the assurance that the raiders had withdrawn.

Maritz, Cilliers and some fifty men hastened towards a widespread scene of utter devastation. Women and little children had been mutilated; tiny babies in their mother’s arms had been pierced through with the same assegai; children beheaded; others hammered to death against wagon wheels or rocks; breasts cut from women and unborn babies ripped out of their mother’s wombs. An estimated five hundred trekkers and their coloured servants had died violently at the hands of Dingane’s warriors. But grieving had to wait. Much was to be done to prevent the circling vultures from descending. The days ahead were critical in view of the possibility of a renewed assault and for once, Cilliers and Erasmus put aside their differences in their united efforts to tend to the spiritual needs of grief stricken friends and family. A crucial decision had to be made; trek back over the berg and abandon Natal or take revenge? A clear majority, especially of the women, forcefully insisted on punishment and retribution. The decision of a public meeting late in March was that the combination of Potgieter and Uys would once again have equal status, each to command his own men in order to punish Dingaan.

Divided we fall - the fleeing commando; ambush at Italeni

Early in April the punitive expedition, totalling 347 armed men, departed from the main laagers. Across the Buffalo River, at Italeni, the waiting Zulus, many camouflaged under their shields, successfully perceived by Uys as cattle, led Uys and his followers into a carefully planned trap. Potgieter, deeply suspicious, held back, the Uys strategy not appealing to him at all. Encircled, Uys and his men tried desperately to shoot their way clear in order to escape the odds, but in the process Uys was fatally stabbed and his young son, Dirkie, not wishing to leave his father, also perished.

Potgieter and his men had to face the waiting trekkers. Panic once again set in at the realisation of yet another leader’s death, and serious thought was again given to leaving Natal. Potgieter was labelled a coward and accused of treason. He left Natal and others were tempted to follow.

Once again, the women implored their men folk to remain, this time fiercely demanding that Dingaan be made to pay personally. Conditions were extremely difficult, the constant threat of Zulu attack forcing them to remain in laagers. Grazing was down to nothing and food supplies were minimal. Crisis loomed. Maritz was on his own. He became desperately ill and died. Like Moses, he saw the Promised Land but was not destined to live in it.

‘Eendracht maakt macht’ United we stand

Victory at last. A month or so after Maritz’ untimely death, Andries Pretorius fully updated with the situation in Natal, responded positively to a plea to join the trekkers in the vicinity of the Little Tugela near Loskop. The situation was extremely grave; Pretorius found an epidemic of measles raging through the Boer camps. Pretorius, immediately elected Commandant General, set out with a force of 468 well armed men, coloured servants, and sixty four battle wagons. A strong disciplinarian, he demanded obedience and was simply not prepared to risk any independent dissidence, the factor which led to the undoing of the Boers up to then and which was to prove a problem in future. Proclaiming “Unity is Strength” (to become the Transvaal Republic

motto and later that of The Union), he did not hesitate to take Cilliers to task when he volunteered to lead some fifty men into what surely would have amounted to a repeat of Itaneni on the eve of Blood River.

Well known is the miracle of that victory. The Afrikaner, ever thankful to God, for without his hand in the battle, the odds were enormous, the situation daunting. Much has been written about the Blood River battle and a future article concentrating on the Zulu aspect would indeed be something to look forward to. Briefly, how do the Boers view the actual battle? Not wishing to rewrite the epic, the following in retrospect, are not usually mentioned; that the trekkers in their determination to defeat Dingaan, decided, before Pretorius arrived, to take wagons to the scene of battle, sixty four, each drawn by only ten oxen as they would largely be very lightly loaded, cumbersome, considerably slow moving, but absolutely essential in forming a laager. Thus, fully aware of the fact that whatever part of North Natal was to be the scene of battle, and that it was likely to be grassland, it was therefore imperative to prepare 'Veghekke' fighting gates, in order to close any gaps between the wagons drawn together for protection and against Zulu invasion. Ammunition bags were prepared in order to make reloading of old muzzle loading muskets quicker. Biltong, rusks, and coffee were to do as rations.

Of interest is that Maritz had thought to bring along to Natal two little cannons belonging to him. These, and a more efficient ship's cannon belonging to Pretorius, were to prove invaluable, especially the longer range of the Pretorius cannon. On the eve of the battle some 700 oxen, 750 horse, 200 native grooms, 130 wagon leads, and 468 trekkers among them three Englishmen, were brought into the roughly 'D' shaped laager. Whip sticks supporting lanterns were in readiness should the impi attack that night. Thick mist however, prevented the warriors from creeping nearer, but ironically, the mist alarmed the trekkers, the threat of their gunpowder becoming damp was very real.

The mist lifting at daybreak, the trekkers prepared for attack, the fact that it was Sunday was of no consequence to the Zulu. Miracle of miracles, in spite of the din of battle, the animals within the laager did not panic unduly and thus wreak havoc by breaking loose and stampeding to escape the confines of a relatively small enclosure. Victory was assured by mid morning. The impi fled, the Boers on horseback hastening their speedy withdrawal.

In Retrospect

Although the battle of Blood River has long been considered one of the greatest victories in Boer history, the trekkers had, in fact, actually laid themselves open to siege. How much longer would those animals have behaved under very stressful circumstances; without grazing? How much longer would the ammunition have lasted; the food; and above all, the water? The lessons learned after Vegkop alerted the Boer to the fact that the enemy, victorious or otherwise, always drove away stock. Not taking the lessons lightly, they prepared for any animals to be confined within the laager, fully accepting that they would be stranded, and their very survival at great risk without any. But with them and the animals in the laager, Ndlela, fortunately for them, was determined to attack the Boers during darkness. In doing so, his plan could possibly have met with success had the night not been so dark and misty resulting in his army repeatedly loosing themselves, the dawn catching them divided in two, a distinct tactical disadvantage as Uys and Potgieter had so tragically experienced. (Victory met with apparent success, the fact remaining though that Dingaan had, after all, not been captured or punished)

Editor's note.

How do the Boers formally record the battle?

Those in front were crouched barely forty meters from the wagons, and behind them the warriors were ranged solidly for hundred's of meters. Meanwhile, the main body under Ndlela, consisting mainly of Dingane's prime regiments, the White and Black shields, also moved up under the verge below the river and sat waiting on their shields. The mist gradually cleared and Sunday dawned bright and clear. Pretorius gave the order to shoot as soon as sights and targets could be distinguished. With a total disregard for danger, the Zulus charged but within a quarter of an hour they were forced to withdraw to a position 500 meters away. When they launched the second attack they were fired upon with deadly accuracy. Once again, the Zulu attack was repulsed and they retreated to a distance of 400 meters. Pretorius now directed the copper cannon towards the hill where the leaders of the Zulu force congregated. The second and third rounds burst among the Indunas and led to a third fierce attack lasting nearly an hour.

Soon after the Zulus had retreated once again a mounted commando of a few hundred men led by Field Cornet Bart Pretorius launched an attack upon them. Twice the commando was driven back but at the third attempt, they managed to split the Zulu force in two. The greater part of the commando force now emerged from the laager and deployed from the north and south along the river where hundreds of fleeing Zulus were shot amongst the reeds and in the river until the river ran red. At this point Ndlela's three thousand crack impis went into action. They attempted to cross the river at the drifts above and below the hippo pool but were swept along

by the hordes of fleeing warriors being shot down by the Boers. At last the entire Zulu army took flight in all directions. The pursuit lasted until midday when the commando returned to the laager where 3000 Zulus lay dead". Official Battle report - Blood River Museum.

Post Battle, Pretorius attacks Dingane's Kraal

Smouldering ruins at UMgungundlovu greet Pretorius and his party and all that required to be done was to bury the remains of the Retief party. Exposed to the harsh extremes of the elements for ten months, a whole six months longer than those of the 24th Foot before collection at Isandlwana 1879, suffice it to say that in sharp contrast to Cillier's report, Jane Bird, the Owen's maid, noted that "scarcely had the Zulus left the place of slaughter when the vultures swept down on the battered bodies of the victims", and two days later, returning to UMgungundlovu with supplies from Port Natal, the Reverend Owen's interpreter, Hulley, recorded....."some time after crossing the river, ascending a hill, we came to a ridge overlooking the great place in the direction of the execution ground. I observed a large flock of vultures hovering over the place of the dead....." For the Zulu, horrific death was the inevitable punishment for the slightest of crimes, an ever flock of watchful vultures provided with carcasses on a regular basis.

The miraculous recovery of the treaty, the eye witness reports of those who found it, along with the details of its content, accepted without question until some 80 years later, came under close scrutiny and heated debate in 1923.

If indeed as a Cape Judge who had visited Natal in 1843 claimed, "The deed or writing formally ceding this territory to the emigrant farmers, was written out by the Reverend Owen". On the previous day to his (Retief's) massacre, and signed with the mark of Dingaan is fact, then the very writer of that document, the Rev. Owen, an eye witness to Dingane's treachery, must still have been in a state of extreme shock when he recorded in his diary that,

Two of the Boers paid me a visit this morning and breakfasted only an hour or two before they were called to eternity. when I asked them what they thought of Dingaan, they said he was good (sic) ; so unsuspicious were they of his intentions. He had promised to assign over to them the whole country between the Tugela and the Umzimvubu (sic) rivers, and "this day the paper of transfer was to be signed".

The Rev. Owen makes no mention of having ever written the treaty and certainly did not know that it had indeed been signed two days before. Handwriting discrepancies abound in the sense that three Zulu witnesses had signed their names. Could they write, and if they could, who had taught them to? Accounts by the trekkers themselves certainly differ greatly. Was forgery necessary? Perhaps so. After all, from bitter experience they knew that their actions against the Zulu would be questioned by both the London Missionary Society and the British Government who would most probably oppose their occupation of Natal. The necessity for a mutually signed document was imperative in order to validate their claims to settle in Natal.

A footnote of interest though, was that when G.E. Cory, by no means hostile to the Afrikaner, in a public address in Bloemfontein in 1923, cast a thoroughly researched doubt on the treaty's provenance, the ensuing emotional storm it caused drove him initially to silence then to sanctuary, until on the occasion of the opening of Piet Retief's old Cape home, on the eve of the Day of the Vow, 15th December 1923. On addressing the meeting he made his apology and declared that he had been mistaken in his findings and that the treaty was in fact genuine.

A further aspect for clarification was the initiation of 'The Vow'. Apparently so moved by Cillier's reading and preaching from the old testament was Andries Pretorius, that he was inspired to the concept of this covenant, only to be cautioned by Cilliers in the sense that he foresaw not only the fallibility of Man but also, that it would be taken by relatively few on behalf of future generations. This, of course, remains an issue particularly in a new, diverse, South Africa, there is no evidence that either the three Englishmen included in the Boer commando or the two hundred odd coloured servants were invited to share in the initial drawing up of the, or indeed recital of, the Vow.

A church was built, a museum today, housing Voortrekkers artefacts including Retief's glass flask bearing the mason's insignia, purportedly rescued from the scene of mutilation "about nine or ten Zulus to each Boer dragging their helpless unarmed victim to the fatal spot" (sic) where "they commenced the work of death by striking them on the head with knobbed sticks". It is perhaps more likely that this flask was found along with other various items retrieved from what remained of the great Kraal. Apparently items taken by the impi at Bloukrans were restored to their rightful owners.

The state of Retief's satchel, having survived intense elements in order to have protected the treaty so miraculously, seems to have disappeared - if it ever left Kwa Matiwane. Strange that Pretorius should have removed its precious contents when he returned to the united lagers, or perhaps the satchel was 'destroyed' along with the original treaty during the Boer War six decades on.

A final point for clarification is Retief's attitude with his dealings with Dingaan, his manner by no means humble and respectful towards a monarch, albeit a black one. In his first letter to Dingaan, before his initial visit to the Royal Kraal he wrote,

Our anxious wish is to live with the Zulu nation. You will, doubtlessly, have heard of our last rapture with Umsilikazi resulting from the frequent and ruinous robberies committed habitually by his tribe; in consequence of which, it has become absolutely necessary to declare war against him, after having in the first instance failed in every attempt to arrange our differences. I shall set out in a few days for the country of the Zulus in order to settle with you our future relations.

and later, more explicitly, with a reference to the nemesis of wicked Kings that;

the great book of God teaches us that Kings who conduct themselves as Umsilikazi does are severely punished, and that it is not granted to them to live or reign long; and if you desire to learn at greater length how God deals with such wicked Kings, you may enquire concerning it from the missionaries who are in your country.

In view of the atrocities and the questionable reports in this phase of Zulu / Afrikaner history, one cannot help but wonder what a Truth and Reconciliation hearing would have revealed at the time, given the two extracts quoted along with Retief's response to the Rev. George Champion when he warned Retief not to return to Dingaan "To be under no fear on his account, for it took a Dutchman, not an Englishman, (Champion was American) to understand a black", and Dingane's statement to Huly that he saw,

Every white man as an enemy to the black, and every black man an enemy to the white, they do not love each other and never will.....

In a new South Africa, for many months and at present, Archbishop Desmond Tutu has chaired a Truth Reconciliation Commission, details of incredible horror and atrocities ceaselessly pouring forth; black on black, black on white, and white on black. History indeed repeating itself.

In tracking down legends in order to show up myths we need a history book by the Zulu nation. Present books on the subject are from pens of Europeans who are biased on the side of their own people in these things, too often present the Native at a disadvantage. Why should we be told so often of these "Cattle stealing savages wantonly attacking unoffending white farmers"? Surely the Zulu must have some explanation of his own for all this, and there must be another side to the question" D.D.T. Jabavu. The Black Problem, Lovedale, 1920.

Editor's Endnote

1. The Battle of Blood River has been a mighty symbol ruthlessly exploited to further the political and religious cause of the Afrikaner. It is evident that South Africa's official history is in need of re-writing, and should be based on empirical evidence using primary and secondary sources rather than mythology.
2. Professor Ben Liebenberg in his paper* (see below) has argued that the significance of the Battle of Blood River was blown up out of all proportion by earlier Afrikaner historians. He wrote, "This view, that Blood River saved the great trek overestimates the significance of the battle. At that stage, only a section of the Voortrekkers were in Natal. The rest were in the present Transvaal and Orange Free State and they wanted to live there. If the Zulus had won at Blood River, the great trek would, at most, have failed in Natal and not elsewhere. It is therefore not correct to say that the victory at Blood River saved the great trek". Prof. Liebenberg has also sought to explode the myth that Blood River marked the birth of the Afrikaner nation.
*See *Myths surrounding Blood River and the Vow* Prof. Liebenberg. For further information see *The Afrikaners* Graham Leach Mandarin 1989.
3. Zulu folklore acknowledges their presence at Blood River but not that either a major battle took place nor that they suffered such serious casualties.
4. It is interesting that the Boers, armed with antiquated firearms, inflicted 3,000 Zulu fatalities at Blood River in the same length of time that the British defenders at Rorke's Drift, armed with more sophisticated breech loading Martini Henry rifles, accounted for 400 Zulus.
5. It was at Blood River that the Zulu learned to avoid a tightly compacted enemy in possession of firearms. They also discovered that the rounds fired by the Boers had a limited effective range. Over a distance of more than 200 yards the rounds would bounce off an angled shield. This knowledge resulted in the Zulu belief that their shields were magical, especially when doctored with 'muti', a belief held and maintained until the battle of Isandlwana in 1879.