



The Great Trek

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Pictures: Bureau for Information, National Cultural History and Open Air-Museum (Nasco), Africana Museum (AM)

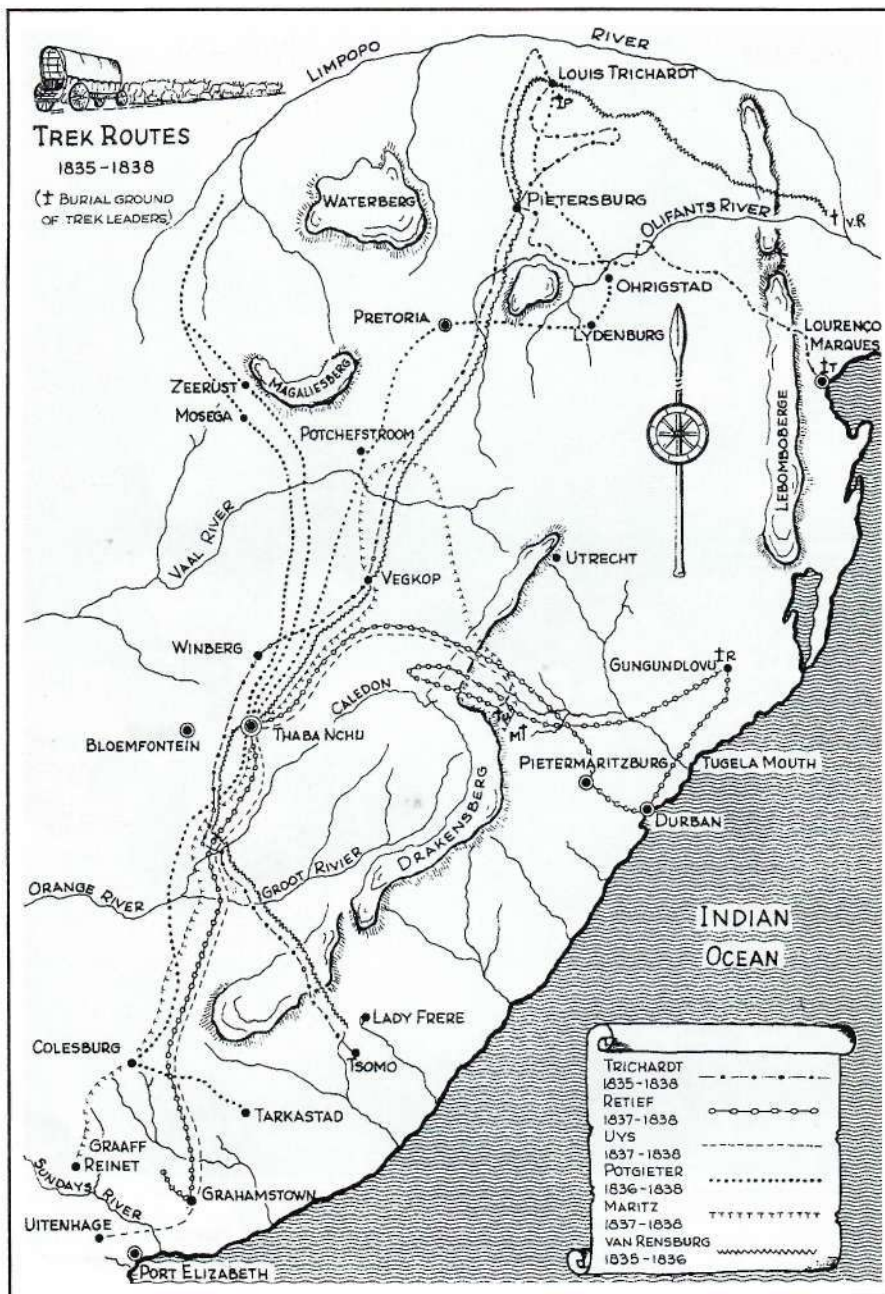
Layout: Peggy Serwas

JUST over 150 years ago some 6 000 farming folk, ten per cent of the White citizens of the British colony of the Cape of Good Hope, loaded their possessions on their ox-wagons and struck north across the Orange River to escape British rule and search for a land where they could live in peace and order their society according to their own lights.

This migration, one of several world-wide in the 19th century, became known as the Great Trek and those who took part as Voortrekkers. One of the key events of South African history, its significance and consequences are yet to be fully understood.

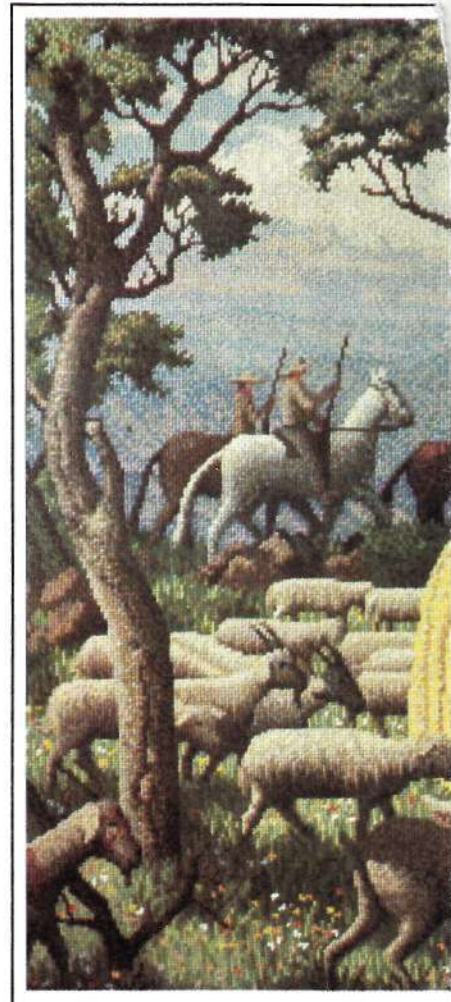
The trek culminated in the Battle of Blood River and the defeat of Dingane, king of the Zulus, in December 1838. A century later, in 1938, the trek was officially commemorated for the first time

The Great Trek, which heralded a new era in South Africa's history 150 years ago, was celebrated this year. Treks by ox-wagon took place all over the country. Here the ox-wagon of the *Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniginge* (federation of Afrikaans cultural societies) starts the long journey northwards from Cape Town to Pretoria on August 27, 1988 (Picture: Eckley Dykman)



The main routes of the trekker leaders as indicated in *Monuments and Trails of the Voortrekkers* by J L Small, 1968 (Africana Museum)

— with a symbolic re-enactment which ended with the laying of the foundation stone of the Voortrekker Monument on a hill south of Pretoria. This year, 150 years on, the trek was once again commemorated. This time, however, there were two symbolic re-enactments, a clear manifestation of an Afrikanerdom now divided on the significance of the trek and one of the key issues left unresolved in its wake — relationships between White and Black in South Africa. The major commemoration, organised by the *Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniging* (FAK), like its predecessor of 1938, ends at the Voortrekker Monument where, on 16 December 1988, the State Presi-



dent addresses the nation.

Who were these people who left a country which had been home to them and their forebears for two centuries, and what made them abandon a land hewn from the wilderness and cultivated with the blood and sweat of many generations?

The Voortrekkers were Afrikaners, or Boers, descendants of two main immigrant groups from Europe. The first were Dutch, the original band sent to the Cape by the Dutch East India Company (DEIC) in 1652 to establish a victualling station for its merchantmen, and those who came after them. The others were a group of 150 Huguenot refugees fleeing religious persecution in France. Soon cattle farmers followed hunters over the first ring of mountains in search of grazing and new farm lands. By 1750, a mere hundred years after Jan van Riebeeck had planted the Dutch flag in Table Bay, Africa's first White community had penetrated a thousand kilometres into the eastern interior, establishing sparse and ten



Louis Trichardt (Tregardt) (1783–1838), who headed one of the first groups of Voortrekkers to leave the Cape Colony. He trekked as far north as Delagoa Bay (today Maputo) where he and a number of his followers died of malaria (Illustration: Rudi Sennett, *Huisgenoot*)

uous settlements all along the way.

By now they no longer regarded themselves as expatriate Dutchmen settling and developing land for a company or a distant fatherland. The umbilical cord with Europe had been cut and, like their American contemporaries on the other side of the globe, they were making a permanent home for themselves and their children. Although only 15 000 in number, they had evolved a new spoken language, Afrikaans, the only Germanic language to originate outside Europe.

By about the middle of the 18th century these pioneers made the first substantive contact with Black tribes in the vicinity of the Great Fish River. These Xhosa-speaking people, vanguard of a south-easterly Black migration, were also hunters and stock farmers, but from a different world. They had never seen the wheel and their culture was not based on literacy and numeracy at all.

For the next century or more the Fish River remained the ever disputed

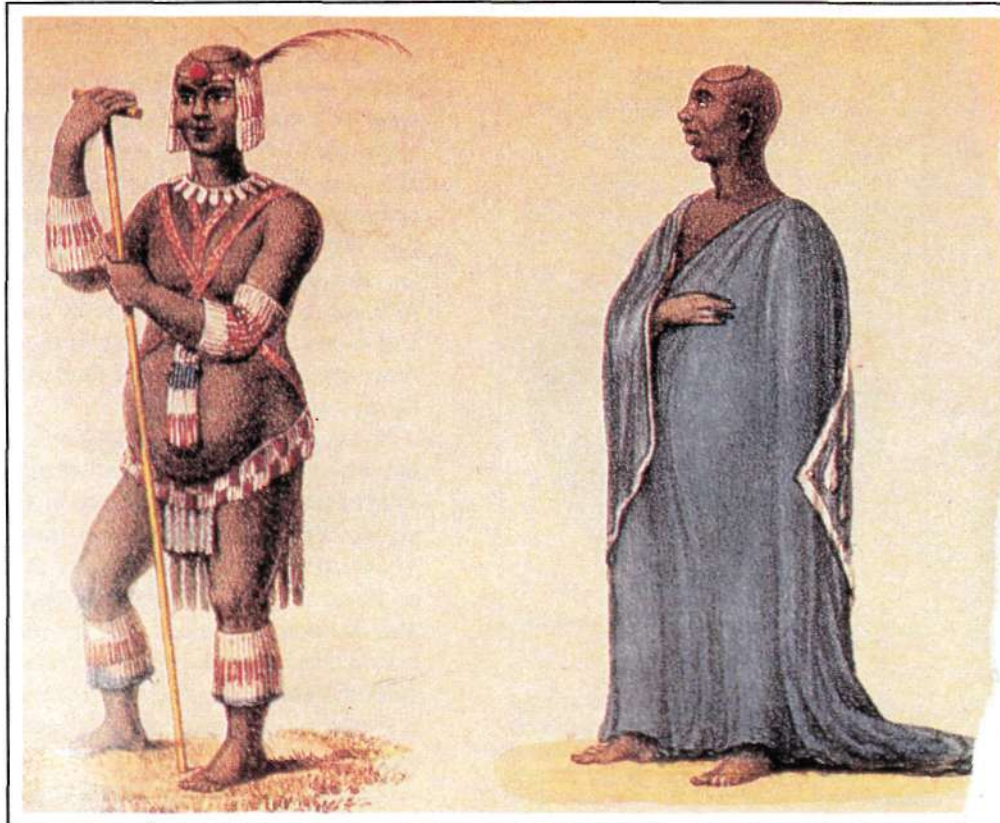
Blijde Vooruitzicht, a painting by W H Coetzer, is the subject of one of the tapestries woven for the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria.

The Voortrekkers had to cross rough terrain and high mountains before they reached their destinations. This panel shows the Piet Retief trek descending the slopes of the Ollivier Pass into Natal (Bureau for Information)



Hendrik Potgieter repelled an attack by the Matabeles at Vegkop in what is now the northern Orange Free State. Sixty years later the German artist Heinrich Egersdörfer captured the battle on canvas (Africana Museum)

Dingane, king of the Zulus, as he appeared to his subjects from day to day in the royal kraal, and in more elaborate dancing costume. These sketches by Captain A F Gardiner appeared in his book *Narrative of a Journey to the Zoolu Country*, 1836 (Africana Museum)



frontier between these Black and White immigrants who fought no fewer than nine frontier wars, the first in 1779 and the last a century later.

But even before the first frontier war the DEIC had lost control over the far-flung north-eastern districts of the Cape Colony. Cape Town was on the other side of the subcontinent and even there the company's rule had become ineffectual. In vain the embattled frontiersmen along the Fish River looked to Cape Town for protection against the marauding Xhosa tribesmen.

Britain, engaged in endless wars against the French and Dutch at the turn of the century, occupied the strategically important Cape for the second time in 1806. The first British occupation lasted from 1795 to 1803 when the Dutch repossessed the colony.

The Cape was the first and only British colony with an alien White community with an established identity of its own, including a language. The only way the authorities knew how to handle this was to embark on a policy

of anglicising the 26 000 Afrikaners.

In 1820 some 5 000 men, women and children were brought out from post-Waterloo Britain not only to redress the imbalance in numbers between Boer and Briton in the new colony, but also to act as a human buffer along the Fish River.

Except for a few rare occasions, the degree and quality of protection offered by the new authorities in Cape Town was no better than that provided in the days of the DEIC. The frontiersmen suffered one policy reversal after another. One governor would allow them to recover their stolen cattle, only for his successor to rescind that concession. One year tribesmen would be forbidden entry into the colony, only to be issued with passes the next year to look for work in the Cape. In 1833 the British government actually forbade these farmers, both Boer and British, to organise themselves into commandos to defend themselves or recover stolen cattle, even though the regular troops stationed on the frontier were pitifully inadequate for this purpose. In the sixth frontier war the following year, the farmers lost 114 930 head of cattle, 5 715 horses and 160 000 sheep, while 456 homesteads were burnt to the ground and 58 ox-wagons destroyed. While the government reneged on its promises of compensation for these grievous losses it still demanded the usual taxes.

At the same time a law was passed

to abolish slavery as from December 1834. What riled those few pioneers in the east who owned slaves, was not so much their impending liberation, but the procedure that was to be followed. The compensation offered was less than half the value of the slaves and this was payable only in British government stock in London.

Meanwhile, unchronicled and largely unknown to most Whites in the Cape

Colony of the time, a drama of cataclysmic dimensions was being enacted much further north. By the second decade of the 19th century Shaka had subjugated many Nguni tribes to forge the powerful Zulu nation in what is today Natal. Fearing the growing despotism of Shaka, Mzilikazi, one of his greatest warriors, broke away and led 20 000 of his followers across the Drakensberg, eventually founding the Matabele tribe in the Magaliesberg range

near present-day Pretoria. From here he unleashed a series of devastating internecine wars against and among the Sotho peoples of the South African highveld. In a kind of domino effect, tribe fell upon tribe in an orgy of bloodshed. Whole tribes were annihilated while others were scattered into distant and inaccessible corners of the country. In this holocaust, known in various African languages as the *difaqane* or *mfecane*, vast areas of the highveld interior were depopulated and laid waste.

Meanwhile, utterly disillusioned with

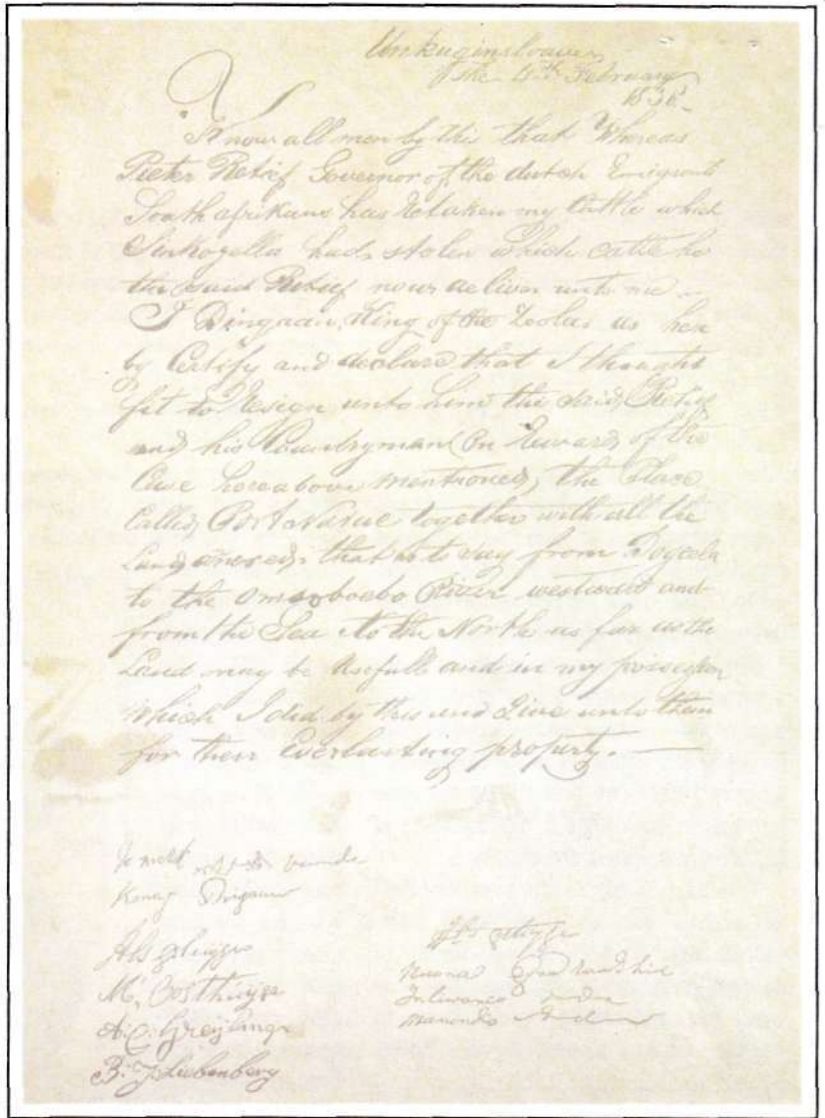


Hendrik Potgieter (1792–1852) strongly believed that the Voortrekkers should move further north and establish contact with the Portuguese colonies along the east coast, and so avoid British interference. He was instrumental in opening the hinterland
(Illustration: Rudi Sennett, *Hulsgenoof*)



A copy of the treaty concluded between Dingane and Retief on February 4, 1838. The original treaty was found near Retief's body on December 21, 1838 (Africana Museum)

Piet Retief (1780-1838), could have been the one leader to unite the individual groups comprising the Great Trek had he not been murdered by Dingane (Illustration: Rudi Sennett, Huisgenoot)



Piet Retief's Bible and hymn-book. Both are kept in the museum at the Voortrekker Monument. The Bible was printed in 1749 and the hymn book in 1819 in Amsterdam (Nasco)



This is how Thomas Baines visualised the Zulu attacks on the trekker laagers at the Bloukrans River in February 1838. The painting was based on eye-witness accounts of the battle (Africana Museum)

British policy on the eastern frontier, the White pioneers had despatched a number of scouting parties northwards across the Orange River to discover where the best prospects were for a land that would truly be their own, where they could establish their own government and practise their traditional policy of differentiating between themselves and any Black races they might encounter.

The interior beyond the Orange was not entirely unknown. In times of severe drought farmers had sought temporary grazing north of the river and hunters had penetrated much further, often returning with glowing reports of the lush savannah plains stretching from horizon to horizon and teeming with game.

Three reconnoitring parties were commissioned. Johannes Andries Preorius headed north-west, penetrating

as far as Damaraland in present-day South West Africa/Namibia. The party under J Scholtz rode due north to reach the Zoutpansberg near the Limpopo River, while Pieter Lafras Uys made his way through Transkei to reach Dingane, Shaka's successor, towards the end of 1834. The latter group returned with encouraging reports of the potential of Natal and the news that Dingane was prepared to grant them a large tract of land.

The scene was set. Farmers in the districts of Graaff-Reinet, Uitenhage, Somerset, Cradock, Tarka, Grahams-town and even as far west as Beaufort-West and Swellendam, began to sell their farms and hoard ammunition in secret. They knew they would be breaking the law when they took arms and ammunition across the border. Nor could they openly discuss the founding of a new independent state elsewhere.

That would have been tantamount to sedition.

The British government and its officials at the Cape knew that something was afoot but they differed among themselves as to what should be done to thwart these plans for a mass emigration. In the end, the governments in Cape Town and London found they could do little more than threaten the application of one or two ineffectual laws, such as the Cape of Good Hope Punishment Act of 1836.

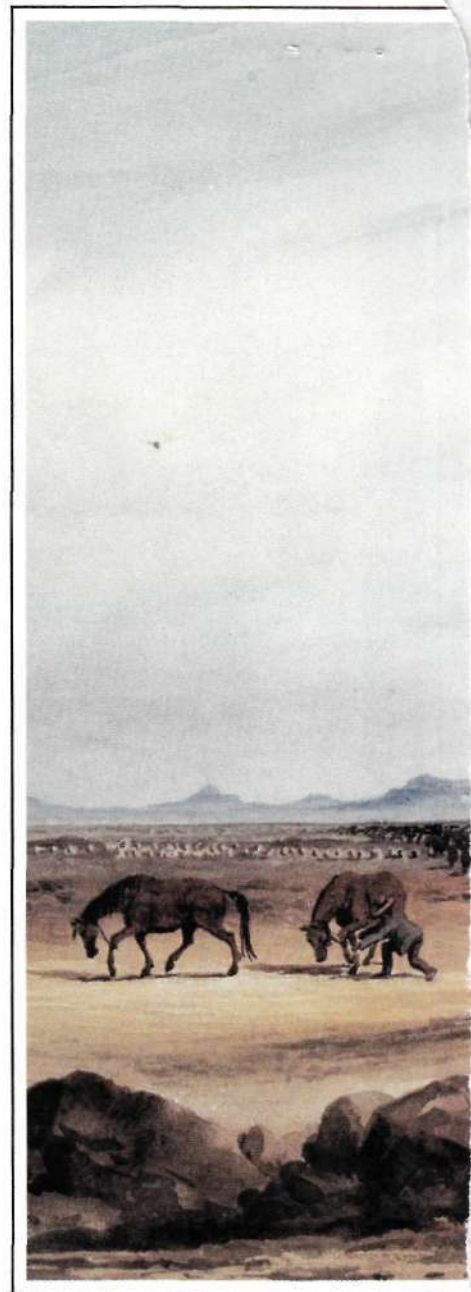
Nevertheless, the leaders of the early groups of trekkers went about their preparations surreptitiously. First to leave were the parties of Louis Tri-chardt (Tregardt) and Hans van Rensburg, in 1835. Remaining in close contact with one another, they headed due

Voortrekker girls played mostly with ragdolls while the boys collected knuckle-bones to use as 'oxen' for their wagons (Nasco)



Personal belongings of trekkers:
 a pair of binoculars,
 a Bible with silver clasps,
 a wooden shaving-box,
 brightly-coloured glass perfume bottles,
 a snuff-box, a jack-knife,
 a mustard jar (which belonged to
 Hans 'Dons' de Lange),
 a copper candlestick and
 a soapstone pipe with
 silver adornment (Nasco)

Gerrit Maritz (1797-1838),
 a highly educated man
 for his time. The Voortrek-
 kers turned to him
 for guidance in
 the dark days
 after Retief's death
 and the murders at Bloukrans
 (Illustration: Rudi Sennett, *Huisgenoot*)



north through Trans-Orangia (the Orange Free State of today) to the Zoutpansberg region. From here Van Rensburg took eight families and struck east in an attempt to reach the Portuguese East African port of Delagoa Bay (later Lourenco Marques and now Maputo). Somewhere along the eastern reaches of the Limpopo River he and his party were wiped out by a group of Zulus, for ever displaced and put to flight by the *difaqane*.

Trichardt eventually followed in van Rensburg's tracks and stopped in the vicinity of the present-day town of Louis Trichardt (which was named after him) to await the arrival of later trekkers whom he hoped to persuade



**Cattle farmers outspanning
in the Karoo by C D Bell,
painted about 1836 (Africana Museum)**

to make for Delagoa Bay with him.

Meanwhile the main group of trekkers under the leadership of Hendrik Potgieter had left the colony without fanfare in either late 1835 or early 1836. From Thaba Nchu in south-eastern Trans-Orangia which had by that time become a kind of staging post or crossroads for the trekkers, Potgieter, on separate journeys, explored the western, central and northern Transvaal. Gerrit Maritz and his party set out from Graaff-Reinet in September 1836 and joined the others at Thaba Nchu.

Mzilikazi, meanwhile, had been watching this influx of White settlers with growing suspicion and fear. Eventually he decided to go on the offens-

ive. His assault on Potgieter's party at Vegkop in eastern Trans-Orangia was repulsed with severe losses on his part. Later Potgieter and Maritz joined forces to drive Mzilikazi further northwards. These two leaders also set up the first trekker administration in Trans-Orangia.

The next notable leader to leave the Cape Colony was Piet Retief, who gave his reasons for emigrating in a manifesto published in the *Graham's Town Journal* of 2 February 1837. To a greater or lesser extent, these were also the reasons of most of those who had gone before him.

When Retief arrived in Trans-Orangia he found growing dissension among

the other leaders as to which way the trek should go. Potgieter opted for the far northern Transvaal with access to Delagoa Bay, as this would virtually guarantee freedom from interference by the British. Retief, Maritz and Piet Uys (who left the colony in April 1837) favoured Natal, especially the lush coastal plain between the Tugela and Umzimvubu rivers. The election of Piet Retief as overall leader of the trekkers with the title of 'governor' failed to put an end to the strife among the leaders. Nevertheless, it was decided to acquire Port Natal as harbour and put an

end once and for all to the Matabele threat. Potgieter and Uys drove Mzilikazi across the Limpopo River into present-day Zimbabwe, and Retief visited Port Natal in October 1837.

He also arranged a meeting with Dingane who agreed to grant the Voortrekkers all the land between the Tugela and Umzimvubu rivers and the Drakensberg range in the west, provided they restored to him cattle stolen by Sekonyela to prove they were not responsible for the theft. Retief kept his part of the bargain and returned the cattle to Dingane at his capital Ungungundlovu. After the land treaty had been signed, Retief and his unarmed company of 70 Whites and 30 Non-White outriders were set upon and brutally murdered. And in the dead of night Dingane dispatched his impis to wipe out the remaining trekkers awaiting Retief's return in their laagers along the Bloukrans and Bushman rivers. A Boer commando under Potgieter and Uys launched a counter attack but was ambushed at Italeni where Uys and his son Dirk were killed. Disillusioned at being accused of cowardice for his share in this disastrous encounter, Potgieter returned across the Drakensberg to pursue his ideal of freedom on the central highlands. Next, the British settlers of Port Natal joined forces with the remaining trekkers in an assault on Dingane in the lower Tugela valley. This attack was also repulsed, with heavy losses on the part of the settlers.

Maritz died in September and two months later, in response to a call for help from the Natal trekkers, there arrived from Graaff-Reinet a man who was destined to play a definitive role in the destiny of the Boers. He was Andries Pretorius, who had earlier also taken part in the campaign against

Mzilikazi. Elected chief commandant, he departed with a commando of about 470 men (including a few English settlers of Port Natal and some Black servants), 500 horses and a train of 64 wagons, on a punitive mission against Dingane. He formed a laager on the



Andries Pretorius (1798–1853), the hero of the Battle of Blood River. He later played a major role in securing British recognition for the independence of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. This painting, which hangs in the Voortrekker Monument, is believed to be the work of G Hauser (Picture: Nelia Botha)

banks of the Ngome River.

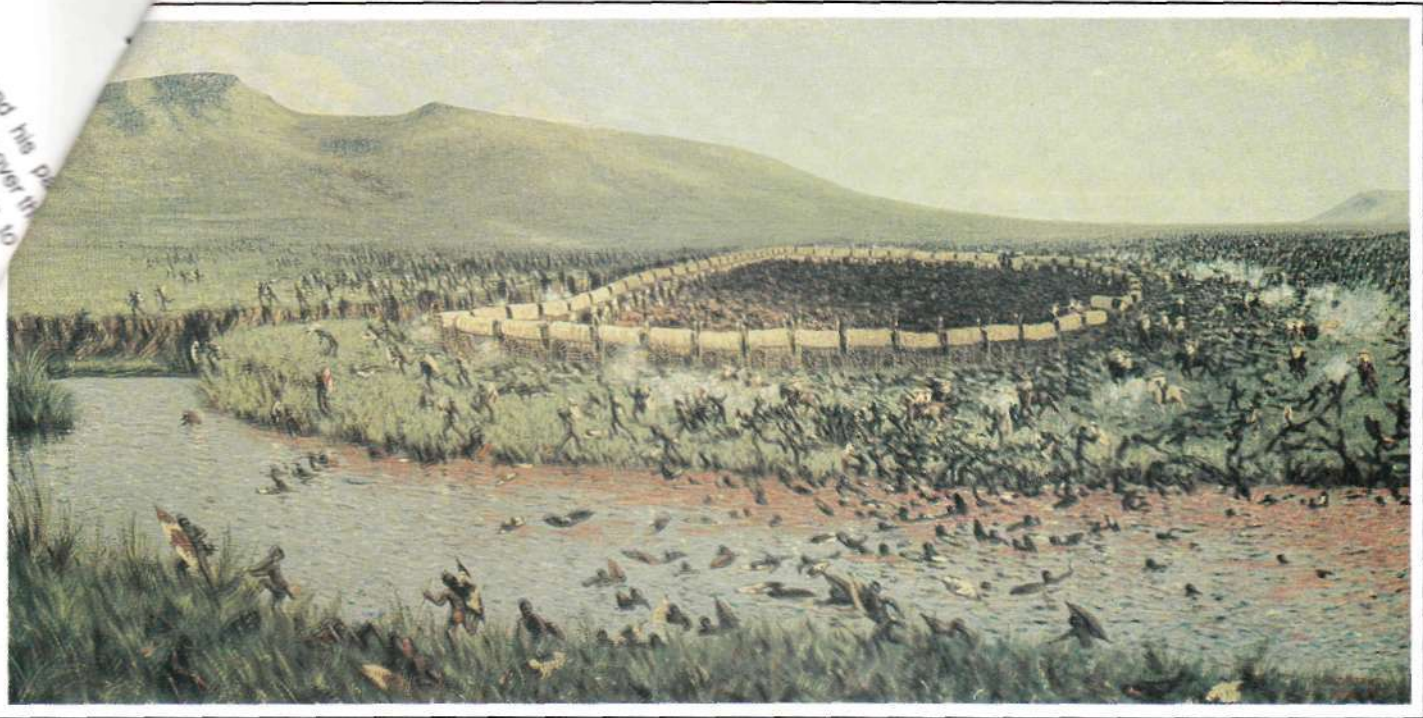
A Zulu army of 12 000 duly attacked on the morning of 16 December 1838. The Boers held off wave upon wave of frenzied impis. In the end about 3 000 Zulus lay dead.

Before the battle of Blood River, as the river was renamed, the Boers had made a covenant with God that if he should grant them victory, they would build a church in his honour and they and their descendants would for ever commemorate the occasion.

Meanwhile Trichardt and his party had made the perilous journey over the mountains from the Zoutpansberg to Delagoa Bay, which they reached on 13 April 1838. Here he and most of his people died of malaria. Those who survived were eventually taken by boat to Port Natal in July 1839.

Following a few more skirmishes in which he could make no headway against the Boers, Dingane in March 1839 sent envoys to Pretorius in Port Natal to sue for a permanent peace, which he failed to observe. Early the following year his half-brother Mpande rose against him and sought the Boers' assistance. Some 350 men under the command of Andries Pretorius, helped Mpande to crush Dingane in the battle of the Makonko Hills in February 1840. The military might of the Zulus was finally broken and the Boers could now begin to establish farms on the land granted to Retief. At the same time, however, thousands of displaced and dispossessed Zulus returned to Natal and the *Volksraad* of the newly established Republic of Natalia adopted stringent new measures to enforce territorial segregation, especially along the southern border.

Alarmed at these measures and fearful of the possible consequences for British supremacy in southern Africa of the new republics' growing contacts with the Netherlands and France, Britain landed an expeditionary force in Port Natal early in 1842. The Boers under Andries Pretorius, having easily repulsed with heavy casualties the British night assault at Congella, proceeded to lay siege to the invaders. It was during this siege that Dick King, a British soldier in Port Natal, undertook his epic 900-km journey on horseback to Grahamstown to summon help for the beleaguered

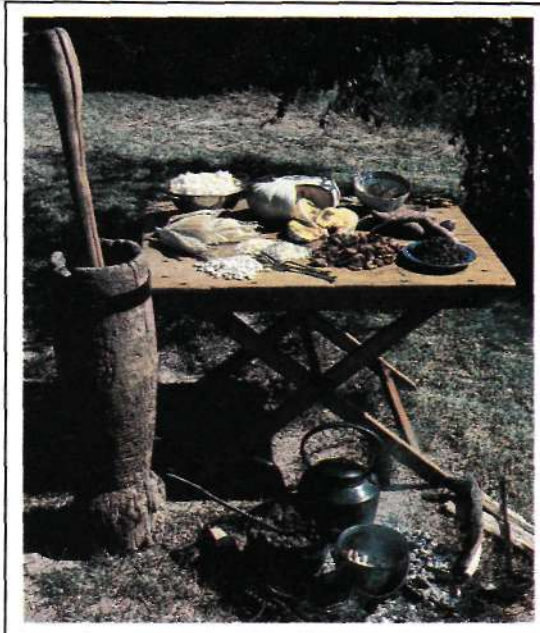


The Battle of Blood River on 16 December 1838, as depicted by W H Coetzer. This painting hangs in the Voortrekker Museum in Pietermaritzburg (Picture: Bureau for Information)



Ox-wagons in Adderley Street, Cape Town, at the start of the trek, one hundred years after the historical events of 1838 (Picture: *Die Burger*)

The usual fare of the Voortrekkers. The pounding block was used to ground grain (Nasco)





The Transvaal provincial commemoration festival of the Great Trek was held at Loftus Versfeld, Pretoria, on October 22, 1988. There were drum majorettes, various choirs, and a mass gymnastic display, as well as a colourful procession of floats and two ox-wagons, one of which originally belonged to the Trekker leader, Louis Trichardt

British. Relief came in June 1842 and a month later the *Volksraad* agreed to accept British rule. The following year Natal was annexed by Britain and the Voortrekkers' first republic disappeared from the scene.

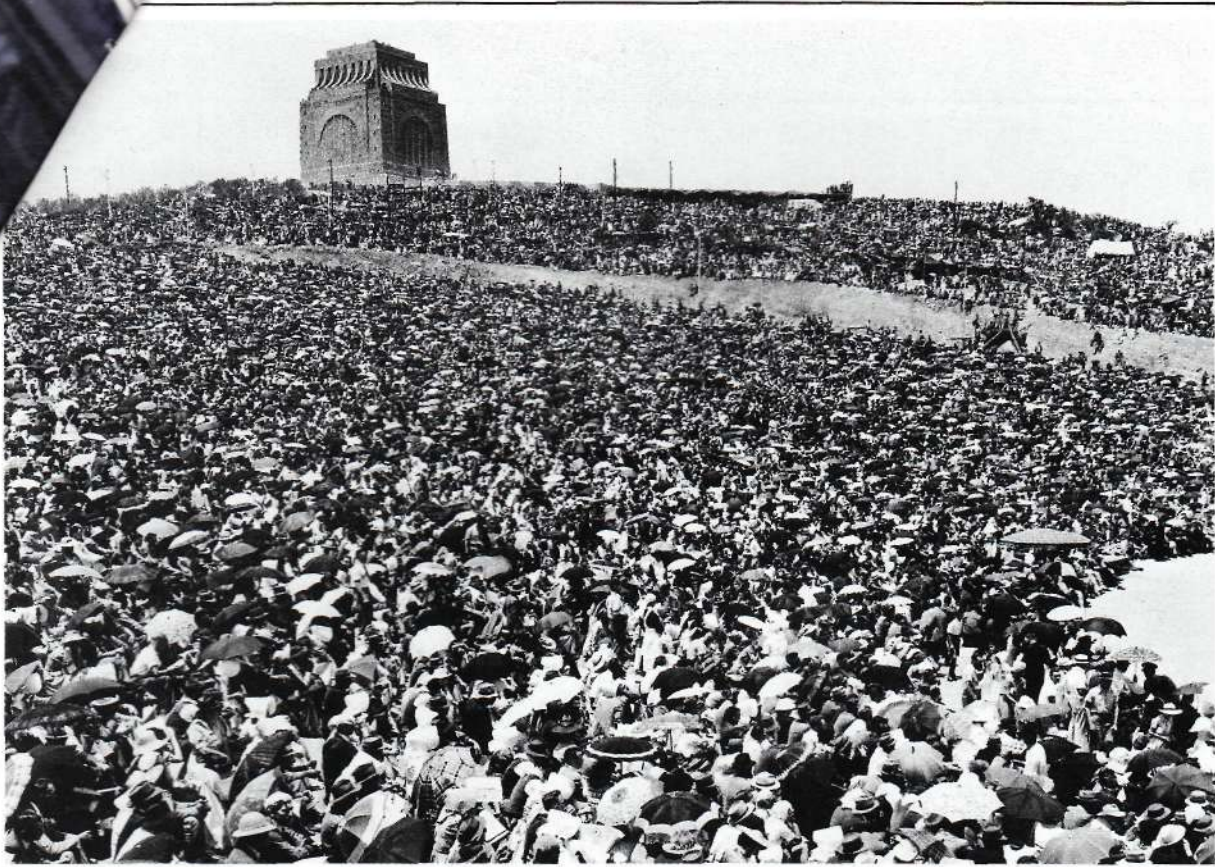
Soon most of the Natal Voortrekkers retraced their steps across the Drakensberg to join their fellows on the highveld of Trans-Orangia and the Transvaal. Britain continued to regard

the Voortrekkers north of the Orange River as British subjects and went through all the motions of governing and keeping the peace in these regions. Eventually, however, worsening security problems in the colony persuaded the imperial government to jettison rather than take on new responsibilities. So, in 1852 Britain signed the Sand River Convention to grant the Boers north of the Vaal their independence. Two years later those between the Orange and Vaal were also given their freedom. Half a century later both these republics — the Transvaal and the Orange Free State — once again lost their independence to Britain in the Anglo-Boer War.

What was the significance of the Great Trek? How does one assess its consequences?

The first point to be made is that the Voortrekkers failed to realise their major objective — to establish an independent nation state where they and their descendants could isolate themselves from other indigenous peoples and be the sole masters of their political and economic destinies. In all their republics, some rather more ephemeral than others, they were forever embroiled in land disputes with subjugated Black tribes.

And today, 150 years after the Great Trek, the crucial political issue is still how to accommodate the legitimate political and other aspirations of the various Black peoples included within the borders of the Republic of South Africa. On this issue the descendants of the Voortrekkers are deeply divided.



The inauguration of the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria on December 16, 1949, was witnessed by thousands of people. The granite monument was designed by Dr Gerhard Moerdyk (Picture: Bureau for Information)



An example of the traditional dress worn by Voortrekker women. The Voortrekkers were deeply religious and the Bible was always close at hand

Some achievements are beyond dispute. The Voortrekkers and their progeny transformed the plains of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal from the killing fields they were in the early 19th century to the tilled lands which feed millions today. They brought an end to the internecine bloodshed and introduced the Black tribes to the Bible and books of learning. They built churches, later schools and hospitals. Today there are six times as many Blacks in South Africa

as there were when Van Riebeeck beached his boats in Table Bay. This is rather more than can be said for the indigenous populations of other New World countries where settlers of the Old World of Europe built new nations during much the same period.

The Voortrekkers also laid the foundations for the development of South

Africa into the most highly industrialised nation in Africa, on whose physical and technological infrastructure and manufacturing capacity many millions of people in southern Africa depend. Their presence on the Witwatersrand towards the end of the 19th century brought forward by many years the discovery of the world's richest gold reef, which attracted the many people who later built the factories and discovered and developed the other mineral riches for which South Africa is renowned.

These are some of the consequences of the Great Trek which can be assessed and quantified with a measure of certainty. Others, as yet imponderable, are not likely to be fully understood before another century or two have passed across the face of Africa. □