Contents

List of maps 11
List of illustrations 12
Acknowledgements 14
Author's note 15

Chapter 1: The Portuguese search for the land of milk and honey 17
San—Prester John—Batholomeu Dias—voyages of exploration—
Khoikhoi—death of de Almeida

Chapter 2: British flirtation with the Cape 33
Secret route—English East India Company—trade with the Khoikhoi—
Core—the Cape as a penal colony—Britain claims the Cape—
Harry—the Haarlem

Chapter 3: Second chance for Van Riebeeck 45
Van Riebeeck arrives—starvation—Eva—slavery—Doman—
free burghers—first Khoikhoi—Dutch war—Van Meerhof—Trekboers—
the Castle—Van Quelberg—French annexation and European wars—
second Khoikhoi war

Chapter 4: Reaching the land of the Xhosa 66
Simon van der Stel—establishment of law and order—
exploring the interior—Stavenisse—land of the Xhosa—Rolihlahla

Chapter 5: The birth of the Trekboers 78
French Huguenots—Khoikhoi wars—Klaas—Willem van der Stel—
trade restrictions lifted—Trekboers—clash of the Xhosa and Trekboers—
corruption and privilege—Adam Tas—rebellion—smallpox—
commando system—660 men drown in Table Bay—
death of Noordt—Chief Phalo—Barbier’s execution—
loan farms—Tulbagh—Meermin—Van Plettenberg

Chapter 6: Corruption and discontent 99
Trekboers move on—shoot to kill—Van Jaarsveld—tobacco massacre—
First Frontier War—boundaries pushed—Xhosa resistance—Maynier—
abandonment of farms—Coenraad de Buys—Second Frontier War—
Nationals—Graaff-Reinet revolt

Chapter 7: The return of the ‘Bushmen of the Sea’ 112
Little Paris—William of Orange—Patriots—British troops arrive—
Gordon’s death—Stockenström—Graaff-Reinet rebellion—Macartney—
Lady Anne Barnard—De Buys outlawed—Ngqika—new boundaries—
ill treatment of Hottentots—Vandeleur marches on Graaff-Reinet—
Redcoats at the Sundays River—defiance of Chungwa—
Lieutenant Chumney—attack on Boers—Boer unhappiness
Chapter 8: God’s messengers arrive

Slaves—the slave lodge—sex and the slaves—Cupido—famous names—free blacks—Afrikaner—the first missionaries—Van der Kemp—De Buys and Nggika—Ndlambe—Stuurman—Cape under Batavia—

Third Frontier War

Chapter 9: The wheel turns

Split of the Xhosa—France and Britain at war—return of the British—Britain takes the Cape—Caledon—Andries Stockenström—Xhosa cross the line—Ndlambe refuses to budge—Cradock—

Fourth Frontier War—end of the Fourth Frontier War

Chapter 10: Execution at Slagtersnek

Chain of forts—words rather than deeds—quitrent system—Booy and Bezuidenhout—anger mounts—Slagtersnek—the role of the prophets—Somerset—Spoor Law—Battle of Amalinde—

Fifth Frontier War—attack on Grahamstown

Chapter 11: Lambs to the slaughter: 1820 Settlers

1820 Settlers—a long way from home—Somerset—Piet Retief—shoddy work—bankruptcy and financial ruin—newspapers—new boundaries—London Missionary Society—Anti-Slavery Society—Commissioner General of the Frontier—Ordinance 50—expulsion of Maqoma

Chapter 12: Going … going … going

Feelings of uncertainty—Louis Trichardt—poverty and ruin—Slavery Abolishment Act—Retief plans to leave—Uys—Potgieter—exploratory treks

Chapter 13: “The land is dead!”

Journey to Natal—Hintsa—Sixth Frontier War—Boers on the move—d’Urban; Maqoma’s frustration—slave compensation—
invasion of the Colony—panic and fear—Salem and Gush—Xhosa attack Bathurst—enter Colonel Harry Smith—attack on Tyali—Boers drafted into the army—bush war—Cape Mounted Rifles—soldiers or herders?—across the Kei—the Mfengu—demands on Hintsa—the Mfengu become British—Queen Adelaide—the murder of Hintsa

Chapter 14: Bitter is the aloe and bitter are the Boers

Sarili—illegal arms trade—missionary rivalry—Select Committee on Aboriginals—South African Commercial Advertiser—troop reinforcements—peace signed—land given to Mfengu—Lord Glenelg—Boer anger at Stockenström—slave compensation error—Glenelg disenchanted with d’Urban—rumour sweeps the frontier—
the Voortrekkers; Trichardt and Van Rensberg—Cilliers—crossing the Orange—Thaba ‘Nchu—Glenelg rejects occupation of Queen Adelaide—Retief takes up the cudgels—Matabele—Mfecane—Griqua—Archbell
Chapter 26: “We have seen the Promised Land but only one of us was chosen to live in it” 351
Natal population grows—Stockenström investigated—Landman annexes Durban—Napier wishes to occupy Durban—plans to avenge Retiefs death—attack on Gatsrand—attends to curtail the Boers—death of Maritz

Chapter 27: The river ran red 361
Pietermaritzburg—apprentices—Napier plans troops for Durban—news of Pretorius—The Vow—Battle of Blood River

Chapter 28: Final closure 381
After the battle—Umgungundhlovu revisited—Boers tricked—the trap—Battle of Umfolozi—the British size up the Boers—Pretorius seeks help—Church of the Vow—Dingane turns to the British—Jervis—Pretorius appointed Chief Commandant—Dingane repulsed by the Swazis—Volksraad—Stockenström returns

Chapter 29: Betrayal and murder 398
Mphande meets Volksraad—Mphande installed as king of emigrant Zulus—Dingane reneges on cattle debt—Natal Association—British depart—Beeskommando—execution of Tambuza—death of Umhlela—death of Dingane

Chapter 30: Dark clouds of war 418
Boer Republic—Potgieter seeks seaport—Potchefstroom—Volksraad clips Pretorius’s wings—the Bhaca—more trouble from the missionaries—British camp at Umngazi River—Russell instructs Napier—Boers “not British”—Pretorius resigns—Pretorius re-instated—troops march from Umngazi—arrival of the Brazilia—Smellekamp

Chapter 31: Boer vs Brit in Durban 435
Smellekamp arrested—Smith’s troops arrive—negotiations fail—Volksraad instructs Pretorius, “Drive out the British!”—Battle of Congella—Dick King’s ride—the Conch—plight of the British troops—truce signed

Chapter 32: “Barefoot over the mountains to die in freedom” 453
Boer defiance—faction fighting—Potgieter scorns Pretorius—Henry Cloete—return of Smellekamp—Zulu refugees—Suzanne Smit—Mocke’s planned annexation—troops return—patriots—Volksraad buckles—Boer marriages—Natal incorporated into the Cape Colony

Chapter 33: Enter the Griqua and Basotho 468
Moshoeshoe—Union Flag at the Orange—Adam Kok—Griqua prepare for war—British troops move again—dividing up the land—meeting of the chiefs

Chapter 34: North of the Vaal 478
Andries Ohrigstad—Sekwati—Potgieter and Volksraad dash—meeting in Lydenburg—departure of Cloete—Location siting for Zulus—Pretorius meets with Stockenström—Pretorius snubbed by authorities
Chapter 35: Arrogance and humiliation

Klipriver Boers—West—return of Sir Harry Smith—insult of Maqoma—
British Kaffraria—Smith and Moshoeshoe—Smith meets with Pretorius—
Smith shocked—Smith breaks his word

Chapter 36: Orange River Colony

Pretorius lobbies support—Orange River Sovereignty—Warden—
Pretorius in Potchefstroom—death of Christina Pretorius

Chapter 37: Battle of Boomplaats

Troops cross the Orange—the battle—rebel execution—rebellion—
Hendrik Buurman—Potgieter and Pretorius vie for power—
Volksraad of Ohrigstad

Chapter 38: Dividing the cake

The Basotho and Tlokwe fight—meeting of Warden and the chiefs—
border proposals—Boers fight for the British

Chapter 39: Peace at last

In search of allies—Pretorius expresses desire for peace—
outlawing of Pretorius annulled—Pretorius the peace negotiator—
meeting planned for Sand River—Sand River Convention—
Pretorius and Potgieter reconciled

Notes
Bibliography
Index
List of maps

Sebastian Munster’s map, ca 1535 21
Standard map of South Africa, mid-17th century 43
The Cape Interior, ca 1770 97
The extent of white settlement, 1795 111
The extent of the Colony in 1805 143
Cradock/Somerset observation posts, 1812–17, and ceded territory forts, 1819–22 156
Extent of the Colony in 1826 177
Scene of hostilities, 1834–5 200
Trek routes, 1835–6 231
Vaal River murders, 21–23 August 1836 247
Nine-day battle of Marico, November 1837 267
Voortrekker routes over the Drakensberg 281
Umgungundlovu: Dingane’s royal capital 299
Position of wagons: Zulu attack on 17 February 1838 333
Extent of the Cape Colony in 1838 358
Battle of Blood River, 16 December 1838 374
Battle of White Umfolozi, 27 December 1838 390
Republic of Natalia 425
Sketch of Port Natal showing attack by British troops under Captain Smith on Boers 448
Griqua, Basotho and Pondo states 482
Battle of Boomplaats 514
The Trekker republics 531
List of illustrations

A Boer dagga pipe, fashioned from a kudu horn. Ntonyanine Museum
Johannes Theodosius van der Kemp.
Xhosa Chief Ngqika. Cape Archives
Hintsa, Paramount Chief of the Xhosa. Cape Archives
Shaka, king of the Zulu. From a sketch by Lieutenant James King, a Port Natal merchant.
Lord Charles Somerset, governor of the Cape colony, 1814–27. South African Library, Cape Town
Sir Andries Stockenström. South African Library, Cape Town
Colonel Harry Smith in 1835.
Colonel Sir Harry Smith, governor of the Cape colony 1847–52. South African Library, Cape Town
Xhosa Chief Maqoma. South African Library, Cape Town
Sarel Cilliers.
Andries Wilhelms Jacobus Pretorius. G. Hauser / Voortrekker Monument
An engraving of outspanned Voortrekkers.
The field of battle at Vegkop as seen today. Robin Binckes
The striking monument to the Battle of Vegkop. Robin Binckes
Sir Benjamin d’Urban, governor of the Cape colony, 1834–38.
Umgungundlovu today. Robin Binckes
Dingane and his dog, Marquillana.
A stylized illustration of Dingane, done by R. Caton Woodville in 1847.
The treaty between Retief and Dingane, dated 4 February 1838. It was found ten months later, in a saddlebag near Retief’s remains.
Dingane’s killing fields at kwaMatiwane. Robin Binckes
The Voortrekker memorial to Piet Retief and his men, kwaMatiwane. Robin Binckes
Dingane’s spring where his maidens drew water, taken in 2011. Robin Binckes
The Battle of Blood River.
The Battle of Blood River.
The Battle of Blood River.
Voortrekker leader Andries Hendrik Potgieter, with his second wife, the widow Van Emmenis.
Blood River. Robin Binckes
The direction from which the trekkers approached at Blood River. Robin Binckes
The direction of the Zulu attack at Blood River. Robin Binckes
Boer cannon at Blood River. Robin Binckes
The Boer laager at Blood River. Robin Binckes
Major T.C. Smith. Durban Museum
The British camp at Port Natal. Jardine Collection
HMS Southampton covers the troop landings at Port Natal, 25 June 1842. Jardine Collection
Richard King.
Justice Cloete, 1861.
A Pietermaritzburg street scene, c. 1843–44. From pencil drawing by Colonel Coxon.
The meeting of Pretorius and Potgieter at Rustenburg, 16 March 1852.
The Great Trek Centenary, 1936. This was a seminal event in Boer history and did much to stir Afrikaner nationalism.
Although the Great Trek Centenary was celebrated across the country, the primary event was held over several days at the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria, with all the participants in period dress.
Here 2,000 folk dancers perform at the Centenary in Pretoria.
Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my wife Margie, who read every word and supported me every inch of the way. My children also encouraged me on this long journey with their comments. Bearnárd O’Riain, knowing how I love to be praised, said all the right things to ensure that when I flagged, I would push on instead of giving up. Similarly, Tony O’Hagan took the time to read my manuscript and provided commentary that encouraged me to continue. Frank van der Tas read and commented on the manuscript and patiently pointed out errors that I had made.

I look to Peter Harris for inspiration, as he is an exemplary South African writer. I am thankful to the staff at the Cape Town Archives and the library at the Voortrekker Monument as well as to Chris and Kerrin Cocks, who gave me a break and published my historical novel Canvas under the Sky, giving me the wonderful opportunity to write the The Great Trek. I appreciate that many of my friends stood by me and encouraged me when Canvas under the Sky created controversy. Thank you all for having faith in me. I hope that this book lives up to your expectations and justifies your belief in me.

To Kate O’Connor who painstakingly edited the manuscript, thank you.

To Chris Gibbons, Jackie Grobler, Jacques Pauw, Mongane Serote, Jeremy Maggs and Nick Binedell who took the time and trouble not only to read the manuscript but also to comment and make suggestions. Thank you.

To the Voortrekkers, those men women and children who inspired Canvas under the Sky and the subsequent The Great Trek, I thank you and salute your memory. I hope that as you look down, you feel I have done justice to your story and are as proud of me as I am of you.

Robin Binckes
Johannesburg
January 2013
Author’s note

“Until the lions are taught to write, history will always be written by the hunters”
—anonymous

The idea for this book is from Chris and Kerrin Cocks of 30º South, my publishers. When I first met them with my manuscript Canvas under the Sky, a historical novel on the Great Trek, they proposed that I expand certain concepts. The book thus evolved into a journey through our country’s history.

Although the focus is on the Great Trek, it is impossible to divorce this incredible journey from earlier events in southern Africa. It is also impossible to divorce the effects of the Great Trek from the events of today. While this story concludes in 1852, it is in reality still unfolding today. The Great Trek was the epicentre of a cultural, economic, military and social explosion that spanned the length of this country, leaving behind a legacy that should be treasured forever. The story of the Voortrekkers is often associated with the Afrikaners. However, the journey of the Voortrekkers belongs to all South Africans—Black, White, Coloured and Indian. For too long, the story had been sanitized, with the characters presented as cardboard cut-outs and the events resembling scenes from a play with poor actors. The story is anything but bland. It entails passion, pride, violence and compassion as well as courage and is arguably the most exciting story in our history.

Storytelling is one of the traditions of our people. In The Great Trek, I have endeavoured to present a narrative that will be enjoyable to readers as well as document our history for future generations. The story and facts speak for themselves. However, in writing this book, I travelled from Cape Town to the banks of the Zambezi, from the White Umfolozi River to Blood River and Maputo. I have been a conduit for some of the greatest recorders of our history, such as Gustav S. Preller, G.E. Cory, George McCall Theal, G.B.A. Gerdener, E.J.G. Norval, Richard Elphick, J.M. Soga, John Bird, Noel Mostert, J.B. Peires and, of course, for some of the characters’ own writings and diaries, such as those of William Wood, Jan Bantjies, Reverend Smit, Allen Gardiner, Louis Trichardt, Sarel Cilliers, Dutch explorer Robert Gordon and French explorer and adventurer Adolphe Delegorgue, as well as many more.

I have attempted to channel their thoughts and feelings and have included many facts in an attempt to entertain and inform. I have been guided in my efforts by the styles and techniques used in Philip Caputo’s A Rumor of War, Antony Beevor’s D-Day: The Battle for Normandy, Martin Windrow’s The Last Valley, Justin Cartwright’s To Heaven by Water and Peter Harris’s In a Different
Time. I hope that their influence is evident in my work and, if it is not, then I have done them a disservice. For the past three years, these authors’ books have been my constant companions and friends and, like spiritual guides, they have revealed to me historical gems of interest.

I have endeavoured to pull the threads together of the works of far greater historians and writers than me. These rich and brightly coloured threads of our past combine into the colourful tapestry of the present day. This tapestry expresses the emotions and actions of many groups in our society and will hopefully contribute in some small way to South Africa’s ongoing and sometimes painful process of reconciliation and understanding.

As I wrote this book, I sometimes felt that the ghosts of great men such as Andries Pretorius, the colourful Gert Maritz, passionate Piet Retief, devout Sarel Cilliers, cheerful Piet Uys and even dour Andries Potgieter and Louis Trichardt guided my thoughts. My intention is that they will come alive for the reader and share their incredible journey and experiences and, most importantly, feelings.

There are mistakes in the book; of that, I have no doubt. Despite every effort to ensure complete factual accuracy, there are different interpretations of events and people from which I have drawn. Where two or more versions of the same event have been described differently by different authors or sources, I have made a call on what I believe is the correct interpretation. You, the reader, may call it differently. Although many dates are included, this book is not meant to be purely chronological. Rather, it records a series of events and stories; the dates act as milestones and are unimportant. However, the people, their fears, feelings and dreams are.

Some aspects of the book may be controversial and promote debate, which would make me happy. That said, I have not deliberately set out to be controversial. I also did not set out to glorify or denigrate any group. The facts speak for themselves and I wrote this book out of a deep love for this country and its people. The facts will assist you in forming your own opinions on the people and events that have shaped our country.

What do I hope for this book? Firstly, I hope that it helps South Africans of all colours to understand our collective history and to be proud of our heritage. Secondly, I hope that people visiting South Africa or who are interested in the country will gain an understanding of our past and of who we are today because of it. Above all, I hope people will laugh, and cry, as they immerse themselves in this story about an incredible era in our history. Naturally, I also hope that the critics enjoy the book, that bookshop managers and owners give it exposure in their stores and that it becomes a bestseller!
CHAPTER 1

The Portuguese search for the land of milk and honey

San—Prester John—Batholomeu Dias—voyages of exploration—
Khoikhoi—death of de Almeida

A small man with yellowish-brown skin and a leathery face that looked as though it had been scorched by 35 summers sat on his haunches, hunched over two sticks that he was vigorously rubbing together. He was no more than 137 centimetres tall and his brown, wrinkled skin hung in folds around his protruding stomach, which glistened in the late afternoon sun because he had smeared it with animal fat.

Eventually, a thin worm of smoke rose from the wood. He stopped rubbing the sticks together to adjust the quiver on his shoulders as it was chafing him. It contained 12 arrows with poisoned bone tips and he had made it from the bark of a euphorbia tree. He had dipped his arrowheads into poison extracted from snakes and caterpillars and any animal he shot would die in minutes, even if only slightly wounded.

When he started rubbing the twigs again, his small but well-proportioned body moved from side to side with the effort and his penis swung out from under his kudu-skin loincloth. Occasionally, he shifted position to achieve better friction, shuffling his bare feet.

When a tiny flame finally flickered, he swiftly covered the burning sticks with dry leaves. The blue smoke puffed into his face and made his eyes water. He blew gently on the small flame until the fire flared and flames cheerily danced. He had made fire.

!Xue !Xue the San, or Bushman, squinted at the setting sun, his small, deep-set eyes narrowing as he studied several shapes and clouds of dust emerging over a ridge about ten kilometres away. He eventually could make out the herders urging their cattle on, red dust hanging over them like a protective cloud.

!Xue !Xue watched the distant specks grow larger. He assumed the herders were his pastoralist cousins, the Khoikhoi (translated as men of men). Nevertheless, he hid behind some dry shrubs. When they were closer, !Xue !Xue could see that these people were foreigners. He had never seen such tall people. He gazed in astonishment at the large black figures. They were completely unlike the Khoikhoi, with their small frames and light complexions. The pastoralist
Khoikhoi had travelled from what is now known as Botswana and lived relatively peacefully alongside the hunter-gatherer San, although the men sometimes stole their cattle and provisions and seduced their women. The San were looked down upon by the Khoikhoi because of their nomadic existence and lack of cattle.

The year was 250 AD and !Xue !Xue had seen the first Bantu people. Over the next few hundred years, many more Bantu would travel to southern Africa from West Africa in search of grazing.³

Many believe that the Bantu (meaning the people or humans) are descendants of the biblical 12 Tribes of Israel and genetic testing has revealed that men from the Bantu-speaking Lemba tribe found in Zimbabwe and South Africa as well as Mozambique and Malawi have Y-chromosomes that are Semitic in origin. One sub-clan, the Buba, even shares genetic traits with the Jewish priest class, the Kohanim.

With a shake of his head, !Xue !Xue rushed out from behind the bushes and hurriedly stamped out the flames of his fire, gathered his bow and spear and jogged effortlessly away from the approaching herders and cattle, heading for his people on the western side of the Fish River.

!Xue !Xue was well used to running long distances at a rapid pace, which he maintained for two days, stopping only to drink and find food. Like all San people, !Xue !Xue was one with the wilderness in which he lived. He was adept at finding subterranean water reservoirs and he quenched his thirst by sucking the cool water up with a reed. Along the route, !Xue !Xue gathered berries, nuts, roots and ant larvae. When he was exceptionally hungry, he speared a rabbit, which he ate raw so that he would not need to slow down. He was also lucky enough to find a honeycomb and he ate half of it, saving the other half so it could crystallize and be eaten later.⁴

Finally, !Xue !Xue joined his family and the small group of Khoisan known as the Gonaqua in their settlement east of the Fish River. Each of the 73 small huts made of mud, grass, leaves and twigs was 1.2 metres in diameter and 0.9 metres tall and slept one or two people. The earth had been scooped out and filled with grass to provide soft bedding and a fireplace marked the entrance to each hut.

Like the approximately 10,000 Khoikhoi in that region, the Gonaqua were descendents of the Hamcumqua. Clustered in groups or tribes from the Highveld down to the coast, the majority of the Khoikhoi lived on the southeastern side of the peninsula around Table Bay.

Thirsty and tired after his journey, !Xue !Xue refreshed himself by drinking soured milk. He watched the women nearby shaking cowhide sacks filled with cream that would eventually become butter, which could be smeared onto their
bodies. They spoke animatedly in their strange click language of |Xam, their voices sometimes resembling the cracking of dry sticks or the sucking sound of a cow lifting its hooves from sticky mud. !Xue !Xue then picked a stalk of dagga (marijuana) and chewed it. He described the Bantu he had observed on the other side of the Fish River with clicks and hand signs to the San who had gathered round him. Stimulated by the dagga, !Xue !Xue probably exaggerated the size and power of the Bantu. His fellow Gonaqua were concerned and afraid and broke out into a chorus of anxious clicks as they discussed this potential threat.

Over time, the Nguni-speaking Bantu moved down the eastern coast of southern Africa and, simultaneously, the Sotho-speaking Bantu moved inland, settling on the vast open grazing lands east of what became known as the Fish River.

Summers retreated into winters and winters gave way to rainy seasons, with little changing over the next thousand years. The rolling grassland plains that extended to the ocean provided lush grazing for many herds of elephant, buffalo, springbok, eland, zebra and kudu and were also home to giraffe, rhino and cats such as lion, leopard and cheetah, which slunk through the long grasses stalking their prey. Similarly, the San tracked and killed smaller animals for their meat and hides or skins.

The Khoikhoi and the San populations gradually grew, despite occasional wars against one another. These were usually about stolen cattle, or women, rather than land ownership. The San were loyal to the Khoikhoi and served as soldiers when they fought other San, Khoikhoi and the Nguni-speaking Bantu, in return for food and meat. While the San revered the earth, the Khoikhoi revered their cattle, even riding them into battle.

Not only did the Khoikhoi use oxen as a mode of transport, they also used them in battle as battering rams or a living wall behind which they could hide. These cattle were trained to respond to the commands and instructions of the Khoikhoi, who called each head of cattle by name using gentle tones and clicks. Later, these Khoikhoi became known as Hottentots due to the many clicks and sounds making up their vernacular.

The name Hottentot was given to the Khoikhoi by the Dutch and means ‘stammerer’.

Early callers at the Cape claimed that “when they are merry they leap up and down and continually sing the word Hottentot and nothing else and keep this up for long, from this they are generally called Hottentots by the Dutch”.

Gradually, the Nguni-speaking Bantu to the north and along the east coast