

The Great Trek UNCUT

Escape from British Rule:
The Boer Exodus from the Cape Colony, 1836

Robin Binckes



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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
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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 30° 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 tips¹ 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 Khoikhoi² (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 peaceably 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 descendents 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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".⁷

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