

Amongst the descendants of Abraham, one of the company of nations has been South Africa, which was first a Dutch colony, before becoming British. The Great Trek is one of the greatest series of adventure stories in South African history. It was a bold initiative by brave farmers who left behind their farms and homes in the Cape, to set off into a mostly unknown wilderness to establish their lives afresh, free from interference of the government at the Cape.

### Wars and Revolution

During the French Revolutionary wars, the Cape Boers were governed in succession by four separate administrations. As Holland fell to Revolutionary France, Britain seized the Cape in order to secure the strategic sea route to the East. After the Peace of Amiens 1802, the Cape was handed back to Dutch rule under the short-lived Batavian Republic. Then, as war re-erupted with the battles of Trafalgar and Austerlitz, and Holland again fell under French control, Great Britain despatched 63 ships across the Atlantic to reoccupy the Cape and deny it to French control.

### Protestant Faith

Although first discovered by the Portuguese Catholic explorer, Bartholomew Dias in 1488, the Cape was settled by the Protestant Dutch from 1652. Holland itself had been a colony of Catholic Spain and had only established its independence after a long and costly struggle for independence by 1648. The rise of Protestant Holland and England as naval powers able to defeat the Catholic superpowers of Portugal and Spain, made possible International Missions and the rapid expansion of the Evangelical Faith across the seas in America, Africa, and to the Pacific Islands.

### British Rule

The people at the Cape, although referred to as Dutch by the British, were by then quite different from the people in Holland. Although the Dutch Bible and language were central to their culture, there were almost as many descended from German and French Protestants as there were from Holland. Their language had evolved into what is now known as Afrikaans, then known simply as, *Die Taal*. Although these very independent minded farmers had been allowed local self-government in the form of *Landdrost* and *Heemraden*, these posts disappeared as British rule introduced a highly centralised administration. Many decisions closely affecting frontier farmers were applied without any consultation. This, along with the British policy of Anglicisation led to deep resentment.

### Clashes at the Kei

After a century and a half of peaceful expansion, the Boers had begun encountering the Black tribes moving South. On the banks of the Kei River, clashes developed between the Xhosa and the Boer. While the nomadic Bushmen had tended to move away into inhospitable terrain where they would be left alone, and while the Hottentots engaged in petty theft, the Xhosa tribes engaged in wholesale theft on a vast scale. Theft was not considered dishonourable and entire herds of livestock were rustled, sometimes to pay for *Lebola* (bride price), for Xhosa weddings.

### Frustration and Alienation

As the Xhosa engaged in cross-border raids on the farms of the Boers, the Boers soon found that the government were far more inclined to listen to criticisms and denunciations of the Boers, than to sit down and hear the farmers concerns and complaints. It seemed as though the government only extracted taxes from them, without providing any real protection from the incessant, violent and ruinous raids by cattle rustlers.

### Commandos

Already from the early 1700s, the farmers had organised themselves together in mutual support groups called *Commandos*, where each farmer provided his own weapon, horse and food, and worked together for mutual defence and hot pursuit to retrieve stolen livestock. Adriaan van Jaarsveld was the Commandant who won the First Frontier War of 1781.

### Slachtersnek

In 1793, a huge hoard poured over the border, destroying 116 farms and leading off many thousands of cattle and sheep. Countless farmers were ruined and the Dutch government seemed too distracted to deal with the threat. The first Republic in South Africa was declared on 4 February 1795 at Graaff Reinet, by Adriaan van Jaarsveld and Jan Tregardt. The brutal way in which the governor dealt with this Republic in 1815, at Slachtersnek, engendered much resentment. Eighty years later, when Britain was attempting to sieze the Transvaal, the mere mention of *Slachtersnek* was sufficient to solidify Afrikaans resistance.

### Voting with Their Feet

Frontier farmers who had time and again had their homes burned down, their loved ones murdered and their livestock stolen, reached breaking point. With the unsympathetic and ineffectual government in Cape Town, they determined on a bold and peaceful rebellion, a mass migration away from the political control of Britain, to establish their own free republics in the hinterland. (This occurred in the mid-1830s, at the same time as Texas declared itself independent of Mexico and fought the battle of the Alamo.)

### Pioneers

Although there was widespread discontent throughout the Cape Colony, only about 20% of the white inhabitants in the Eastern Cape, and 9% of the total white population of the Cape took part in the first wave of the Great Trek (initially 6,000). Louis Trichardt and Hans van Rensburg were the first of the pioneers to head to the Transvaal Lowveld in 1835. Hans van Rensburg's entire party was massacred, and almost all of Louis Trichardt's group died of malaria.

### The Path of Blood

However, despite these unpromising beginnings, before the end of 1835, Hendrik Potgieter set off with another group of stalwarts, determined to establish new farms in the interior. These early trekkers moved through mostly de-populated territories, that had recently been subjected to astounding devastation. Human skeletons, scenes of massacres, burned out villages, all bore eloquent testimony of the Path of Blood of Mzilikazi and his Matabele warriors.

### The Difaqane

This was part of the Difaqane, first set in motion by Shaka, the Founder of the Great Zulu Empire. At about the same time as Napoleon's revolutionary French armies were devastating Europe, Shaka was welding the Zulu into a formidable fighting machine, devastating neighbouring tribes and incorporating them into the ever-expanding Zulu kingdom.

### Mzilikazi

Shaka's General, Mzilikazi, fell into disfavour with the king and fled with his army, laying waste to vast sections of what later became the Orange Free State, Transvaal and Botswana. Millions died in the Difaqane, most of them at the hands of Mzilikazi's Matabele, who were credited with exterminating 156 tribes. It was into these de-populated and devastated areas that the Voortrekkers moved.

### Vegkop

Scattered survivors of Mzilikazi's marauding raids pleaded with Hendrik Potgieter for protection. The showdown came at the Battle of Vegkop, 2 October 1836, when Potgieter's Trekkers successfully withstood repeated Matabele assaults on their laager. Later Potgieter's Commandos defeated the Matabele decisively, retrieving the looted cattle and by November 1837 sending the Matabele fleeing across the Limpopo, into what today is Zimbabwe. The scattered survivors of the devastated tribes were deeply grateful to the Trekkers and sold large areas of land to them, in exchange for livestock and further protection.

### Natalia

At Thaba Nchu, Piet Retief was elected Governor of the Trekkers and chose settling in Natal. The area between the Tugela and Umzimvubu Rivers was de-populated as a result of the ravages of the Zulu. Piet Retief travelled to Umgungundlovu to negotiate for the sale and transfer of the unpopulated sections of Natal. After extensive

negotiations and the handing over of many cattle to Dingaan, the king of the Zulus signed a treaty ceding the territory of Natal to the Voortrekkers. This was on 3 February 1838, witnessed by Rev. Francis Owen of the Church Missionary Society, who was acting as the king's secretary and interpreter.

### Deceived

Retief was so impressed with the charming manner of Dingaan, and relieved at the signed document in his satchel, that he was persuaded to order his men to leave all their weapons outside the Kraal and go in for one final audience with the king. At this Dingaan ordered the entire Boer contingent of 100 defenceless men bound, and tortured to death in a most brutal way.

### Massacre at Midnight

In the early hours of 17 February, ten thousand Zulu warriors attacked the sleeping Voortrekkers between the Bushman's and Bloukrans Rivers, massacring hundreds of mostly women and children. When the Zulu army retreated, they took over 25,000 cattle, and many horses and sheep with them, effectively ruining the devastated, and now destitute, Voortrekkers.

### Andries Pretorius

It was at this darkest time of despair that Andries Pretorius, a wealthy farmer from Graaff Reinet, who had not taken part in the Trek until now, travelled to Natal to organise the *Wencommando*. Under the motto: *Eendragt Maakt Magt* (Unity is Strength), he mobilised 464 men, in 64 wagons, to engage the Zulu. Their chaplain, Sarel Cilliers, who had fought at Vegkop, led the men in daily devotions and proposed a solemn Vow.

### Beating the Unbeatable Foe

Against all expectations, and against overwhelming odds, this small band of trekkers defeated the, up till then unbeatable, Zulu Impis. On the morning of 16 December 1838, 15,000 Zulus attacked the laager of the Boers on the bank of the Ncome River, at what later became known as The Battle of Blood River. It was one of the most decisive victories in African military history, and the Boer and the Zulu became good neighbours, never fighting one another again.

### Reversal

Dingaan, who had stabbed his own brother, Shaka, in the back, was now himself murdered and replaced by his half-brother, Mpande, who maintained good relations with the Boers.

### The Red Coats Again

However, the Voortrekker Republic in Natal was to be short lived as the Britain seized it in 1842, compelling the Boers to trek back over the Drakensburg to settle primarily in the Orange Free State and Transvaal. Britain later tried to bring the Free State under their control with the Orange River Sovereignty. However by the Sand River Convention of 1854, which Missionary Andrew Murray assisted in drafting, Great Britain later recognised Boer independence and withdrew.

### Gospel Advance

It is a fact that South Africa in its present format could not have come into existence without the bold exodus of the farmers from the Cape, opening up the interior and creating a common identity for the vast territory, which today is know as South Africa. Most importantly, in every wagon was a Bible, and with the Voortrekkers went the Gospel. The Gospel impact amongst hitherto unreached tribes would be incalculable.

### Christian Civilisation

The Great Trek marked a tremendous advance for the Gospel, for education, and for a civilisation itself. All people in Southern Africa benefited from the Protestant work ethic, Gospel witness, productivity and Christian charity which was an integral part of the lives of those God-fearing pioneers.

Along with the farms established were churches, schools, hospitals, orphanages and Mission stations. Christianity flourished which transformed the continent and brought healing to lands devastated by the Difaqane. The power of the witchdoctors was broken and the spiritual liberation of the peoples of Southern Africa advanced

dramatically.

***"******"******When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour; I gave Egypt for your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in your place. Since you were precious in My sight*** ♦ fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your descendants from the East and gather you from the West; I will say to the North, ***'******Give them up!******'******,*** and to the South, ***'******Do not keep them back!******'*** ***Bring My sons from afar and My daughters from the ends of the earth*** ♦ everyone who is called by My Name, whom I have created for My Glory; I have formed him, yes, I have made him.

***"******"*** ***Isaiah 43:2-7***

The Reformation Society

P.O. Box 74 Newlands 7725

Cape Town South Africa

Tel: 021-689-4480

Fax: 021-685-5884

Email: [mission@frontline.org.za](mailto:mission@frontline.org.za)

[mission@frontline.org.za](mailto:mission@frontline.org.za)

[www.ReformationSA.org](http://www.reformation.sa.org/)