The Great Trek

Wallace G. Mills Hist. 322  6  Great Trek

The Great Trek

Trekboers and migrations

- as noted earlier, some white farmers had taken to pastoralism as their main economic activity about the beginning of the 18th C. They had developed the tradition that if they needed more or better land, moving farther was the way to acquire it. These treks or journeys were undertaken by small groups or families.

- by the early 19th C, these treks had ceased because of

  - confrontation with the Xhosa to the east;
  - a law by British authorities in Cape Town forbidding migration north of the Orange River.

- for reasons we shall discuss, a series of coordinated, large treks were undertaken beginning in 1837. The treks were a bit like wagon trains during the 19th C in the U.S. Some treks had several hundred white people, at least an equal number of servants, large numbers of ox wagons (bigger and much heavier than 'prairie schooners' in the U.S.), and huge herds of cattle and livestock. Most treks were organised by and around a particular leader. These collectively came to be called 'The Great Trek'. Traditionally, it was said to have ended in 1847 (the bulk of the migration happened in the first years up to 1840), although small scale migration continued afterwards (a short article on the Great Trek).

- various estimates are given for the number of participants. Thompson's estimate is that 6,000 whites left the Cape Colony up to 1840. Different websites give 10,000 and even 12,000 during
the entire period of the Great Trek, but these are almost certainly too high. Another estimate is that over 15,000 people in total left in that period; however, this includes non-whites who made up at least half of the total. Thus, a total 7-8,000 Afrikaners is probably about right. Although they are given little recognition in the Afrikaner nationalist hagiography, a great many servants and employees (mostly Coloureds) also were part of the ‘Great Trek’. One reason for the designation ‘great’ is this size and scale of the migration.

- later, near the end of the 19th C and early in the 20th C as Afrikaner identity and nationalism began to grow, this series of events (including the battles with various indigenous peoples), came to be regarded as an heroic and defining moment in the history of the Afrikaner ‘nation’. The white participants began to be regarded as fearless, God-fearing, larger-than-life heroes who had preserved the Afrikaner ‘nation’ from Anglicization and assimilation. They came to be called ‘Voortrekkers’ meaning those trekkers who went before—i.e., the pioneers, the first Afrikaner nationalists. They have tended to be venerated (like saints or like Americans regard their ‘founding fathers’).

It is interesting to note that in North America with our own pioneers, there is quite a gap between image and reality. The image is of hardy pioneers who braved attacks by Indians, cut down the forests or moved out onto the prairies to carve farms out of the wilderness and opened a continent to development and civilisation. They were certainly hardy, but cockroaches are hardy! The reality of what the North American born pioneers were like was recorded by Susannah Moodie and other immigrants. According to these accounts, they were uncouth and ignorant, poorly educated, not all that trustworthy, whining, etc. However, they knew how to survive and could help show the newcomers. They certainly opened the continent to development, but their contributions to ‘civilisation’ are much more in doubt. The point is that succeeding generations have a tendency to see early pioneers with rose-coloured glasses.

There is also a lack of perspective. The settlers in wagon trains moving west have been celebrated in song, novels, movies, TV programs and so on. The wealth and resources produced by industrialization in the East and Mid-West was probably more important in achieving the ‘Manifest Destiny’ of the U. S., yet there are no movies celebrating the heroes of the blast furnace. The discovery and exploitation of mineral wealth (diamonds and gold) is undoubtedly the biggest factor in the creation of modern South Africa, but trekboers had little role in that; in fact, they often wanted to impede that development.]

Interpretations
- the Great Trek has been the subject of disparate interpretations.

(1) Flight from bondage in the land of Egypt
- this was the line of self-justification taken by the Voortrekkers themselves. They complained of a number of grievances and ‘injustices’ under British rule. The list was long: the Black circuit, Slaughter’s Nek, Anglicization policies, immoral and impious overturning of divine order by imposing equality between ‘Christians’ and ‘heathens’, the abolition of slavery with inadequate compensation, maligning of Boers by missionaires and other malicious persons, refusal to allow all cattle and land confiscations from Xhosa in the wars that whites argued were their
due, etc.). The government in Cape Town was likened to the government of the pharaohs.

(2) **Meddling busybodies and do-gooders in London**
- this was the line taken by the British settlers and the 'settler' school of historians who had their own axes to grind.

- the Great Trek was seen as the consequences of the pernicious influence of Exeter Hall (this was the auditorium in London where the anti-slavery organisations and Aborigines Protection Society held their large rallies and meetings) and the meddling of ignorant do-gooders in Whitehall who had no understanding of the 'realities' in South Africa. The trekkers had been goaded beyond the point of endurance to the point that they were prepared to face the dangers of the unknown in order to get away.

(3) **Incorrigible slave masters**
- missionaries and other critics argued that the trekboers were upset because slavery and their high-handed oppression of the indigenous people were ended or at least being curbed. The Great Trek into the interior, they argued, was mainly an attempt to reestablish the old ways and slavery again.

- the Voortrekkers hotly denied that they were involved in slavery, but in fact raids to capture people and the practice of 'apprenticeship' of child captives reemerged among the Voortrekkers.

(4) **Nationalist superheroes**
- as noted, this movement came later to be viewed in an Afrikaner nationalist perspective. In this interpretation, Anglicization and 'liberalism' was threatening the infant Afrikaner nation with extinction ('cultural genocide' is the more florid term used by the unthinking nowadays).

- the brave and hardy Voortrekkers defied the overwhelming natural and human dangers in wildest Africa to preserve the infant and vulnerable Afrikaner nation from contamination, culturally and religiously. The Voortrekkers became great superheroes in the pantheon of Afrikaner nationalism. This reached a peak in the centenary celebrations of the Great Trek in the 1930s.

(5) **Landless poor whites**
- recent interpretations tend to stress more mundane factors and motivations for the movement. The migratory habits to acquire more land, which were firmly established by trekboers throughout the 18th C, had been bottled up for 40-50 years and there were growing numbers of landless white males. In trekboer society, this was a terrible situation and fate. Their only course was to become a 'bywoner' to some relative or other farmer with land. As such, they would provide services (usually as an overseer) and be allowed to use some land for a few cattle or agricultural purposes. This meant that their status was only a bit better than non-white servants.

- this interpretation sees the 'Great Trek' as merely the bursting of the dam that had bottled up migrations in search of land for over 2 generations.

**Piet Retief's Manifesto**
- Retief was one of the most influential of the Great Trek leaders. Among those who joined the Great Trek, he was a bit unusual in a couple of respects. He was much better off than most trekkers; at one time he owned over 20 building lots in Grahamstown as well as farm
properties. As can be seen from his letter (translated and published in the Grahamstown Journal), he was better educated than most who were illiterate or just barely literate.

This is a very interesting document and it shows much about the task of the historian in interpreting such thing. In interpreting documents the historian has to take into account the situation and context as well as the motivations of the author. What we now call ‘spin doctoring’ is not new just because the term is relatively newly coined. Clearly, the writer of a document has a purpose in mind and an audience to whom it is addressed. Naturally, the writer is going to put his/her best foot and best arguments forward. In many cases, the arguments cannot and should not be taken at face value.

Much of this is obvious or should have been obvious, but for a long time, Retief’s Manifesto tended not to be subjected to critical and rigorous evaluation and interpretation. Writers in the settler school of historical interpretation had their own axes to grind in condemning the White Hall and philanthropic lobby in Britain; Retief’s Manifesto provided more ammunition so they were inclined to use it. For Afrikaner nationalist historians, here was a statement from one of the greatest heroes and, with his death at the hands of Dingane and the Zulu, a great martyr of Afrikaner nationalism.

Clearly, someone like Retief is not going to say, “We are landgrabbers” or “We want to reintroduce slavery and apprenticeship;” however, in the veiled references to ‘proper relations’ between whites and Africans there was a hint; this was spelled out more explicitly in the constitutions of their ‘republics’ which stated— “No equality in church or state.”

In addition, the complaint about the abolition of slavery and the process of compensation (see Thompson) for a long time went unexamined and was repeated innumerable times as a factor in the trek (by both friends and critics).

However, investigation revealed that slavery was not common in the eastern frontier areas from which almost all the Voortrekkers came. Besides, no new slaves could be imported after 1807 and the prices of the existing slaves had risen markedly. Very few (if any) Voortrekkers had ever owned slaves. Retief’s only known connection was that at one time he had borrowed money from an ex-slave woman!

Undoubtedly, there were grievances and complaints; even that early, they had established a catalogue of complaints and felt genuinely aggrieved (whether we think the grievances were as serious as they did is another matter).

Elements in the context

A number of elements in the context tends to put these issues in a different perspective.

1. Shutting down of migration after 1780s.

The earlier expansion had left some land not taken up behind the leading edges and the pushing back of the Xhosa in the early wars in the 19th C had made some land available (however, the 1820 settlers had also been assigned much of that); nevertheless, the voracious appetite for land among trekboers meant that by the 1830s, landlessness had grown. In effect, the on-going migration that had characterised the 18th C had been dammed up for almost 50
years. Thus, the Great Trek can be viewed as the bursting of the dam. Thus, the Great Trek can be seen as merely the resumption of the earlier process.

- this interpretation is supported by the fact that late in the 19th C when the problem of landlessness again reemerged in the South African Republic (Transvaal), a couple of attempts were made to organise new treks farther into the interior (into Zimbabwe or Angola). These efforts were blocked by Rhodes who wanted to ensure that it was the British Empire that got these areas. However, these aborted attempts to leave the Boer republic could hardly be viewed as attempts to ‘preserve the Afrikaner nation’ from extinction of assimilation and provide a powerful argument against the nationalist thesis.

2. **Law forbidding migration north of the Orange River**

   - the rumours about the proposed treks beyond the Orange River had been circulating for 3-4 years and the government had been considering what it could do in such a case. Again, rumours were that troops were to be sent to the drifts (fords) in order to intercept and prevent the treks. Retief and the trekkers were trying to forestall such actions.

   - one of the ways to do this was to influence public opinion and sympathy. Many of the grievances were probably included to appeal to those Afrikaners who were not going on the trek. The slavery abolition surely falls into this category. The slave owners lived mostly in the western province area and none of them were joining the trek; however, raising the issue was sure to get their sympathy.

1. **Disobedience of lawful authority**

   - this is a sin in much of Calvinist tradition. Earthly authority and government is a surrogate for Divine authority; the Calvinist definition of sin is rebellion against God. Thus, rebellion against earthly authority becomes by projection rebellion against God.

   - the only exception is when earthly government is so evil and wicked that disobedience and rebellion is justified. Thus, some of the arguments (not so much by Retief but by others in the movement) were designed to show that this was true of the British administration in the Cape and justified the analogy of the government of the Pharoahs.

2. **Nationalist piety and sacrifice?**

   - this came to be the major assertion of Afrikaner nationalists in later generations. F. van Jaarsveld challenged this idea in the 1960s in *The Awakening of Afrikaner Nationalism*; he was roundly denounced for this heresy and there were demands (including members of parliament) that he be fired from his job in the Univ. of Potchefstroom for Christian National Education.

   - he argued that a sense of ‘national identity’ was very little or not at all developed; Trekboers certainly recognised the differences in language, religion, etc. between themselves and the British. They had certainly developed a way-of-life and a set of values that were
distinctive, but they were also significantly different from people of Dutch descent in the western province areas of the Cape. The latter regarded the Trekboers as rather wild, semi-barbarous frontiersmen and the sense of common identity was limited and incomplete. The westerners followed the Trek with interest and probably with a good deal of sympathy, but they certainly did not see the trekkers as the saviours of some mystical Afrikaner ‘nation’.

- even more significantly, the trekkers themselves had only a limited sense of unity; only severe danger could unite them. Mostly, their loyalties were to individual leaders. Repeatedly during the next 30 years or so, they fought and bickered with each other. They even engaged in ‘wars’ although they were careful not to kill each other. They were not even united on religion; two new Reformed churches were started (they left the NGK behind in the Cape as it was too ‘liberal’ and required well educated clergy). One of these new churches (known as the ‘Dopper Church’) was very austere; even singing of hymns was regarded as too worldly and the only music allowed was the singing of psalms (this was the church of Paul Kruger).

- van Jaarsveld argued that a true sense of national identity did not emerge until after the British annexation of the South African Republic in the 1870s; then a series of national meetings to oppose the annexation and the successful revolt against the British—the ‘1st War of Independence’—did bring a sense of identity among the Boers of the Transvaal.

- the feeling of nationalist identity (particularly among Afrikaners in the Cape Colony) was only fully developed and confirmed in the period leading up to and including the South African War (‘2nd War of Independence’ for Afrikaner nationalists).

1. **Preservation of the Trekboer ethos and way of life**
   - this a main thrust of MacCrone’s thesis. It is argued that even under the VOC, Cape Town and the western province area had been exposed to ideas from Europe through frequent ships and educated clergy. These include ideas of the enlightenment. However, in the interior where they were largely cut off from such influences, the Trekboers had developed a very different ethos and different notions, especially in regard to the status and relationships between the different ‘racial’ and colour groups. These notions insisted that darker skinned, ‘heathen’ peoples were inherently and irremediably inferior to white ‘Christians’. Moreover, it was decreed by God that the superior Christians should dominate over and use the labour of the inferior heathens.

   - the arrival of the British represented an enormous challenge to this Trekboer ethos. Initially, the British regime was not very much more ‘liberal’ than the VOC regime or the Batavian regime that it replaced. However, the British regime did begin to extend its authority into the interior in a way that the VOC had never been able to do and began to interfere with Trekboer techniques for dominating and forcing labour from the indigenous and mixed population. Moreover, the humanitarian and antislavery movement in Britain was reaching a peak in the 1820s and 30s. Their campaigns against slavery and exploitation of indigenous peoples were brought very dramatically against Trekboer techniques by the missionaries.

   - by the 1830s, the Trekboer ethos was under enormous pressure with Ordinance 50 of
1828, an independent court system which gave everyone equal access, Anglicization policies, etc. The only way to save this ethos and its associated way of life was to escape from the British sphere in the Cape Colony. Clearly, the desire to preserve their view of the world and their way of life was a big incentive for many who joined the Great Trek. It was certainly mentioned in a number of ways.

- this move was successful because the Trekkers were able to resume some of the old practices and to embed their view of ‘proper’ relations between whites and others in their constitutions with the explicit principle of ‘no equality in church or state.’ This formed the basis of what has been labeled the ‘northern’ approach in contrast to the ‘liberal’ tradition that developed during the rest of the 19th C in the Cape Colony (we shall examine Cape ‘liberalism’ in Module 12).

- when the Union of South Africa was formed in 1910, there were 2 different approaches—the ‘northern’ approach of Transvaal, Orange Free State and Natal and the ‘liberalism’ of the Cape. Liberals hoped that in the decades following, the liberal approach would gradually take over in the Union. However, the reverse happened. By the 1920s and 30s, liberals such as MacCrone were fighting to prevent the last vestiges of ‘liberalism’ from being extinguished as segregation was increasingly being implemented on the road to what became ‘apartheid’. For many South African ‘liberals’, the significance of the Great Trek was that it had allowed the retrogressive ethos and attitudes on race to survive and thus be the foundation for a segregationist and apartheid South Africa in the 20th C.

- certainly, I tend to put a good deal of emphasis upon ‘land hunger’; however, not all landless trekboers joined the migration and others, like Retief, were not landless so other factors were involved as well. Certainly, preserving the Trekboer ethos and way of life was important also. We should not adopt a monocausal or single cause approach.

**British attempts to create a stable frontier and border**

- the strategy of defining a clear boundary as a means of avoiding hostilities and warfare with the indigenous people had, as we noted earlier, began soon after the settling at the Cape. Although VOC officials had tried to draw boundaries, it had never worked, especially after the emergence of trekboers. However, the Khoikhoi had not posed such a serious military threat as the Xhosa did.

- the British too wanted to limit responsibilities. This was all the more so because it soon proved that wars with the Xhosa were expensive.

- the mainstay of British attempts to solve the frontier problem was the practice of signing treaties with Xhosa chiefs. The first attempt involved making a treaty with the Nqiquka, who was paramount chief of the Rharhabe clans west of the Kei River. The problem was that Nqiquka had no control over his uncle Ndlambe and other chiefs; he hoped that the treaty would bring them back under his control with help from the British. The British failed to understand the real situation; although he was genealogically paramount, it did not mean that he had any real
authority or control. Later, the British decided that Ngqika was being two-faced when he did not force the chiefs to abide by the terms of the treaty that he had signed. In spite of repeated failures, the British kept trying to use treaties.

- another approach was to create an unoccupied nomansland between the white settlement and the Xhosa. Thus, after forcing the Xhosa back in a war, they signed treaties with the chiefs that their people would stay out. African chiefs could not enforce such an order upon African people who regarded the land as theirs. On the other side, there was also much unhappiness among whites who had hoped and expected that any land taken from the Xhosa would be given or, at least, sold to them.

- the 1820 settlers was another attempted solution. It was hoped that this settlement would accomplish 2 things: the British settlers would act as a buffer between the trekboer farmers and the Xhosa. Secondly, a major part of the problem was deemed to be the extensive agriculture and pastoralism practised by the Afrikaner farmers which created the unsatiable demand for land. The British farmers were supposed to be an example of the intensive agriculture as practised in Britain. If Afrikaners could be converted to this, there would be adequate land for a long time. This too failed because the Xhosa still regarded it as their land and the climate was totally unsuitable for intensive farming. Most of the 1820 settlers soon abandoned the land for towns (most had not been farmers anyway) and those who remained on the land had to adopt many of the same practices as the Afrikaners. Now the British government were worse off because they now had to protect British settlers who had much greater claims for protection on the government.

- on the other hand, men on the spot (governors) often were frustrated and felt that the solution was to annex the disputed land and impose order. This was opposed by most missionaries who felt that not only was this unjust to the Xhosa, but it was catering to the white settlers who would have incentives to foment further troubles whenever they wanted more land. This latter suspicion occurred to imperial officials in London also. Besides, if this process was started, where would the annexations end?

- J. S. Galbraith came up with a general explanation—the ‘turbulent frontier’ thesis in his book, Reluctant Empire. He had earlier used this idea to explain British expansion in India; this book applied the idea to South Africa.

- he argued that in order to have a stable border, it is necessary to have strong central governments in states of comparable size and power. Strong central governments are required on both sides of the border in order that unruly elements can be controlled. Otherwise, border incidents occur and escalate into war which then leads to expansion of the winning state. If there is too big a power differential between the states, there is a partial vacuum on the side of
the border of the weaker state and the more powerful state tends to get pulled into expansion.

- he used this theory to explain how it happened that the English East India Company and later the British government got pulled into expansion in India until the government ended up controlling the entire subcontinent either directly or indirectly. He uses this same theory to explain why, in spite of great reluctance and even strong steps to avoid it, the British nevertheless made annexations and expanded their control in South Africa.

- the thesis is that failing these 2 requirements, the border area tends to be ‘turbulent’; incidents increase tensions and lead to wars. If the 2 sides are relatively equal, it is an endemic condition. If not, the stronger state conquers and expands.

- the situation in South Africa failed on both counts. The Xhosa were not united and paramounts had at best only limited control of genealogical subordinates. Chiefs could not impose their will in the face of popular opposition. Even the British at times had difficulty controlling white settlers. Moreover, power differentials were great.

- as a result, according to Galbraith, in spite of their great reluctance, the British kept getting drawn deeper into southern Africa.

- however, one further factor should be noted. The British were extremely sensitive to any intrusion by other European powers. In the 1840s when the Voortrekkers of the Republic of Natalia were rumoured to be attempting to open contacts with the Netherlands, the British hurriedly annexed Natal. Again, in the 1880s after great reluctance to annex the area now part of Botswana, the German intrusion into and annexation of South West Africa (modern Namibia) brought a rapid change of attitudes and the annexation of Bechuanaland.