

PREFACE

In 1938, when I was fifteen, I stood on a high platform at the Riversdale Showgrounds, my back to a large choir and facing some 4,000 people. In front of me were microphones. Torches flared everywhere, illuminating hundreds of parked cars, and there was a constant scurry of organizers and radio technicians. I was dressed vaguely as a Voortrekker boy, but all I remember is a red paisley scarf from my grandmother's jewellery case. I had a slight cold. I was to recite a patriotic Trek poem to the largest audience I had ever beheld, and at the same time it was to be broadcast to the Union of South Africa at large. It was an unnerving experience, and I was terrified, wondering too how my cold would affect my voice.

Voorwaarts (Forward) by S. Ignatius Mocke, with nine stanzas, was the poem I had selected. I was coached by the local Dutch Reformed Minister, a massive young man who, apart from his oratorical powers, had been a great rugby forward and boxer in his student days. There was only to be this one recitation, and out of hundreds of scholars I was the chosen one. 'Forward, young South Africa,' it began. 'From the ashes of the Past, we build our Future, our Present, we who carry the torches of Freedom. Far away is the blue shimmer of mountains, stirring our trekker blood; bring your horse, Mate, your spurs; this is the legacy of the Boer.' And so it went on, referring to the cracking of whips, distant fires, *wanderlust* in the blood, and the urge for freedom. After various items, the leader of the choir gave the signal and I was off, having the unnerving experience of hearing my own voice booming back at me through the loudspeakers around the grounds.

The occasion was the centenary celebrations of the Great Trek, when a symbolic ox-wagon trek passed from village to village up to the North. It was the most ambitious national celebration ever undertaken in South Africa, and it was a great honour for me to be part of it. As I recited, I gained in confidence, and when I concluded: 'Trek! God will show the way!' there was thunderous applause. Speeches and singing followed, but I was deaf to it all in the exultation that I had not made a fool of myself and had been worthy of the trust put in me. Like every history-minded South African child I had a general idea what the Trek was all about. As a boy the adventures of the Trekkers, their battles and murders, had captivated my imagination, and I was proud that members of my family had

fought in the Battle of Blood River. But over thirty years were to pass before I began an extensive study of the Great Trek. The result is this book.

To trek means to migrate or emigrate, to move on. A 'voortrekker' was a man who took the lead in moving away, 'voor' meaning the one who goes in front. The story of these Voortrekkers embraces the founding of a nation, the Afrikaners, as well as the opening up of the sub-continent of South Africa. The subject is large, for Boer, Briton, Bantu, Hottentot, Bushman and Bastard all play a role in it. Documentation is voluminous, with valuable diaries and letters, though the memoirs of Trekkers as assembled by Odé and Preller have struck me as having been written or recorded much too long (some fifty years) after the events described, slanted by hindsight and distorted by failing memories. But they have value—as long as one cross-checks every statement made and remembers that these writers were nearly all influenced by the course of South African history, particularly the Annexation of the Transvaal of 1877.

For some inexplicable reason no single comprehensive work in Afrikaans has ever been written on the Great Trek. On the other hand, various biographies exist, some exceedingly detailed as in the case of Retief, Pretorius and Maritz; and there is a vast amount of literature on aspects of the Trek in Afrikaans, published annually for decades in celebration of Dingaan's Day (now known as the Day of the Covenant) by writers who have studied every detail and aspect of the exodus: weapons, transport, costume, utensils, literature, games, toys and so on. In English in recent years there has been a thorough study of the Bantu and their rulers, giving the other side of the picture, and complementing the accounts of the early Port Natalians. The result is that a new look at the Great Trek has become possible and imperative.

My main objective has been a totally new way of presentation. The Trek is a subject for a vast canvas, a challenge indeed, but my training of a lifetime as a painter has helped me to plan the composition of this book as I would a mural, and my training over many years as a biographer has been invaluable in interlacing a number of major and minor biographies into one coherent narrative. I have done so as simply and impartially as possible. It is, after all, a great story, a great subject, and it should have the grandeur of simplicity in the telling, purity of outline and clarity of colour.

I have followed the modern spelling of the names of persons: Tregardt instead of Trichardt, Dingane instead of Dingaan, Mpande instead of Panda, and so on. But I have used the original Dutch place names, as I do not approve of such names being stripped of their historical significance by being given the Afrikaans version—Waschbank instead of Wasbank, Blaauwkrantz instead of Bloukrans. I also do not anglicize names which

gain nothing by it. In the case of Bantu names I have followed mainly the versions given by the *South African National Biographical Dictionary*. Sometimes relatively modern designations had to be used. The emigrants, for example, never referred to themselves as Voortrekkers—that came much later—but as emigrant farmers. So too the terms Afrikaner and Bantu are relatively modern, whereas Boer and Kaffir are older, like Native which can be misleading. Where appropriate I have used both old and modern appellations, for this is after all a book conceived by modern eyes for contemporary readers.

The Great Trek is the greatest adventure story in South African history, the 'central happening' as Professor E. A. Walker puts it, and my main concern in the telling of it has been presentation in a novel form, from the viewpoints of Boer, British and Bantu, and to bring to light a large amount of information not published in English before. The narrative and its construction being my main concern, I have also made a departure from other studies of the subject by not overbalancing incident as my interest or sympathy may move me and by not allowing myself to be side-tracked by political, national and constitutional evolution. The story told is about the Voortrekkers, about people, and the peoples they encountered, about human courage, endurance, resource and the frailties of humanity. Attention is also given, for the first time to this extent, to the many non-whites who accompanied the Voortrekkers.

For general information, co-operation, advice and assistance I am grateful to the Archives of Cape Town and Pretoria, to the Cape Provincial Library Administration of Grahamstown and the Central Reference Library of Cape Town. For illustrations, not that all of them have been used, I thank the Cape Archives, the State Archives and National Film Board and the Africana Library and Museum of Johannesburg. I also wish to express my gratitude to the many people, from university professors to journalists, museum directors to farmers, for their warm interest shown and for often drawing attention to aspects of the Trek which could have gone unstressed or unmentioned. My gratitude too to my wife for her patience, forbearance and loving care at all times.

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