

JOHN ROBERT LYS
17.1.1829—14.8.1880
Pioneer of Pretoria

Among his list of loves was a hearty love of music. Combine this with a fine baritone voice, the ideal time for indulging this talent before the advent of the Movie and T.V. and you get numerous evenings when “the Sea Captain” could lead the singing of rollicking sea shanties with zest and enjoyment.

But most important of all was his great love of adventure which had brought John Robert Lys to South Africa in the first instance after having sailed to North America and the West Indies. He conducted a trigonometrical survey in the Cape in 1850, farmed for a bit near Harrismith, and then one memorable month in 1855 he went on a shooting trip into the Interior.

I love to imagine that glorious high veld evening when he first saw tiny, baby Pretoria. Picture, if you will, then, that wonderful highveld evening, crisp and tingling and special with one of our celebrated Transvaal sunsets staining the sky above the Magaliesburg a patriotic British red, watch the figure of a tall, well-built, heavily bearded man, sitting easily in the saddle with his hunting rifle slung over his shoulder, canter up the last rise and gaze down over the handful of houses along the Apies river below. A dog barks far away, there is the sound of chickens going to bed and the lovely Transvaal wood-smoke smell drifts up to him. At that moment something in his heart must have leaped up and urged him down the rough track to the houses below – some huge sense of anticipation and fulfilment, for John Robert Lys had finally come home.

I think that possibly the time and the place must always bring forth the man, and nobody could have been more suited to the time of 1855 and the place of infant Pretoria than he who was to be fondly called “The Father of Pretoria” by its inmates. Public spirited to the nth degree – (the family motto is “*Non sibi sed patria*”) – he was to start everything in Pretoria. You name it, he started it. We’ve already seen that he started the Library and the Anglican Church and breeding thoroughbred horses, we will also see how he started the Masons – (becoming the first Master of the Masonic Lodge Aurora in 1873) the Pretoria Club to whom he donated a billiard table, horse-racing in Pretoria, served on the first School Commission, became the first English-speaking member of the Volksraad, which he served with total dedication, and found the first large lump of gold.

But I’m jumping the gun a bit, it is still only 1855 and he has bought at Daspoort, a farm which later was to become the Pretoria Portland Cement Company, and he has started a trading business with his wagons going down to Durban and later up North. Using his trigonometrical survey chain, part of his equipment as a Naval officer, he helped Pretoria’s first Landdrost, du Toit, to lay out what is now the centre of Pretoria and in 1859 President Pretorius rewarded him by granting him the site on the South Eastern corner of Church Square, and here he built his house “The Eyrie”.



MRS. OLIVIA SELINA LYS
October, 1896

President Pretorius and John Robert Lys became close friends and John Robert was to support him in the Volksraad against the Kruger faction.

“The Eyrie” was a spacious, thatched, gabled house, where he lived as the first, and for a time, the only, British resident in Pretoria. With his business prospering and a nice home, he could think of marriage. So he sent to England to ask his fiancée, Olivia Selina Fry to come out and marry him. She came out by sailing ship and the journey took three months. She must have been very sure of herself and of him – imagine having three months of having nothing else to do than to wonder if you had made the right decision! The ship was the s.s. “Waldersen” and there were cows, sheep and poultry on board. Her son Godfray was to say of the journey – “to the end of her life, my Mother disliked the smell of tar, it reminded her of the “Waldersen” and she was not a good sailor.”

They were married in 1859 and it is very difficult to think of her as looking anything other than remarkably like Queen Victoria – as a family photograph shows her – but, I suppose that when they were married by the Bishop of Natal in Durban she must have been full of fun, being Irish. Olivia Selina Lys started the first hospital in Pretoria. Certainly she had an 18” waist and auburn hair and was so small that she could fit under her huge sailor husband’s arm. Godfray said “I have seen my Father pick her up like a child and I have heard her expostulate – “Oh Robert, it’s so undignified.”

After being guests of the Governor in Government House, Pietermaritzburg, they set out for their honeymoon under the huge African stars while they made their way through the unpolluted, game-teeming wastes to their home in Pretoria. We can imagine what that journey must have meant to the newly married husband and Nature lover. His son, Godfray, once said: “Well I have had the best of this country – when I was in my prime I rode over it from North to South and it was unspoilt by man. My Father and I have waited something like 20 minutes while a herd of Springbok have jumped across the road. I have chased a Springbok outside Pretoria and killed it with my stirrup iron. Now I regret killing anything, but then it was for the pot.” These words give us a little inkling of what the two newly-weds must have seen on that sweet, adventurous journey towards their new life together.

In “The Eyrie” the French and English furniture brought by Olivia Selina Lys and her pretty ornaments stood in the lofty, well-beamed rooms against the elegant blue French wall-paper, embossed with gold fleur-de-lis (the family crest). The wall-paper and board floors were a new innovation in Pretoria and must have caused quite a stir. The well-appointed house became the focal point of political and social activity in Pretoria. As there was no hotel in Pretoria in those days, Mr. and Mrs. Lys entertained many prominent visitors such as Sir Theophilus Shepstone, Sir Bartle Frere, General Colley,

who was killed at Majuba, Sir John Swinbourne, who was interested in mining, Herbert Rhodes, brother of Cecil Rhodes, Rider Haggard and many other explorers, soldiers, missionaries, politicians and travellers. Sir Charles Tucker, and General Buller and Sir Owen Lanyon were amongst their oldest friends and Thomas Baines painted for John Robert the lovely picture of early Pretoria which now hangs in the Africana Museum in Johannesburg. It depicts a typical high-veld Summer afternoon with a thunder-storm boiling up over the South towards Johannesburg and Godfray with his white horse, Sailor, in the foreground on the kopjie where the Union Buildings stand today. In the background are the handful of houses making up Pretoria.



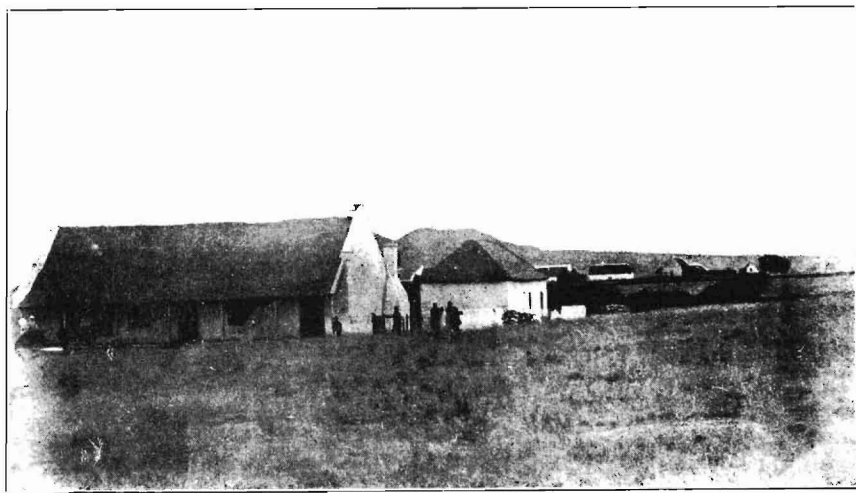
MAJOR ROBERT OLIVER GODFRAY LYS

It is always something of a shock to discover just how up-to-date the Old Days were – like finding that the Ancient Romans had a Stock Exchange and traffic problems just like our own. So it is a little amazing and amusing to discover that along with all those English titles the “Illustrated London News”, “The Times” and “Punch” were regular arrivals at “The Eyrie”. It was a very British corner of Church Square, because floating over the house on Sunday afternoons flew the first Union Jack ever to be seen in the Transvaal, and on the 24th May every year a royal salute of 21 guns was fired from the little brass cannon, purchased from the Portuguese Government in Mocambique, to honour Queen Victoria’s birthday. Those days were happy, non-racist days, so the salute was paid for by subscription of John Robert Lys’ Boer friends.

The first stitches the baby daughters sewed were those constructing small flannel bags to hold the gunpowder for the cannon and Godfray said: “When I was big enough to stand next to a gun I joined my Father in firing the Royal Salute of 21 guns. Between each shot I sponged the gun – being the powder monkey. I also used to break the flag when the first charge was fired.”

Godfray leaves us a lovely description of “The Eyrie”. He was to describe his happy home like this. “We had a very happy family life in the old bungalow on the centre of Church Square. (Where the Standard Bank stands today.) There was the usual large yard with stabling for a dozen horses. The house and gardens were surrounded by a brick wall. Beyond this there was an orchard, flower garden and beautiful lawn – the pride of my Dad’s heart. There was a thick rose fence enclosing the flower garden – this rose never seemed to be out of bloom. It was the double pink bloom that no old Pretorian will ever forget. The water, almost as strong as a Scotch burn, used to run down two sides of the garden. As is the way with everything connected with one’s childhood, I still think there never was such fruit as grew in our orchard, nor have I seen such flowers. There were always wild pets round the place, springbok, duika, stembok, koodoo and even a lion cub at one time. I remember a hartebeest and young white-tailed gnu – most of them were shipped to different zoos when full-grown.”

I have mentioned before John Robert Lys’ love of the classics, which stemmed from his education and up-bringing and resulted in his being fluent in French and Latin. His knowledge of Latin gave rise to an amusing incident. Baby Pretoria was a lovely, friendly village where the charlatan could ply his trade on the unsuspecting inmates, with the result that many so-called “Doctors” moved in to fleece the simple pigeons. One of these hired rooms, decorated the walls with an imposing collection of so-called “Certificates”, which were duly passed by the Republic’s officials, to whom, I’m afraid, the Latin meant as much, or as little, as Sanskrit, and, rubbing his hands, prepared to make a fortune. Unfortunately for him, John Robert Lys



THE LYS HOMESTEAD IN PRETORIA

This building was formerly the site of the Grand Hotel and is now that of the new Standard Bank of South Africa. When this house was built the site was worth about £10. It was purchased a short time ago by the Standard Bank for £80,000.

dropped by and went into his rooms. He had but to take one look at those "Certificates" to see that they were bits and pieces culled from quack recipes, introductory prayers and similar seemingly learned efforts. Half-an-hour later the "Doctor" was hurriedly making his way to the Orange Free State! One wonders if he had better luck there.

John Robert Lys' only son was born in "The Eyrie" on 22nd June, 1860. Robert Oliver Godfray Lys was a greatly loved man from that day to the day of his death in 1936. He was a totally noble, loyal and honest man, who lived at peace with all men, because he was at peace with himself. In the early days of Johannesburg when sharp business practices and expediency were the order of the day – (if possible, more than nowadays,) there was a saying – "Lys' word is his bond". And that was enough. He must have been a great joy to his parents, certainly he was a credit to them. That his Father loved him dearly is plainly seen from the many references to Godfray, or Bunny, as his Father called him in John Robert Lys' diaries. These diaries are amazing documents, faithfully written up each night by their owner before retiring, no matter how late the hour may have been. Here the climate of each day was faithfully recorded, together with business transactions, events of note and so on. Unfortunately every political allusion was carefully cut out by his widow after his death in 1880. But from the diaries emerges a vivid picture of the life in

early Pretoria and the noble character of the writer. He loved his family – I told you he was a “Man who loved much” – and one extract taken at random from the diaries, proudly says: “My son, Godfray, is a great favourite with everyone.” He loved his two daughters dearly, too. And in the diaries is faithfully recorded their first riding lessons, etc.

John Robert Lys was asked to stand for the Volksraad by his Boer friends. He represented Pretoria District from 1863 to his death in 1880. Night after night there appear in the diaries the words, “bed 2 a.m., 3 a.m. 1,30 a.m.” as this conscientious and dedicated member of the Volksraad worked on the Republic’s business. He was especially anxious that the Republic’s national debt be reduced by the full exploitation of its mineral wealth. In 1863 John Robert must have been serving on the Finance Committee of the Volksraad, because in his diary appears this marvellous passage about the presentation of the budget of £20 000. About the debate he said: “The amount of nonsense talked and the ignorance shown was delicious.” And later: “The Budget still going on. Very few members of the Raad understand the meaning of the estimates.”



Kerkplein Pretoria met die Lys Huis (middel) nadat aanbouings aan die regterkant aangebring is. Let op die klok van die eerste Kerk op Kerkplein (afgebrand 1880).