

THE HISTORY
OF THE
GREAT BOER TREK

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THE HISTORY OF THE
GREAT BOER TREK
AND THE ORIGIN OF THE
SOUTH AFRICAN REPUBLICS

BY THE LATE
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HER MAJESTY'S HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR NATAL, 1843-44

EDITED BY HIS GRANDSON
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PREFACE

AT a time like the present I conceive that no apology can be required or expected from anyone who endeavours to enlighten the ignorance or to remove the misapprehensions concerning South African history and affairs which undeniably exist among great numbers of our countrymen. It is with that object that I now republish in a popular form a book hitherto not easily procurable, which gives a succinct but adequate and impartial account of the course of events in South Africa from the conquest of Cape Colony to the formation of Natal into a British colony in 1843. The book consists of five lectures delivered to the Literary Society of Pietermaritzburg in 1852-5 by my grandfather, the Hon. Henry Cloete, whose high character and attainments commanded the confidence alike of the Boer farmers, the British settlers, and Her Majesty's Government ; who was chosen as Her Majesty's

Commissioner to negotiate the final settlement of Natal; who as regards many other important events could well say "*quorum magna pars fui*," and who delivered these lectures, within ten years of the date of the Natal settlement, in presence of a mixed British and Boer audience in whose minds the occurrences dealt with were a fresh and vivid memory.

Just because the book is a condensed and dispassionate statement of facts from which inference and comment have been excluded with singular care, it requires to be read with intelligent attention. But if read with attention and some moderate exercise of political imagination, it will enable the candid student to understand the clash of conflicting interests and incompatible ideals which has created the South African question as we know it to-day. He will see in the conduct of the Colonial Office much to deplore, but not so much that can be fairly charged to official blundering if due regard be had to the conflicting impulses and ideals of the English people. He will find in the conditions prevailing in Cape Colony, when we took it over from the Dutch, elements of disorder and difficulty

with which only the highest sagacity, aided by good fortune, could have coped with entire success. While driven to confess that neither of these agencies was always present, he will nevertheless admit that the complete tranquillisation of Cape Colony and of Natal under British rule is a not inconsiderable achievement, and his forecast of the future, based upon the story of the past, will not be that of a pessimist.

When this country took over the Cape Colony, the farmers in the rural districts had been demoralised by the habit of receiving grants of blocks of from ten to thirty square miles for single farms. Civilisation and even government loses its hold upon a population so scattered. The farmers had ceased to cultivate according to civilised methods, and had relapsed into a purely pastoral and even nomadic life. The territory had become too small for this wasteful colonisation, and the Boers habitually encroached, both temporarily and permanently, upon the lands of the surrounding native tribes. These tribes not unnaturally made reprisals, especially as the treatment accorded to them was uniformly severe.

This is the kernel of the South African question. The Boer farmers tenaciously clung to their supposed rights to take as much land as they pleased, shooting as many of its owners as they saw fit, in districts which were not under the control of the British Government. They expected that Government, whose treaties they broke and whose orders they disobeyed, to intervene on their behalf whenever their proceedings provoked a Kafir rising; and the Colonial Office alternately defended them for the sake of the colony they endangered, and recoiled from the limitless responsibilities thus entailed. The right policy, of course, was to set up a chain of military posts upon the frontier and to do even-handed justice, keeping the Kafirs out and the Boers in, until the population of the colony became sufficiently dense to justify orderly annexation of new districts. But this policy actually adopted by one far-seeing Governor was reversed by his successor, and the old bad system of marauding on one side and reprisals on the other went on until it provoked the great Kafir rising of 1834.

That rising was put down by the British

Government, but the effort exhausted its patience. When the Boers claimed compensation for their losses at the expense of the British taxpayer, they were told, with perhaps unnecessary sharpness, that they had brought the calamity on themselves and must bear the penalty. They then determined that since the British Government would not adequately protect their individual encroachments they would make a combined effort and would cross the frontier wholesale to form a new settlement for themselves, where their peculiar institutions might flourish unchecked. They migrated in large bodies into the territory that is now Natal.

There was another great cause of discontent. The Boers of Cape Colony had reduced the Hottentot population to the condition of slaves, and with the Hottentot women had produced a race of half-castes known as Griquas. It is true the slavery was of the domestic or predial type found in many parts of the world, but the British public, in the heat of the abolition movement, took no notice of such a distinction, as a great part of it refuses to do to this day. Slavery was abolished, rudely, hastily, and

without regard to the complete dislocation of the social machinery which abolition brought about ; while, to crown all, the promised compensation—part of the famous twenty millions—turned out ludicrously disproportionate to the hopes that had been raised. It is not the only instance in which the British public have gratified their emotions at the expense of other people.

Up to a certain point the early history of Natal offers a curious parallel to the more recent history of the Transvaal. In the two concluding lectures the reader will see how the emigrating Boers came into contact at once with the Zulus and with a British community settled at Port Natal ; how they sought to profit by British assistance and yet to reject all British control ; how they claimed to be an independent State making treaties on equal terms with this country, which however was to have the unprofitable privilege of defending them ; how they expected help from Holland, and were ready to give that country a Protectorate ; how they cut to pieces a small British force ; and how they found eventually that there was more British force to reckon

with, and that Great Britain would never consent to relinquish sovereignty or to permit foreign intrusion. So far the parallel is complete, though the scale is different. In Natal it was found that war, instead of accentuating race hatred, laid the foundation of enduring peace. Natal is now a prosperous and loyal British colony, and but for a change of governors and policy, the Orange Free State would to-day have been in the same position. There were irreconcilables of course, and they trekked into the Transvaal, where we have missed splendid opportunities of repeating our Natal success. Let us hope that a united nation, faced by what has grown to be an Imperial danger, will not again take its hand from the plough until the furrow is cut clean and true.

Under the wise and benign rule of our gracious Queen, we have witnessed immense progress in colonial loyalty as well as in conceptions of Imperial duty. Cape Colony, the essential loyalty of which has been far too lightly called in question by superficial observers, forms, together with Natal, a standing proof that men of Dutch descent as well as

others can find under the British flag all the conditions of prosperity and contentment. Once rid of a corrupt and arrogant oligarchy, largely of extraneous origin, and of its fantastic dreams of an African dominion, there is no reason to doubt that the mixed races of the Transvaal will range themselves peaceably side by side with their brethren of the Cape and of Natal.

WILLIAM BRODRICK-CLOETE.

LONDON, *October 29th*, 1899.

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