THE 'GREAT TREK'

The term 'Boer Trek' was first coined by Neil Parsons in his *New History of Southern Africa* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1982). At the time of the migration of Boers from the eastern Cape Colony to beyond the Orange River in the late 1830s, it was neither a single 'trek' (from the Afrikaans 'to pull' a wagon), nor was it very great. It was perceived to be a continuation of the long-established Boer search for new land that could be settled without too much resistance from its local African occupants. They left the Colony in groups, sometimes with family connections, always under the 'protection' and 'guidance' of some leader figure. There were many different motives, and hence different directions in which they aimed. It took them two decades to form into two reasonably cohesive, racially-defined, 'republics'. At the time, these ancestors of modern 'Afrikaners' regarded themselves as simply '*volk*', who spoke a colloquial dialect of Dutch, known locally as the *taal*.

It was not until the early 1870s that 'Boer' intellectuals in far-off Cape Town began to refer to themselves as 'Afrikaners', and the language that they spoke as 'Afrikaans'. This was a deliberate attempt to retain something of their historic roots in the face of the Anglicising culture of the Cape Colony's British rulers. This had become important in the light of the British granting of internal 'self-government' to the Colony in 1872, with English as the official language of the whites-only parliament in Cape Town.

In 1875 a Dutch Reformed Church minister in the Cape Colony, Stephanus du Toit, founded an association dedicated to the preservation and official recognition of the 'Afrikaans' language. The following year Du Toit launched *Die Afrikaanse Patriot*, the first Afrikaans-language newspaper. In 1877 he published a history of the Afrikaners, in the Afrikaans language, '*Geskiedenis van Ons Land in die Taal van Ons Volk*'. This became a story of a people whose unique culture was forged in the face of British oppression, and it was this book which first portrayed the Boer migrations out of the Cape Colony as 'The Great Trek'. Du Toit's portrayal drew parallels with the Biblical 'Exodus' from Egypt in search of the 'Promised Land'. In the evolving mythology of Afrikaner nationalism, the Boer republics north of the Orange River became part of God's plan for the Afrikaners, thus making the 'Great Trek' a key event in the evolution of Afrikaans culture.

The historiography of the Boer trek received a boost by the English-language historian, Eric Walker, whose *The Great Trek* (A & C. Black, London) was published in 1934. The publication of a second edition, in 1938, was timed to coincide with the centenary of the 'event'. This was commemorated by Afrikaners on a vast scale (with monuments to match) in 1938. By this time the 'Great Trek' had come to be regarded within South Africa as *the* defining event of the country's history.

It was not until the late 1960s that the role of the 'trek' in southern African history got a serious re-assessment and the mineral revolution, that started with diamond mining at Kimberley in 1870, began to replace the Boer trek as the key pivotal moment in the region's history. The two-volume *Oxford History of South Africa*, edited by Leonard Thompson and Monica Wilson and published in 1969 was the first major work to mark this shift in focus – the two volumes being divided along the year 1870 (OUP, Oxford, 1969). The trend was followed by successive textbooks during the 1980s so that the mineral revolution now marks a standard turning point in South African history: see, D. Denoon and B. Nyeko, *Southern Africa since 1800* (2nd edition, Longman, London, 1984); N. Parsons, *A New History of Southern Africa* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1982, 2nd edition, 1993); K. Shillington, *History of Southern Africa* (Longman, Harlow, 1987, 2nd edition, Longman Botswana, Gaborone, 2002); and C. Hamilton, B. K. Mbenga and R. Ross (eds), *The Cambridge history of South Africa* , Volume I, *From Early Times to 1885* (CUP, 2010).