

CHAPTER ONE



SETTING THE STAGE

Europe, gold and Africa

E^x Africa *semper aliquid novo* – loosely translates as ‘out of Africa there is always something new’. This was the Roman view of the continent and they were very well acquainted with it. Indeed, their empire included the whole of the north coast of the continent and it was a prized possession. In order for the young Roman Republic to become a major European power in the first place, she had successfully to meet the challenge from Africa: the Phoenicians of Carthage. Carthage was already a great Mediterranean military and trading power when the Roman Republic was still in her infancy.

But the deep interior of the continent always remained a mystery to the Romans. Unlike the Egyptians and the Phoenicians, the Romans never ventured much beyond the Pillars of Hercules into the Atlantic Ocean, or down the east coast of Africa via the Red Sea. Herodotus, however, recounts that Pharaoh Necho (610–595 BC) wished to determine whether Africa was circumnavigable. Accordingly, he commissioned a number of ships manned by Phoenicians to undertake the voyage. This fleet sailed via the Red Sea into the Indian Ocean and down the east coast of Africa.

Every year they built a temporary settlement further along the African coast in order to plant a crop. After they had harvested it, they would continue on their journey along the coast. In the third year of their journey, they sailed through the Pillars of Hercules from the Atlantic side and returned to Egypt. They reported that

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they had ‘rowed until the sun rose over their right shoulders’. Herodotus seems sceptical, but since we now know Africa to be circumnavigable, the story gains credibility.

Herodotus also mentions a Carthaginian called Sataspes, who, because he had used violence against a maiden, was given a choice by the Great King Xerxes of being impaled on a stake or of sailing around Africa. That was not a difficult choice. He elected to attempt the circumnavigation but after many months at sea, he lost heart. He returned to ‘civilization’ and reported that ‘at the farthest point he had reached, the coast was occupied by a dwarfish race’ and ‘whenever he landed, they left their towns and fled to the mountains; but his men did them no wrong, only entering into their cities and taking some of their cattle’.¹

What is certain, however, is that Europeans did not always harbour such a favourable impression of Africa as the Romans did. Until they had developed sea-going craft and navigational equipment that allowed them to travel down the Atlantic west coast of Africa, the interior remained impenetrable. Between Europe and the interior of Africa, there is the vast and impassable wasteland of the Sahara Desert, severely discouraging overland exploration. The rest of the continent was consequently screened from the European view and Africa was generally perceived as the ‘Dark Continent’. But a Dark Continent could hold many dark, but exciting secrets. Thus, to the European mind it was surrounded with an aura of mystery.

It is interesting to look at some of the ideas and events that shaped the European perception of Africa – it was after all with these perceptions and ideas in mind that they eventually set out to discover and explore the continent. Africa was the fabled land of the golden city of Ophir; it was where the fabulously rich gold mines of King Solomon lay, waiting for rediscovery. The Queen of Sheba was also out of Africa and of her beauty and wealth the Old Testament of the Christian Bible is unstinting in its praise. However, in the mediaeval European mind, somewhere, deep within the vast unexplored and unknown continent, also lay the amazing kingdom of Prester John. His was a much more immediate reality for them. He was supposed to be a descendant of the Magi and possessed great wealth.

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During the 1130s, Turkish power threatened the Crusader kingdoms in the Holy Land. These kingdoms urgently sought aid from Christian Western Europe. Around 1145, Hugh, Bishop of Jabala, met Pope Eugenius to ask for help. Otto von Freisingen, Bishop of Freising, recorded in his *Historia de Duobus Civitatibus* (1158) that Hugh told the Pope about Prester John, a Christian priest and king whose kingdom was in the extreme Orient. The point Hugh made to the Pope was that they (the Crusader kingdoms) could not expect help from Prester John because he was cut off from them by the River Tigris.²

In 1165 the Emperor Manuel Comenius of Byzantium received a (forged) letter allegedly from Prester John. The forgery was quite clever, obviously being based on Otto von Freisingen's report. It played on the hopes and fears of the Europeans for deliverance from the Turks by this, reputedly the mightiest of all Christian Kings.

In part, the letter read:

I am a zealous Christian and universally protect the Christians of our empire, supporting them by our alms. We have determined to visit the sepulchre of our Lord with a very large army, in accordance with the glory of our majesty to humble and chastise the enemies of the cross of Christ and to exalt his blessed name.

For gold, silver, precious stones, animals of every kind and the number of our people, we believe there is not our equal under heaven.

The letter caused a sensation. Not only were copies circulated widely, but excerpts were even made into song. The official response to the letter was from Pope Alexander III, who sent a Papal emissary in 1177 with a letter for Prester John, carried by his physician, Magister Philippos. Nothing further was ever heard of the letter, the physician, or of Prester John.

Prester John was originally thought to rule in Asia, but as trade increased European familiarity with that continent, it became apparent that the priest king was not there. By the 14th century, all searches for Prester John and his kingdom in Asia had proved fruitless. Rather than give up on this hopeful and glamorous

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legend, however, Europeans decided that they must have been looking on the wrong continent. Where better to seek this mysterious kingdom, then, than on the continent of mystery itself? They turned their eyes towards the interior of Africa. Always associated with fabulous riches, Africa could easily harbour the most fabulously rich and powerful king in all Christianity.

There was an actual Christian kingdom there, the Nestorian kingdom of Abyssinia, latterly known as Ethiopia. East Africa was sometimes conflated in European thinking with the 'Indies', and so here, they thought, must be that great Christian King in the East. It remains a striking phenomenon of the European psyche that, centuries after the fall of the Crusader countries, when European exploration of the coastal waters of Africa began, they were still on the lookout for signs or tidings of the kingdom of the mighty Prester John.

The Portuguese sent several expeditions to make contact with Prester John's kingdom and the reports that came back confirmed the belief that he had finally been found. Thus, it came about that it was in Africa that Prester John's kingdom was thought to lie when the earliest printed maps of Africa first appeared. The legend eventually passed from common belief, but not before leaving a number of maps illustrating this wonderful myth. As far as Europeans were concerned therefore, thoughts of Africa constantly intermingled fact with fiction and legend, but, somehow, Africa was always associated with visions of gold and fabulous wealth.

The Arabs and the Chinese enjoyed much more early success in trading with Africa. Their trading relations with African coastal communities thus date from far earlier. They concentrated on relations with the African east coast and colonized it right down to the spice island of Zanzibar. The Mediterranean galley ships of the Europeans were unsuited to navigating the waters along the African coast, but the ships used in the North Sea offered greater promise. It is from the latter that the successful Portuguese caravels were later developed.

When the Portuguese Prince Henry the Navigator set out with his new ships and navigational technology, it was to the African coast that he turned in the hope of finding gold and wealth.³ The indigenous black people of Africa had of course been known to

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Europeans for centuries. They were always highly regarded for their physical strength, superior endurance and ability to perform hard labour. When Prince Henry did not find much gold on these travels, he quite contentedly settled for the black variety – slaves. Slaves were already being traded by the local kings and chieftains with Arab traders, as they had been doing for centuries. Some evidence suggests that these West African societies had been involved in trade with Western Europe, through various intermediaries, from as early as 7000 BC. However, their first direct contact with Europeans actually occurred only during the 15th century.

It is remarkable that the slave trade never really reached southern Africa.⁴ Whereas black slaves were obtained in great numbers from both the east and the west coasts of Africa, where poor, luckless individuals were provided in greater numbers by local rulers than by direct Portuguese slave hunts, slaves never were taken from the south to the same extent. The geography of Southern Africa largely isolated the region, thus protecting its people from these ravages.

After leaving Luanda in Portuguese Angola on the west coast of central Africa, a ship could not find a safe harbour along the dangerous African shore until it reached the southern part of Mozambique on the African east coast. There were harbourages available at and around the Cape of course, but the coast is swept by dangerous currents, hidden rocks closer inshore, extreme winds and massive waves, known as Cape rollers. The whole region was thus best avoided.

Added to these navigational obstacles is the fact that on the western shore, south of the mouth of the Congo, there are no navigable rivers giving access to the southern African hinterland. The habitable interior is also separated from the west coast by the oldest and most formidable desert in the world – the Namib. Beyond that, lies still more desert. Although not quite as barren as the Namib, the Kalahari stretches up to the Vaal River, while the semi-desert of the Great Karroo stretches down almost to Cape Town. The lush Mediterranean-like beauty of the Cape of Good Hope is a veritable oasis in the arid surrounding landscape, which continues north for hundreds of miles along the west coast.

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The difficulty of access exists only from the west coast, but matters were different on the east coast. There the interior of the southern sub-continent was accessible and the slave trade would thrive from Delagoa Bay in the 18th century. The indigenous inhabitants of Southern Africa were thus not completely isolated from the rest of the world, nor were they spared the ravages of the slave trade. When the first white settlers met up with the black peoples of the interior, they were already raising white corn as their staple food. To this day South Africa is one of the largest producers and consumers of white corn, due to the native people's traditional preference for this product against the yellow variety. Exactly how corn reached these tribes from Mexico is unknown, but the most reasonable assumption would be that it was introduced by Arab traders. Arab traders had been trading up and down the African east coast for centuries.

Similarly, it appears that the locally grown marijuana (known locally as *dagga*) is not indigenous either. Although it has been traditionally used by most of the native inhabitants, including the insular and shy San (Bushmen) for as long as anybody can remember, the local product is apparently of Chinese origin.

It is unlikely that these tribes traded directly with either the Arabs or the Chinese. However, the well-known international trade network in which the impressive Limpopo Valley settlements played a vital part, even before Great Zimbabwe became the most important link, would have been readily accessible to most Southern African tribes south of the Limpopo.⁵

In 1815, Britain recognized the right of the Portuguese to take captives between Cape Delgado and Delagoa Bay in Mozambique. The export of slaves from northern Mozambique rose from 47,000 during the first decade of the 19th Century to 129,000 during the decade from 1820 to 1829. Some evidence suggests that this increase, and especially the low price paid for slaves, is probably the single most important event that gave rise to 'the time of troubles'. These terrible times in South Africa have a direct bearing on the later events described in this book. It set the scene that confronted the Dutch settlers and the gold diggers when they penetrated the region.

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The people of South Africa

When referring to the indigenous peoples of Southern Africa, one must tread warily. Whether or not Africa, and more specifically perhaps, the western part of the promontory known as the Witwatersrand, is the cradle of humankind is moot. It is, however, a matter of archaeological record that the interior of South Africa, and particularly the area later known as the Transvaal, have been inhabited by humans and their anthropological forebears for hundreds of thousands of years.

Who these original people were cannot be established with any degree of certainty – in fact, not even with uncertainty. In this respect, Southern Africa is obviously not unique. The identity of prehistorically indigenous peoples is enigmatic all over the world. However, these people would be the only ones who truly qualify to be called indigenous. All others migrated at one time or another into the areas they now occupy.

Almost invariably, the approach relating to the indigenous peoples of southern Africa has been Euro-centric. It was largely the white man's delusion, perhaps honestly, but certainly conveniently, held that the black tribes of South Africa were migrating south into the empty interior just about the same time as the white settlers were busy migrating northwards into the same empty space.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The archaeological record (as well as extensive linguistic and other studies) shows that the interior of the country had been populated for many thousands of years. It appears that the inhabitants of longest standing are the San and Khoi. They were widely dispersed in population groups throughout the sub-continent. In the interior, over centuries, black peoples moving down from the north were displacing the lighter-skinned Khoi and San groups.

Although Early Iron Age occupation of the Transvaal is certain, it has not delivered the overwhelmingly rich evidence of its activities that the Late Iron Age has, especially from about AD 1400 and later. The southern highveld was the focus of extensive human occupation

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and during the same period, numerous settlements arose on the eastern Transvaal escarpment as well. In whatever way these societies developed, the evidence is clear that the Early and Late Iron Age inhabitants of the Transvaal were Bantu-speaking peoples. They were black people, as opposed to the San and Khoi peoples who also inhabited the area and who were hunter-gatherers, speaking an unrelated language and not practising metallurgy.

Among the Bantu speakers living south of the Limpopo, four broadly defined groups are usually distinguished. They are the two large linguistic groups of the Tswana-Sotho and Nguni speakers, followed by the smaller Venda-Lemba and Tsonga groups. These distinctions are essentially linguistic ones. For the sake of clarity, the later geopolitical appellations of Transvaal, Free State, Natal and the Cape Colony will be used throughout.

Broadly speaking, and with only minor exceptions, the Nguni-speaking people reside on the coastal and inland regions of Natal and in the eastern coastal parts of the Cape Colony. They count among them probably the three best-known black nations of South Africa: the Swazi, the Zulu of Natal and the Xhosa of the Eastern Cape. There are many clans within each of these broad groupings. For example, there is the Thembu, a Xhosa clan with its own identifiable culture and distinct history. Ex-President Nelson Mandela is a Thembu hereditary chief, recognized as an aristocrat among all the Xhosa.

The Tswana-Sotho speakers generally occupy the Transvaal, the Free State and the adjacent western regions that include the vast and beautiful country of Botswana. The Venda-Lemba is a relatively small group that lives exclusively in the north-eastern, Soutpansberg area, of the Transvaal.

Among the Tswana-Sotho-speaking people, there was very little development in the way of state formation. The absence of true state formation among the Tswana has been attributed to fissiparous tendencies within their chiefdoms. The social and political structure of both the Sotho and Tswana, before the 'time of troubles' is striking for its fragmentary nature. This great weakness made these communities very vulnerable when they came under pressure during the Difaqane, as the 'time of troubles' is more properly known.

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All Tswana ruling lineages can be traced to one of three founding ancestors, called Morolong, Masilo and Mokgatla. Morolong appears to have lived in the western Witwatersrand around the 13–14th centuries; Masilo appears to have lived in the northern Witwatersrand area around the 14–15th centuries; Mokgatla appears to have lived in the north-eastern Witwatersrand area around the 15–16th centuries.

The Witwatersrand therefore appears to be the heartland of the Tswana speakers, but when the first Dutch settlers arrived, the Witwatersrand appears to have been wholly depopulated. The later history of these Tswana ruling lineages is marked by fission and division into more and more chiefdoms. Eventually the Tswana inhabited the whole of the Transvaal as well as areas to the west and northwest.⁶

In the northeastern Transvaal, the Pedi formed what could be described as a state in a loosely organized ‘federation’. It was the only state formation among the Tswana and is discussed here in some detail, as the Pedi play an important role in the history of gold and war in the Transvaal.

A Tswana chiefdom is really a ‘tribal estate’ with the chief as estate manager; it is an integrated unit made up of three separate delineated areas, each area set aside for a specific purpose. There was a residential section which was large enough to be termed a village or even a town. In the western Transvaal, some towns were surrounded by sturdy stone walls. The towns, called *metse*, were closely settled and accommodated perhaps some 25,000 people. Next, there was arable land that the chief, who possessed supreme executive, legislative and judicial power, allocated among family households. A family household was the smallest component of a chiefdom. Finally, there was land designated for grazing, access to which was also controlled by the chief.

As will be seen in later chapters, the efficiency of this socio-economic political system was generally capable of, and did deliver, substantial economic surpluses. It was on this ability that the labour policy of the gold mines relied for the efficacy and cheapness of the migratory labour system.

The Pedi, situated in the lush eastern Transvaal, is a Tswana chiefdom that is different from the others. It can be argued that

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the higher rainfall area that they inhabited condensed the area required by the population for economic exploitation. This smaller, more densely populated area thus allowed the Pedi chief to amalgamate a number of separate 'tribal estates'.

This structure led to the Pedi to adopt a hierarchical social structure, headed by a royal lineage (*bakgomana*), although he was really a paramount chief. The system was flexible in that aliens were readily incorporated and accepted among the commoners. Slaves or captives were the lowest levels in their hierarchy.

The Pedi polity, however, can be described neither as a state, nor as a nation. Rather, it is a federation of chiefdoms built by force and marriage. The Pedi rulers were able to maintain their rule from the Soutpansberg Mountains in the north, to as far south as the Vaal River. Although the rule was initially established by force of arms, it was maintained by the giving of royal wives to subordinate chiefs and the recognition of local autonomy.⁷

Sekhukhune, a Pedi paramount chief, was destined to play a terminal role in the fortunes of the first Boer Republic in the Transvaal.

The Difaqane

The 'time of troubles' is known by various names among the people of South Africa, but most often it is called the 'Difaqane'. The word conveys the idea of a forced removal and therefore emphasizes the uprooting of settled communities that took place because of the prevalent violence. The Xhosa use the word *Mfecane*, which might be derived from the word *ukufaca* meaning to be weak and emaciated from hunger.⁸

The importance of the events during this period can hardly be overemphasized. The present demographic structure of South Africa owes much to the events that occurred during the two crucial decades between 1820 and 1840.⁹ It is not surprising that the causes and effects of such cataclysmic events have been a subject of contention between historians for many years past. Although much of what happened will forever remain hidden by

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the smoke of chaos, modern research and discovery have resulted in a much clearer picture, slaying many myths in the process. The overall impact of the Difaqane was also varied: some societies were severely devastated; some were forced to migrate and establish themselves in other parts of Africa; others withstood the traumas and even consolidated their position.¹⁰

We now know that the disturbances began in about 1817. Fundamentally, the cause was a struggle that developed between certain Nguni tribes (clans) to gain access to trading with the Portuguese through Delagoa Bay. This is modern-day Maputo, formerly Lourenço Marques and the capital of the ex-Portuguese colony of Mozambique. Dingiswayo was a powerful chief of one of the clans, the Mthethwa. He had long dreamt of gaining access to trading via this bay. However, other tribes who inhabited the southern, western and northern approaches, jealously guarded access to the bay. Dingiswayo apparently did not take any aggressive action to realize his dream, but another clan, the Mabudu, struggled continuously and eventually gained access to the southern shore of the Bay. They then entered into an alliance with Dingiswayo, fulfilling the latter's dream of direct access to the Bay.

Zwide was another powerful chief in the area. He and his tribe lived inland and to the west of the bay. This new alliance now cut off his access to the Delagoa Bay trading area and this is what probably drove him to attack the two allies in 1817. He won the fight, killing Dingiswayo in the process but in so doing, he unwittingly initiated the great Difaqane that would engulf the whole sub-continent.

Shaka, the man who would become the great warrior king of the Zulu, was then only a young commander in Dingiswayo's army. The Zulu were at that time only one of the Nguni clans, and one of the smaller ones at that. Shaka found himself in Dingiswayo's army because the Zulu owed allegiance to Dingiswayo. But Shaka was a military genius. He vowed to take revenge for the defeat suffered by Dingiswayo's forces. He was such an impressive warrior and military strategist that he was soon given command of the whole army and within two years, he was ready to do battle with Zwide.

Shaka's defeat of Zwide was so thorough that Zwide's people and their remaining leaders fled in all directions. One of those leaders,

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Soshangane, fled northwards to the Delagoa Bay area where he entered into violent conflict with the people living along his escape route, but he also entered into trading arrangements with the Portuguese 'for the supply of ivory, slaves and other wares'.¹¹ Large-scale anarchy then ensued, spreading out in an ever-widening circle, the epicentre of which was in the hinterland of Delagoa Bay.

Later events, including two years of massive drought and failed crops, sent further shock waves of refugees south over the Kei River and into the eastern Cape. Other groups fled west over the Drakensberg, killing and pillaging as they went, thereby destabilizing the Cape Xhosa and the Sotho communities in the Free State. The refugees plunged into, raided and drove settled communities from their homes, who, in turn, did the same to communities along the path of their flight with the effect of falling dominos. The fragmented Sotho and Tswana communities could not hold their own in the ensuing chaos. The whole of the eastern part of the South African sub-continent was thus thrown into a state of violent turmoil.

Fortunately, there were also stabilizing forces at work. Moshweshwe, a chief with a south Sotho power base in the mountain stronghold of Thaba Bosiu, and chief Sekwati of the Pedi tried with some success to halt the chaos. Moshweshwe's efforts would result in the modern state of Lesotho, but the Pedi would eventually be emasculated as a political and military power by the British. But at the time of the Difaqane, these two chiefs set up new centres of power and order in their respective strongholds. They became safe havens for people fleeing from the murder and mayhem of the Difaqane and afforded them an opportunity to start rebuilding their lives under the auspices of these powerful chiefs.

The Difaqane had a devastating impact on the Tswana-Sotho speakers. Apart from the Pedi, many of their chiefdoms had been severely disrupted, dislocated and the communities scattered. The fact of their fragmentary settlements had made them vulnerable in the first place. After the dispersion of the Difaqane, they were even more vulnerable.

Even the Pedi were severely tried. They were almost the first victims of the fleeing Zwide, who nearly destroyed their economic power base by his incessant cattle raids. This was followed by

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invasion in 1822, again from Zululand, by Mzilikazi and his followers who had decided to break away from Shaka. Mzilikazi was one of Shaka's outstanding young generals and Shaka apparently had a special affection for him. He regarded Mzilikazi as his protégé. Mzilikazi was actually Zwide's son-in-law, who, together with his followers, had changed sides from Zwide to Shaka.

Mzilikazi's break with Shaka was a result of a sharing of the spoils of war. After a successful military campaign in which many cattle were captured, Mzilikazi disagreed with Shaka on the portion due to the latter. Because he expected severe punishment at the hands of Shaka, Mzilikazi led his followers, mainly from the Khumalo clan, across the Drakensberg and into the eastern Transvaal.

Although Mzilikazi beat the Pedi in battle, he had by no means conquered them. He tried to set up a new territorial base in that eastern area, but continued conflict with the Pedi eventually convinced him to seek safer pastures. Accordingly, Mzilikazi and his followers, who would later become known as the Matabele nation, moved westwards. They established themselves in a safer territorial base in the area of the Marico River, in the Western Transvaal. This was where they were based when the Dutch emigrant farmers first came into the Transvaal.

This, then, was how the stage was set in the interior of the sub-continent when what would later become known as the Great Trek started. Apart from the strong and still cohesive Xhosa nation in the eastern Cape, Moshweshwe had established, and was building, a strong, settled and prosperous nation in his mountain stronghold that bordered the eastern Cape, Natal in the east and the Free State in the west. The open veldt of the Free State had not yet returned to normal and the Tswana-Sotho-speaking communities were still recovering from the devastation of the Difaqane. Under the tyrannous rule of Shaka, a strong Zulu kingdom had developed north of the Tugela River in Natal. But the whole area south of the Tugela, up to the Pondoland border, and bordered in the west by the Drakensberg Mountains and the Indian Ocean in the east, was in chaos. This chaotic area would be the basis of the later colony of Natal.

To the north and west of the Zulu, the Swazi were solidly strengthening and maintaining their territory; north of the Swazi

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border, the Pedi were consolidating their position in the eastern Transvaal. The southern border of Pedi territory was Swaziland, while it shared part of its southeastern border with the Zulu. Its eastern border, however, was demarcated by the low range of mountains called the Lebombo Mountains, to the east of which lay Portuguese territory. The Lebombo Mountains still form the eastern border of South Africa with the modern state of Mozambique.

To the west of the territory of the Pedi, chaos still reigned in the Transvaal interior, with unsettled communities struggling to survive and many hiding in mountains and forests. Mzilikazi and his Matabele had settled in the western Transvaal on the Marico River, from where they were systematically building a polity by subjugating surrounding tribes and exacting tribute from them.

When the Dutch colonists started immigrating into the interior of the Free State, the Transvaal and Natal from 1836 onwards, it was in this cauldron of bubbling violence that they found themselves. While they might have thought that they were moving into empty land, they in fact became full-scale participants in the Difaqane. Wittingly, or unwittingly, they were another destabilizing force in an already destabilized situation.

To them, it was an opportunity, but fraught with danger. According to their understanding, if they could prevail, nirvana was theirs. How they handled the challenge would make the difference between success and failure in the long term. But much of the story still has to be told before it reaches the stage where the Dutch emigrant farmers arrived on the South African highveld to colonize it.