

## A Fascinating Collection of Primary Sources

**Karel Schoeman (ed), “Early White Travellers in the Transgariep, 1819-1840”, *Vrijstatia Series*, 14**

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Notes, chronological outline, bibliography, maps, index

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In 1992, the thirteenth number in the *Vrijstatia Series*, “The British presence in the Transorange, 1845-1854”, appeared. Even though three more volumes of primary documents on Free State history were ready for publication at the time, they had to be shelved, as no subsidy could be obtained to fund their printing. Recently though, through the involvement of Protea Book House, it has become

possible to publish two of these manuscripts, namely “Early White Travellers in the Transgariep, 1819-1840” and “The Griqua Mission at Philippolis, 1822-1837”. After the long interval, editor Karel Schoeman prepared both volumes with his usual meticulous care, thereby making what he calls “my final contribution to Free State historiography” (p 5).

“Early White Travellers in the Transgariep, 1819-1840” comprises seven chapters. In Chapter 1, a general introduction to the earliest written records pertaining to the subject is given. Chapter 2 contains various statements and documents which provide insight into the circumstances of early white hunters and pastoralists in the Transgariep between 1819 and 1825. The journey of missionaries John Melvill and G.A. Kolbe from Philippolis to the Caledon River in 1828, is the topic of Chapter 3. Their joint letter, dated 25 November 1828 and addressed to Richard Miles, Acting Superintendent of the London Missionary Society, forms the basis of its contents. In the autumn of 1833, a party of Wesleyan missionaries undertook an exploratory journey into the Transgariep, followed in the winter of the same year by missionaries of the Paris Missionary Society. Chapter 4 comprises John Edwards’ description of the former journey and excerpts from Thomas Arbousset’s journal kept during the latter. Chapter 5, entitled “Two journeys along the Modder and Riet Rivers (1835-36)” provides information on the exploratory tours undertaken by the Berlin Missionary Society’s August Gebel, Johann Lange and Johann Schmidt between 1835 and 1836. In Chapter 6, extracts from the travelogue of Captain William Cornwallis Harris is provided. While on extended sick leave at the Cape, he undertook a hunting expedition into the interior of Southern Africa in 1836. In addition to his evocative descriptions of the Transgariep, the account of the journey through this region by yet two more missionaries, François Daumas and Thomas Arbousset, is contained in this chapter. Daumas travelled beyond the Modder and Vet Rivers in 1836. The final chapter is devoted to “The missionary tour of James Backhouse and G.W. Walker (1839)”.

This diverse collection of primary sources presents the reader with a fascinating picture of the landscape and heterogeneous inhabitants of the Transgariep in the early nineteenth century. White hunters from the Cape Colony had already started visiting this area at the end of the eighteenth century. By 1825, seasonal migration by white farmers to the Transgariep was officially allowed and soon developed into permanent settlement. The documents found in this publication, vividly describe these events. In the introduction, Schoeman expresses the wish that the book will be of use to the historian and of interest to the general reader (p 6). This will indeed be the case, as the eyewitness accounts of the many visitors provide a wealth of information on nature, nations, historical events and their time – each in the respective author’s individual style and

manner. Their diverse approaches to the same topic, lends a unique charm to this compilation, yet all are ably united by the author's comprehensive introductions and notes.

Information on any imaginable topic can be found in this volume, including the traditional clothing of the different peoples who inhabited this area at the time (pp 33, 113-114, 117, 132, 143, 150), their homes (pp 34, 82-83, 86, 98, 116, 128, 132, 141, 148), home-life (pp 102, 130), food (pp 45, 114, 123), agricultural practices (pp 60, 73, 80-81) and crafts (p 144). Of course nature receives a lot of attention – from large animals to insects (pp 76, 134, 142-143, 147), as do the numerous tribulations faced by travellers in the early nineteenth century (pp 71, 108-109). With the major part of the contributors being missionaries, religion and missionary work are frequent topics. One can only marvel at the zeal displayed by these Christian pioneers. It is sad to note that what they often took to be a favourable response to their teachings, in fact was often simply a matter of courtesy on the part of indigenous populations, or the desire to obtain the protection of missionaries and their firearms against raiders and enemies (pp 36, 65). A particularly poignant description of the loneliness of the missionary is to be found in Daumas' journal (p 105).

Not only are the numerous footnotes which enlighten the texts of great use to the reader, but a comprehensive bibliography, index and chronological outline of the establishment of the European presence in the Transgariep, dating from 1775 to 1848, also add to the value of this publication for research purposes. In addition it ensures that the reader who is not well-versed with this particular section of Southern African history, never "becomes lost" in the text, despite being faced by a mass of facts. A sketch entitled "Mequatling" by James Backhouse graces the cover of the book, but otherwise no illustrations are included, as the limited pictorial records which exist of this period, have already been used repeatedly in previous volumes of the *Vrijstatia Series*, as well as in other publications. Two maps – respectively of the western and the eastern Transgariep – helps the reader to orientate him/herself even more accurately while "accompanying" the travellers on their journeys in spirit.

"Early White Travellers in the Transgariep, 1819-1840" is a paperback edition. Despite having spent several days in a crammed handbag, it still looks brand-new, thereby proving the quality of its binding and cover. It will be a welcome addition to any historian or book-lover's collection.

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