

CHANGING BLACK PERCEPTIONS OF THE GREAT TREK¹

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In this day and age it has become quite fashionable to "debunk" various aspects of history. The reasons for this are varied. In some cases the re-evaluation is based on new evidence coming to light, which necessitates a reformulation of earlier interpretations. Alternately new research methods might bring about a need for reassessment. New paradigms of explanation have also led to re-interpretations. The search for a new explanation can also be attributed to the new directions in the philosophy of history, which have opened the way for new fields of research that at times have brought more conventional rationale into question. Thus the writing of history is in a constant process of revision.

There has been some research into the evolution of South African historiography. These works have, in part, addressed themselves to the polemical problem in South African historiography, but have restricted themselves to the nature of the conflict between the various so-called "white" schools of history.

While they have not entirely neglected the Black perspective, they have tended to be dismissive of it, on the grounds that it is 'unscientific', and therefore irrelevant to the discussion of South African history writing in general. While there is no quarrel with their logic, it can be argued that they have neglected a vast body of literature that would indicate that Blacks have a very definite historical interpretation. This perspective is clearly evident in the literary and polemical writings that will come under discussion. It is perhaps apposite that this discussion should be centred around a controversial issue such as the Great Trek which over the last 150 years has excited passions for a variety of reasons.

At the outset it should be pointed out that some of the criticism levelled at the paper as originally presented was that it was debatable as to what extent the views of the individual could be taken as being representative of the whole. The intention is not to present these views as those of Blacks in their entirety, but as those of individuals who operated within a specific social, cultural, economic and political milieu, and who could be considered to be representative of the constituency in which they operated. Thus it is possible to find conflicting viewpoints on the same theme, which arise from either the era or sphere in which the writer operated. It should also be borne in mind that, particularly among the early spokespersons, there was a tendency to consider their particular needs and demands as synonymous with those of the broad mass. This was not always the case, and there is no doubt that the early leadership and membership of the South African Native National Congress made it a fairly elitist organization that tended to speak on behalf of those in positions of power within the Congress rather than for some faceless mass.

Another aspect to be considered is that the sources consulted do not represent contemporary primary sources on the Great Trek. What they represent are attempts by various Black writers to come to grips with their current situation. They seek an explana-

1. This article is based on a paper presented at the Historical Association of South Africa's conference *Perspectives on the Great Trek*, held in Pretoria on January 21–22, 1988 and reflects some of the criticisms offered of the paper, both during formal and informal discussions. I thank those who offered criticism. Naturally the opinions expressed here are my own and I accept full responsibility for them.

tion of the present in the past, and for many the arrival of the Whites at the Cape, with the subsequent territorial expansion, forms the basis of their predicament. Because the Great Trek forms part of this territorial expansion, it is not surprising that a good deal of the comment is devoted to this phenomenon. A further question arises as to what sources the individual writers used on which to base their views? In the case of the "historical" works there is no doubt that much of the information contained in them is based on the works of early liberal historians and commentators. And among the more contemporary writers the two volumes of M Wilson and L M Thompson's *The Oxford History of South Africa* are significant reference works. The latter have also contributed to the views of modern radical writers. It should be added that in this last case these writers have applied information gleaned from Wilson and Thompson's works and employed it within their framework of explanation. It might be argued that as a result of these influences the views expressed do not represent those of Blacks, but rather those of Whites. To an extent this criticism is valid, but, it must be remembered that the writers involved freely adopted and adapted the views contained in their references to meet their needs and substantiate their perceptions.

The Great Trek will be looked at under two fairly conventional headings, viz. causes and consequences, as seen by various Black writers. In addition an attempt will be made to provide an insight into Black perceptions of both the Great Trek and the Voortrekkers. Within these two major categories I shall outline the interpretations of each writer and attempt to relate his viewpoint to the particular milieu in which he operated. In the context of this article, perception is taken to mean the interpretation and significance that an individual attaches to specific events in terms of his specific cultural, social, economic and political milieu, and how he formulates his responses to this interpretation against the background of his environment. An attempt will be made to highlight some of the themes that arise from the writings under discussion and to relate them to the era in which they evolved. It is hoped that in this way the correlation between time and changing perception will become apparent.

Even though the division between material and ideological causes of the Great Trek is accepted in more recent interpretations this is not an entirely recent development. Already in the early phase of Black commentary on the Great Trek it is said that some of the causes are to be found in the material sphere. Thus Glenelg's reversal of D'Urban's land cession after the Sixth Frontier War, although unwise, was nevertheless just. Unfortunately the colonists, particularly the Dutch, were infuriated and cited this as one of the reasons for the Great Trek.² On the ideological front the causes were to be found in the refusal to recognise the liberty of others. The emancipation of slaves was "the most potent cause". In addition an analysis of the Retief Manifesto would show that practically all the clauses demonstrate discontent over the British government's conduct of "native affairs".³ The emigration from the Cape was a flight from the more "equitable laws of the Cape Colony", to allow the emigrants to once again enslave Blacks without British interference.⁴ Thus Plaatje also saw an ideological motive for the exodus, as slavery to him was largely a question of racial attitude rather than an economic one. In addition he is sceptical about the claims that the Boers left the Cape for the sake of religious freedom.⁵

S M Molema, *The Bantu Past and Present* (Cape Town, 1963), 103.

Molema, *The Bantu Past and Present*, 242—3 and 272.

S T Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa. Before and Since the European War and the Boer Rebellion* (Johannesburg, 1982), 127.

5. S T Plaatje, *Mhudi. An Epic of South African Native Life a Hundred Years Ago* (Lovedale, 1957), 82—3.

If it is remembered that Plaatje in particular was intimately involved with the campaigns against the Natives' Land Act of 1913, which included a strong propagandist element, then much of the motive for these explanations becomes apparent. Plaatje was convinced that if an adequate appeal could be made to British "fair play" (the principle that was believed to underlie the "equitable laws" of the Cape) then pressure would be put on the Union government to rescind the Act and subsequent legislation which threatened the few remaining rights of Blacks. It had to be made clear that the contemporary Afrikaner was merely a younger version of the Boers who had fled from the enlightened laws of the Cape to get more land and practise slavery. Both these practices, dispossession and slavery, were believed to be inimical to what were held to be the basic tenets of British rule. What is clear from the works of Plaatje and Molema is that, with some variation, they saw the Great Trek as having its origins in the racial attitudes of those people who came to be known as the Voortrekkers.

This theme was continued by Xuma, who claimed that the passage of Ordinance 50 of 1828 had created an "unbearable boil" that came to a head with the emancipation of the slaves. The only relief that the colonists had was to remove themselves from the source of their affliction, the Cape Colony and its laws.⁶

Similarly J T Gumede felt that the Voortrekkers left the Cape to avoid the pending equality.⁷ Xuma was the last of the ANC leaders who would follow policies formulated in the early years of the SANNC based on the belief that Blacks could achieve their objectives by representations and negotiation. Gumede represents an interregnum in the ANC in the pre-1949 period, in that he sought to take the ANC along the path of confrontation, until he was ousted in 1930 in the purge of communists from the ANC.

The views of the writers thus far presented have demonstrated a concern with the question of race, which is in keeping with political sentiments of the era 1900 to the 1930s. While there was this preoccupation with race and more specifically racism great care would have to be taken that the condemnation of Whites did not become so comprehensive as to include all Whites, but only a specific section of them, the Afrikaner. Should the shot of condemnation of Whites become so widespread, the spokespersons of Black interests believed that they ran the risk of antagonising those amongst the Whites whom they believed to be sympathetic to their cause. It was believed that they would find some support amongst those who claimed to be "friends of the natives", both in Britain and in South Africa, and could therefore not afford to antagonise the support that was expected from this quarter. Similarly an attempt had to be made to avoid leaving themselves, as representatives of sections of Black opinion, open to accusations of a reversed racism. That is why they were, at times, at pains to create some sympathy for the Voortrekkers by creating an understanding of their motives. This would also have the advantage of providing a timely warning to the British government of the consequences of maladministration. The implication being that if a justification could be found for the Boer emigration then a parallel could be found for a Black rejection of governmental authority. It should also be remembered that these comments were made at a time when the Cape franchise was still extant, albeit precariously.

'Bridging the gap between White and Black in South Africa.' Address by Dr A.B. Xuma at the Conference of European and Bantu Christian Student Associations at Fort Hare, June 27 — July 3, 1930 [Extracts], in T Karis and G M Carter (eds), *From Protest to Challenge. A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882—1964, Volume 1, Protest and Hope, 1882—1934*, (Stanford, 1978), 220.

J T Gumede, in A W G Champion (ed), *Minutes of the First Non-European Conference Held in the City Hall, Kimberley, 23rd, 24th and 25th June, 1927* (Wynberg, n.d.), 26.

Moving on to later opinions there is some consistency in that there are still the material and ideological motives, with the emphasis still on the latter.⁸ One writer, however, attributes the origins solely to material causes when he says that "The Boers have one aim only — land and cattle, the very things that are the soul of our race."⁹ Subsequently Dhlomo was to identify other causes as well. Dhlomo represented a new generation of African which increasingly came to the fore after the 1930s, which did not feel itself obliged to express itself in terms dictated by its mission school education. Nor was it as vulnerable to the subtle censorship of the mission presses. The writers of this age became more assertive in their demands and their articulation of them. They tended to use the language of the oppressor, but in an idiom that was not formulated by the colonizer. The memories of the preceding century were not as acute as to make them see their salvation in adhering to a philosophy prescribed by their missionary mentors.¹⁰ At the same time the implied confidence in a negotiated settlement, via existing electoral institutions, was rapidly receding as the campaign for the passage of the Hertzog Bills of 1936 reached a crescendo.

Another interesting facet of Dhlomo's pronouncement given above is that he alludes to the "soul of our race". This is one of the early expressions of an awareness of the cultural impact of the Voortrekkers and subsequent colonization. The implication of the comment is in itself significant, but it is also indicative of a new tendency in Black political thought. The cultural component in the creation of a national awareness is coming to the fore. No longer would the African consider himself obliged to blandly accept the imposition of an alien culture, and thus imply that his cultural roots were of no significance, if not to be scorned. Much of Dhlomo's writing contained in the work cited is a reflection of a resurgent pride in Blackness, that would not have to acknowledge its debt to other cultures or accept an inferior status.

Amongst the current writers there is some similarity with their predecessors although the way that they express these views is in some respects consistent with the ideology of the writer. There is a great concern to demonstrate that the policies that are the target of the writers are not merely a momentary aberration, but the consequence of deep tracks that had been laid down in the history of the evolution of current South African society. Ncube would argue that the Boers had organized an unprecedented exodus to maintain their mythical superiority, which would fuel their will to translate their ideal of separation, independence and self-determination into reality.¹¹ Through the terminology employed by Ncube a semantic link is established between the Great Trek and apartheid. And apartheid is one of the chief targets of this work of Ncube. The Voortrekkers' flight from the Cape was prompted by the need to escape the influence of humanism in the Cape and fostered by a desire for a group-based exclusiveness and preservation.¹² A further viewpoint is that the Boers remained untouched by the Enlightenment and the ideology of the French Revolution, which was evident among the British who came to settle in the Cape in the nineteenth century.¹³ The Trekkers had also exiled themselves from the Cape

8. A Vilakazi with B Mthethwa and Mthembeni Mpanza, *Shembe: The Revitalization of African Society* (Johannesburg, 1986), 7.
9. H I E Dhlomo, 'Dingane', in N Visser and T Couzens (eds), *H.I.E. Dhlomo. Collected Works* (Johannesburg, 1985), 91.
10. J M Chirenje, 'Some Origins of Modern Africans Thought in Southern Africa', in M Mutloaitse (ed), *Umhlaba Wethu. A Historical Indictment*, (Johannesburg, 1987), 47.
11. D M J Ncube, *The Impact of Apartheid and Capitalism on the Development of Black Trade Unions in South Africa*, (Johannesburg, 1985), 8.
12. J K Ngubane, *An African Explains Apartheid* (London, 1963), 33—4.
13. A Ngubo, *The Development of African Political Protest in South Africa, 1884—1910: An Analytical Approach* (Unpublished D Phil dissertation, University of California, 1978), 2.

because, ironically, their cultural isolation had created a profound feeling of inadequacy.¹⁴ The Boers had fled because they as "proper people", could not tolerate the idea of being called to account for ill-treating a "schepsel".¹⁵

From the preceding paragraph it appears that the gist of the argument is that the Boers had got caught in a self-perpetuating cycle. Through their isolation the Voortrekkers contributed to a feeling of insecurity based on a sense of inadequacy. In an attempt to create a sense of security the isolationist tendency was intensified, which however, had the opposite effect of that intended. Underlying these contentions is the belief that if the heirs of the emigrants were to break the cycle by identifying with contemporary norms they would at last find the security that they had so long sought, by being accepted as members of the broader community.

It appears that Ngubane is not only concerned with providing a motive for the emigrants' departure, but also with tarnishing some of the romantic imagery attached to the Great Trek. This writing was aimed at denying "the evocative power of the Great Trek for resuscitating the old passions in the hearts of present-day descendants of the Boer trekkers: the imagined epic ... with its Promethean quality."¹⁶ Not that this was a new tendency as sixty years earlier an editorial in the *Ilanga lase Natal* had asked whether all the fanfare over the victory at Blood River by dint of superior arms was justified.¹⁷ It is difficult to reconcile the image of all conquering heroes with that of a people filled with a "deep sense of inadequacy". The fear of egalitarianism became the motive force behind Afrikaner actions, which became a nearly pathological adherence to what was to become known as apartheid.¹⁸

A subtle shift in emphasis is noticeable in the immediately preceding perceptions. Racism *per se* is no longer under attack, but oblique references are now being made to Afrikaner nationalism. If the desire of the Afrikaner for self-preservation through an exclusive and hegemonic nationalism could be frustrated by denigrating this nationalism, then the abuses that arose from the application of this nationalism would also subside. This shift in the direction of African writing was also indicative of the beginnings of a disillusionment with the appeals to and hopes placed in a successful collaboration with the "friends of the natives".

It could be argued in the case of Ngubane that he was pleading for some understanding of the Trekkers because he himself was steeped in the liberal tradition, which at the time of writing was far more concerned with bringing about a rapprochement between Black and Afrikaner, than in precipitating an irreconcilable confrontation. To Ngubane, at this stage of his life, nationalism, at least in its South African format, was anathema. He was equally antagonistic to Afrikaner as to African nationalism at the time that he wrote *An African Explains Apartheid*. The greater part of the particular work cited is devoted to highlighting the liberal tradition in South Africa starting with Dr John Philip. The Afrikaner is warned that unless he mends his ways he will be forced into a new exile of the diaspora to which the rest of the world could be indifferent.¹⁹ It is, however, unlikely that the Afrikaner's sense of history will allow him to change, because he saw no purpose in history other than to use it as a justification for the status quo.²⁰ From this standpoint then

14. Ngubo, *The Development of African Political Protest in South Africa*, 34.

15. B Head, *A Bewitched Crossroad. An African Saga* (Johannesburg, 1984), 31.

16. L Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks. Themes and Style in African Literature* (London, 1983), 47.

17. *Ilanga lase Natal*, December 15, 1922.

18. Vilakazi, *Shembe: The Revitalization of African Society*, 7.

19. J K Ngubane, *An African Explains Apartheid*, 127.

20. J K Ngubane, *An African Explains Apartheid*, 4.

Ngubane criticizes the Afrikaner's interpretation of history as being distorted to justify his policies and their implementation. If Blacks can be portrayed in history as being a threat to Afrikaner survival then a justification can be found for current policies. Time and again Ngubane returns to the theme of what he believes is the unjustified fear that the Afrikaner has of Blacks. Should this fear be overcome then the Afrikaner will conceive of Blacks as human beings. The obverse of the coin is that Black resentment of the image forced on them by Afrikaner history, and the consequent policies, will recede. In this way a reconciliation will be possible.

What is apparent here is Ngubane's liberal connections. There is a note of appeal to the Afrikaner to reassess his position regarding history and the wilderness it is leading him into. In a later work he would take a far stronger Africanist stand.²¹ Despite this shift in philosophical foundations a recurrent theme is that the second Blood River, with a reversed outcome, can be avoided only if today's rulers would acknowledge and correct the error of their ways, which are based on the mentality created by the original Blood River. Ngubane is continuing in the vein of his predecessors in that he is seeking explanations for the present in the past. This search has led him to the conclusion that the contemporary malaise is due to the failure to adhere to what he believes are universally and eternally valid beliefs. In his case liberalism.

A further dimension is added to the dichotomy of material and ideological causes by Tsotsi, who says that the exodus was not only away from the British, but also from the Xhosa. Tsotsi is thus apportioning a place to Blacks in South African history, refusing to treat them as mere bystanders in the struggle between Boer and Briton. In addition the Boers were perturbed by the introduction of new relations of production through the introduction of Ordinance 50, the abolition of slavery and the regulation of land ownership which put an end to the indiscriminate land-grabbing of the Boers.²² Similarly it is argued that the emancipation of the slaves was viewed as a threat to the pure peasant economy of the Boers that had depended on slave labour.²³ The emigrants had left the Cape to oppress, humiliate, and dispossess the Blacks of their material base and political power in their fatherland.²⁴ In this way the link is established between the Great Trek and the dispossession of Blacks, and subsequent exploitation by Whites. Tsotsi is intimately involved with the Unity Movement which follows rather doctrinaire socialist policies. Therefore one could expect that he would express his perception of the Great Trek in terms consistent with his ideology. If the current situation can be attributed to the machinations and forces of capitalism in the past, then the only solution to contemporary problems lies in the obverse of capitalism, socialism.

The underlying ideology of Tsotsi's work is not unique, but is representative of the transformations that had been and are taking place in Black political thought and strategies. Firstly there was the age of the supplicant and petitioner as seen in the three decades after 1910. In this time political activity was largely aimed at emulating White political practices and establishing a credibility by adhering to "White standards". Implicit in this strategy was, that by merely following these policies, Blacks would be able to resolve their problems. The failure of these methods was demonstrated by the passage of the various discriminatory laws between 1913 and 1936. In the wake of this failure new methods would have to be devised and employed, in an intellectual climate generated and reflected

21. J K Ngubane, *Ushaba. The Hurtle to Blood River* (New York, 1975).

22. W M Tsotsi, *From Chattel to Wage Slavery. A New Approach to South African History* (Maseru, 1981), 22.

23. B M Magbubane, *The Political Economy of Race and Class in South Africa*, 43.

24. M Pheko, *Apartheid: The History of a Dispossessed People* (London, 1985), 41.

by people such as the writers under discussion.

Thus one saw a gradual transition to creating a national consciousness, based on enhancing the awareness of being Black and the situation that this gave Blacks in South African society. The reasoning behind this development appeared to be that if Blacks could not get a response by imitating Whites, which obliged them to adopt a stance of subordination, then Whites would be more responsive if Blacks became more self-assertive. Equally important was to strike a responsive chord amongst the constituencies that the writers and spokespersons claimed to represent. This would serve to underline the urgency of the message that Blacks were sending to Whites. When these methods failed a new strategy had to be developed. Thus writers such as Tsotsi would elect to adopt a new approach to South African history, based on the Marxist paradigm. The aim of this shift in direction has already been outlined in a previous paragraph. It should also be remembered that this transition in the method of explanation is also attributable to the changing social circumstances of Blacks in an industrializing South Africa.

Apart from the reaction to British liberalism as a cause of the Great Trek some writers suggest that the British administration encouraged the withdrawal of the Trekkers from the colony. Magubane interprets the British connivance in the establishment of the Boer states as an adroit move that would create a pan-Boer buffer zone against the threat from the Africans.²⁵ Thus the Trekkers only survived because of the logistical and moral support of Britain.²⁶ A further implication is that the basis of conflict in present-day South Africa is not merely that between African and Afrikaner, but between Blacks and Whites in general. Britain could no longer claim to have been overtaken by events, and therefore carries some of the responsibility. Britain must stop the pretence of acting as the 'friend of the native', while allowing exploitative practices to continue. The focus is shifting from the Afrikaner and his racial policies to racial discrimination in general. Perhaps this was to counter the contention from White liberals that one cannot fight one form of racism with another. This to an extent continues the logic of Tsotsi, namely that if racism is not the fundamental explanation then an answer must be sought in capitalism as the driving force of colonialism. If today's dispensation is based on a discredited ideology then the only solution lies in an alternative ideology, which in the case of Magubane, is once again socialism. To a certain extent the broadened perspective of contemporary writers has diffused the focus on the Afrikaner as the source of the problems of Blacks. Instead, and more correctly, the driving force behind the colonization and subjugation of Blacks is seen to be Britain and financial pressure groups within that country. In fact, to an extent, the Voortrekker and his successors are treated far more sympathetically than they had been previously. And to an extent they are seen to be equally as much victims of colonization and imperialism.

If these were some of the motives that drove the Voortrekkers from the Cape, what then were the people like that left the Cape, and what impact were they believed to have had on the people that they met on the way?

Much of the discussion is based on the views of writers who have allowed themselves a fair degree of poetic licence in creating dialogues between Trekkers and Blacks or amongst Blacks themselves on the Voortrekkers. It might be argued that the perceptions so composed are fictional and therefore irrelevant. The salient point is, however, that these imaginary descriptions are the product of a variety of influences which are pertinent to this discussion. Although there has been no qualification of the sources of the writers it

25. Magubane, *The Political Economy of Race and Class in South Africa*, 45.

26. Magubane, *The Political Economy of Race and Class in South Africa*, 45 and Tsotsi, *From Chattel to Wage Slavery. A New Approach to South African History*, 30 and 36.

can safely be assumed that, particularly in the case of the early generation of writers, they were relying on tradition. Even if these writers were not concerned with a factual rendition of the past they were trying to provide an insight into the mental attitude and motive forces of the people they believed to be the source of their problems. Both the early authors and their successors did have one point in common in that they wished to depict the Boers in a certain light to serve a specific political end at a particular time.

From their first contact with Moroka at Thaba Nchu, states Abdurahman, the Voortrekkers' record had been one uninterrupted catalogue of rapine and greed, that had no single virtue which could redeem it from the abuses committed in the cause of civilization.²⁷ They were not motivated by a racialism directed at Blacks as such, but by a reaction against British liberalism.²⁸ However, in setting out on their odyssey they unwittingly formed the vanguard of the scramble for Africa.²⁹ Seen with the link established by Vilikazi between the Great Trek and apartheid much of the political objective behind this writing is now apparent.

The Trekkers have been portrayed as people driven by racial prejudice and greed. They were the progenitors of the architects of apartheid, therefore just as much as the Great Trek had dubious origins then, so apartheid has now. Today's Afrikaner is still possessed of a frontier mentality,³⁰ and apartheid is the confirmation of his pledge to preserve the temper of the Trekkers.³¹ So evocative is the legacy of the Great Trek that an Afrikaner constable is left incoherent through the historical hatred and fear that emerges when he is confronted with a 'black Englishman.'³² It is felt that today Whites no longer have to rely on the use of force to achieve their objectives as the banditry of the law is an adequate substitute for their murderous anger.³³ Of the latter three authors cited all went into exile when they had seen their ideals for South African society shattered after 1948. Modisane was the only one who would remain in exile to vent his anger and frustration. Ironically Modisane was the least politically active of the trio while still in South Africa.

So successful was the opprobrium attached to the Boers that Z K Matthews remarked that whenever he and his childhood friends wanted to pick a fight with English-speaking youths they would call them 'Boers'.³⁴ The Boers were so inhumane that Black leaders were determined to obtain British protection despite that country's greedy disposition and expedient surrender of humanitarian principles.³⁵ Even though there was this overt hostility there was also a lingering empathy with the Trekkers. Blacks in the Cape still felt a kinship with their fellow pastoralists, who, because of their occupation, must have been honourable people. This somewhat more conciliatory tone is modified by the statement that Blacks in the northern regions did not share this view as they had been at the sharp end of the Great Trek. They had been up against the inflexible racial attitudes of the Boers, which had not been tempered by the presence of a mediating power.³⁶ There is

27. Presidential address delivered to the tenth annual conference of African People's Organisation at Kimberley, on September 29, 1913, by Dr Abdurahman, in Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa*, 155.
28. Tsotsi, *From Chattel to Wage Slavery. A New Approach to South African History*, 53.
29. Tsotsi, *From Chattel to Wage Slavery. A New Approach to Wage Slavery*, 23.
30. E. Mphahlele, *The African Image* (London, 1974), 52.
31. Ngubane, *An African Explains Apartheid*, 37.
32. B Modisane, *Blame Me on History* (Johannesburg, 1986), 90–91.
33. Modisane, *Blame Me on History*, 127.
34. Z K Matthews, *Freedom for My People. The Autobiography of Z.K. Matthews: Southern Africa 1901 to 1968* (Cape Town, 1981), 19.
35. B Head, *A Bewitched Crossroads. An African Saga*, 33.
36. N Jabavu, *The Ochre People* (Johannesburg, 1982), 235.

also a sense of betrayal that the people who had, in bygone days, grazed their cattle with the forefathers of the Blacks and sucked on the same pipe should now be propagating a racial myth that says that it would take Blacks a millenium to attain the same civilization that Whites enjoy.³⁷

Hitler provided an ideal analogy for the modern critics of the Great Trek. Originally Luthuli likened the Afrikaner to the *Herrenvolk*, but then in a footnote amended this to say that all White supremacists were like Nazis.³⁸ By the 1980s the Voortrekkers had become the bearers of a "Nazi-like philosophy".³⁹ The condemnation of the Boers as racists who followed philosophies similar to those of the genocidal Germans has now reached its logical conclusion. No wonder then that Dingane had been exhorted to pre-empt those who had come to usurp the Black fatherland and kill them.⁴⁰ The rise of the Nazi paradigm had distinct advantages for those who wished to explain the present in terms of the past. Firstly, the framework of explanation was universally comprehensible. Secondly, by making the present-day Afrikaners understood in these terms a stigma was instantly attached to them, which would facilitate the creation of an international aversion to the Afrikaner and all he was held to represent.

Further doubt about the treachery of Dingane is raised by the question as to why the Boers should have told Dingane that it was Sekonyela who had stolen his cattle after Sekonyela had led them to Dingane. It is also remarkable that Dingane's cattle should have been stolen by mounted men armed with guns. Blame is further shifted to the Whites for the Piet Retief killing by arguing that had Cane followed his instructions and reported back to Dingane on his visit to the Cape then diplomatic relations might have been established with Britain, and thus conflict with the Boers avoided.⁴¹ The White settler John Cane had been sent to the Cape to establish diplomatic relations with the British administration there in 1830, but only went as far as Algoa Bay without completing his assignment. He was also reluctant to report back to Dingane, thus confirming the suspicions planted in the mind of Dingane by the translator Jacob. Jacob had been a member of the Cane expedition, and informed Dingane that the Whites intended taking his land.⁴² Dingane had to act against the seedbed of white treachery,⁴³ whose nocturnal activities inspired no confidence in their intentions.⁴⁴ This reaction to the night-time movements of the Retief party heightened the resentment over claims to the cattle that the Zulu had captured from Mzilikazi, and which the Boers claimed by right of conquest.⁴⁵

A W G Champion argues that when the government of the day realised that Dingane's Day was also commemorated by Blacks, as a reminder that they were not entirely impotent, it quickly changed the name to the Day of the Covenant.⁴⁶ The Nazarite Church, for a time, also observed the commemoration of the Battle of the Ncome River as a day of mourning on which Blacks dedicated themselves to an African renaissance.⁴⁷ On the one

37. Tsotsi, *From Chattel to Wage Slavery. A New Approach to South African History*, 20–1.

38. A Luthuli, *Let My People Go. An Autobiography* (London, 1982), 156.

39. Pheko, *Apartheid: The History of a Dispossessed People*, 149.

40. Dhlomo, 'Dingane', in Visser and Couzens (eds), *H.I.E. Dhlomo. Collected Works*, 97.

41. Pheko, *Apartheid: The History of a Dispossessed People*, 43–4 and 56.

42. M Wilson and L M Thompson (eds), *The Oxford History of South Africa, Vol I, South Africa to 1870* (London, 1969), 353.

43. Ngubane, *Ushaba. The Hurtle to Blood River*, 37–8.

44. M M Fuze, *The Black People and Whence They Came* (Pietermaritzburg, 1986), 170.

45. Statement # 37 by Lunguza ka Mpukane in Webb and Wright, *James Stuart Archive, Volume I*, 318–319.

46. A W G Champion, 'Repetition and Indication of Years', in M W Swanson (ed), *The Views of Mahlali. Writings of A.W.G. Champion a Black South African* (Pietermaritzburg, 1983), 64.

47. Vilakazi, *Shembe: The Revitalization of African Society*, 18–9.

hand there is no condonation of Dingane's abuse of his guests, but with the wisdom of hindsight one could have expected no other action from Dingane in protecting himself and his land from people who ultimately turned out to be "virtually robbers" of Zulu country.⁴⁸ Despite the constant refrain of dispossession by force, it was also clear that the Boers could resort to diplomatic guile to achieve their ends.⁴⁹ In what appears to be a rather ironic comment, Kumalo remarks that at least the British dispossessed the Blacks honourably, through "regular war", while the Boers, by implication, had chosen the dishonourable path of stealth.⁵⁰ Despite the criticism of Retief and his actions there is a note of relief as well. The events that followed on the Retief murder did bring home the realization that the Zulu did not have an exclusive monopoly on monarchy.⁵¹

It is no wonder that already in 1916 Plaatje should ask why Blacks had increasing difficulty in continuing to love and respect Whites as they had done previously?⁵² After all, the people who rule by coercion⁵³, would not have got the power to enact legislation like the Natives Land Act of 1913 without the active connivance of the British. Tsotsi would not have to experience this disillusionment because from his perspective, if the Boer and Briton had nothing else in common, they were at least united in their desire to dispossess Blacks of their land and establish White supremacy.⁵⁴ Tsotsi was no longer subject to the constraints that applied to Plaatje. He did not feel himself obliged to be placatory and obsequious to liberal pressure groups. Tsotsi had joined the ranks of those who saw the liberal elements as diversionary and subversive of Black interests. No nuances of political persuasion were recognised amongst Whites by Tsotsi, although he did make an exception for those who subscribed to his ideology.

The dispossession of Blacks was so total that the heirs of the Voortrekkers even denied the aborigines their name and instead named them Bantu, Bushmen and Hottentots to try to legitimate their conquest by suggesting that the Africans were settlers.⁵⁵ So complete was the subordination initiated by the Voortrekkers that the Zulu, for example, began to doubt the philosophical foundations of their existence.⁵⁶ Here again there is an assertiveness over, and a pride in, an own identity that rejects the near fawning stance of people like Plaatje and Molema. The latter two, through their practically unequivocal acceptance of the superiority of Western civilization, had provided at least a moral motive for the colonization that followed on the Great Trek. At the same time Vilakazi and Dube indicate how devastating the Great Trek and its aftermath were. Blacks not only lost their land but their cosmology was corroded as well, and thus the spiritual foundations of their existence. One could deduce from this that the colonization was not effected exclusively by force of arms, but by a destruction of the people's worldview, which facilitated their subjugation.

It is accepted that the Boers upset the balance of power created by the Mfecane, but

48. *Ilanga lase Natal*, December 15, 1922.

49. Molema, *The Bantu Past and Present*, 87-9.

50. Statement # 32 by J Kumalo, in Webb and Wright (eds), *The James Stuart Archive, Vol I*, 259-264.

51. Statement # 37 by Lunguza ka Mpukane in Webb and Wright (eds), *James Stuart Archive, Vol I*, 320.

52. Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa. Before and Since the European War and the Boer Rebellion*, 434.

53. Statement # 32 by J Kumalo, in Webb and Wright (eds), *The James Stuart Archive, Vol 1*, 247.

54. Tsotsi, *From Chattel to Wage Slavery. A New Approach to South African History*, 30.

55. D Dube, *The Rise of Azania. The Fall of South Africa* (Lusaka, 1983), 32.

56. Vilakazi, *Shembe: The Revitalization of African Society*, 9.

to suggest that they ended an era of darkness is untenable.⁵⁷ Although the Boers were slightly more civilized than the Matabele, after they had dispersed the latter, the BaKwena were confronted by a people who conducted war as barbarously as those they had recently vanquished.⁵⁸ Given the lurid and vivid descriptions of Matabele warfare this was hardly a flattering epithet. It is recognised that the Boers were not the first people to make a moral virtue of physical necessity. The Israelites had already done so.⁵⁹ The Voortrekkers had been divinely endowed with powerful weapons to enforce God's will among the heathen.⁶⁰ Through this attack on the Voortrekkers, aspersions are also cast on Christianity for its role in the subjugation of Blacks. Unfortunately the Boers did not have the good grace to keep "their Calvinistic self-deception" to themselves, and thus had an influence on the course of South African history.⁶¹ What was this impact to be?

To the early writers it was a fairly simple effect. The Trekkers were as vehement in denying the liberty of others as they were in claiming freedom for themselves. This contradictory philosophy was the product of an untutored mind, buttressed by an inherent inclination and warping of the soul towards the denial of the humanity of others. In addition the emigrants had an absolute faith in divine predestination.⁶² To Molema and Plaatje the Boers were driven by a warped mentality that drove them to subjugate Blacks. The kingless race observed the law of the jungle, and behaved "like monkeys — noisy, mischievous, restless!",⁶³ as they grabbed the land of the Blacks. At the same time they also usurped the Blacks' sovereignty and corrupted their beliefs.⁶⁴ So complete was the dispossession of the material and spiritual foundations of existence that Africans started to doubt their existence, and cast around for new anchors in life. But even these were to be denied them as the history that Black children are taught denies them their acenstral heroes and respect for the traditions of their people.⁶⁵

The chaos of the Great Trek far outstripped that occasioned by the Mfecane.⁶⁶ But was this chaos just a product of some perverse twisted temperament, or was there some deeper motive? A linkage between the Great Trek and subsequent colonization is seen in the warning that Moshoeshoe would soon have to deal with the problems of land alienation, territoriality and the cash economy that followed on the heels of the Voortrekkers.⁶⁷ A more explicit interpretation is seen in that the emigrants imprinted a path of blood, land theft and military and political subjugation of the indigenous people that would initiate a process of national dispossession of the aborigines of Azania.⁶⁸ Ironically the Boers would form the vanguard of the scramble for Africa, until they themselves were overtaken by the imperial juggernaut in the South African War.⁶⁹

A further indictment of justifying present policies by reference to the past is seen in the rejection of the policy of "forced removals", which are believed to have had their ori-

57. A W G Champion, 'Repetition and indication of years', in Swanson (ed), *The Views of Mahlati. The Writings of AWG Champion a Black South African*, 64—66.
58. Molema, *The Bantu Past and Present*, 52.
59. Ngubane, *An African Explains Apartheid*, 34.
60. Tsotsi, *From Chattel to Wage Slavery. A New Approach to South African History*, 23.
61. Tsotsi, *From Chattel to Wage Slavery. A New Approach to South African History*, 23.
62. Molema, *The Bantu Past and Present*, 242.
63. H I E Dhlomo, 'Dingane', in Visser and Couzens, *H.I.E. Dhlomo. Collected Works*, 85.
64. Dhlomo, 'Dingane', in Visser and Couzens (eds), *H.I.E. Dhlomo. Collected Works*, 97.
65. Ngubane, *Ushaba. The Hurtle to Blood River*, 12.
66. Vilakazi, *Shembe: The Revitalization of African Society*, 6.
67. Dhlomo, 'Moshoeshoe', in Visser and Couzens (eds), *H.I.E. Dhlomo. Collected Works*, 260.
68. Pheko, *Apartheid: The History of a Dispossessed People*, 42 and 148.
69. Tsotsi, *From Chattel to Wage Slavery. A New Approach to South African History*, 23.

gins in the policies followed by the Voortrekkers with regard to "redundant" Blacks. The argument that the migrations occasioned by the Mfecane and the Great Trek set and justified the precedent for contemporary forced removals cannot be accepted. It has to be remembered that the earlier motive forces for migration occurred during times of war, while the forced removals of today are imposed in times of peace.⁷⁰ Once again a connection has been created between the past and the present, which has been characteristic of the changing Black perceptions on the Great Trek.

All of the writers referred to have written in a specific era, and are thus concerned with the conditions of the period in which they worked and providing either an explicit or implicit criticism of the solutions of the time or the premises on which these solutions were based. Because many of these premises were based on perceptions of the past it is to be expected that much of their writing would be devoted to trying to place the past in a different perspective to that given it by the current "conventional wisdom." They were not only concerned with the immediate situation, but also its origins. And many saw it as originating in events and ideas surrounding the Great Trek. It appears that the belief was that if the errors of the past could be explained and understood then their repetition in the present could be eradicated and avoided in the future. Clearly this did not happen. If an immediate solution was not forthcoming then another rationale had to be provided that would resolve the problem that Blacks found themselves confronted with. Thus one sees a gradual shift from trying to explain the Great Trek in terms of racial prejudice to enforced changes in the modes of production that required altered labour relations, and greater opportunities for labour coercion.

These changes in interpretation have a close parallel in the evolution of Black opposition to White rule. From the early twentieth century one saw the striving for inclusion in White society, through the attainment of White norms. This aim would only be achieved if White racism could be ended, and Blacks were allowed access to the institutions that would enable them to achieve this goal. Therefore the current situation is seen as the residue of racial attitudes that had led to the Great Trek and been confirmed in the course of the exodus and the establishment of White settlement.

With the passage of time it became clear that the object of assimilation would not be realized because of White prejudice. Goals had been set for the Blacks who wished to enter the White sphere, but as soon as they were prepared to take a kick at the posts they were to discover that the target had been moved. If this avenue was closed what other route was available? A far greater reliance on enhancing the Blacks' self-image emerged, that was marked by a self-assertion that said that Blacks did not have to measure themselves in terms of White norms. The implication of this was that the dispossession caused by the Great Trek was not the natural consequence of the conflict between 'inferior' and 'superior' civilizations. The diffidence and supplication of earlier interpretations had been found wanting. If Whites would not allow Blacks access to their civilization, then Blacks would have to regain confidence in their own, and so gain the acceptance and respect of Whites. From this perspective Blacks were not merely passive bystanders, but were actively involved in events surrounding the Great Trek. Gradually this viewpoint would evolve into an even more strident ideology that would assert that the onus no longer lay with Blacks to prove their value as human beings but with Whites who would have to show whether they were capable of identifying with Black norms. This new direction would have a profound influence on the interpretation of the 'Promethean' qualities of the

70. T Matsetela, 'Uprootal and Its Effects', in M Mutloatse (ed), *Umhlaba Wethu. A Historical Indictment*, 26-29.

Great Trek and ultimately their negation. In time, however, this development would be rejected on the grounds of its implied racism.

If the various attempts to explain the Great Trek in terms of racism had failed, and the attempts to found a nationalism based on a reaction to the perceived nature of the Great Trek had also borne no fruit, then other ways would have to be found to explain the current malaise. Thus today there is an increasing tendency to view the origins and consequences of the Great Trek in terms of historical materialism. If capitalism and its causal effects in regard to the Great Trek can be shown to be at the root of the current predicament then a justification is given for replacing South Africa's current 'capitalist' foundations with socialist ones. This development would have a two-sided effect. On the one hand there would be redress for the dispossession initiated by the Great Trek. On the other hand, because of the correlation between race and class in South Africa, the creation of socialist dispensation would create a classless and, therefore, a nonracial society.

Therefore it is clear that the changing Black perspectives on the Great Trek are related to the current political milieu in which the perspectives are founded. Several themes that have come under discussion during the course of this article justify individual attention, but within the confines of this article this has not been possible. Matters such as acculturation, civilization and culture, dispossession, enculturation, modes of production, religion and subjugation would require considerable individual attention. Nevertheless it is hoped that some appreciation has been created that history is not only an immutable rendition of factual information. Generally it is not the facts of history that are in dispute. It is how these facts are interpreted that forms the basis of the conflict between the opposing viewpoints. The debate around the Great Trek has been a protracted one and has essentially been representative of the White "factions" to the exclusion of a Black viewpoint. It is hoped that by presenting at least some Black perceptions of the emigration, future discussions of the event will be broadened to include the standpoint of Blacks.