

By the same author

PATH OF BLOOD

*The Rise and Conquests of Mzilikazi.
Founder of the Matabele Tribe of Southern Africa*

RULE OF FEAR

*The Life and Times of Dingane.
King of the Zulu*

HILL OF DESTINY

*The Life and Times of Moshesh.
Founder of the Basotho*

THE PATHFINDERS

The Saga of Exploration in Southern Africa

PETER BECKER



PENGUIN BOOKS

maintaining peace in the area. Chief Koba, he said, would be advised to prohibit his subjects from trespassing with stock on Colonial grazing grounds, for otherwise they might be cut off by white commandos and put to death. Referring to the great expanses of pasturage owned traditionally by the Xhosa to the east of the river, he pointed to their encroachment on Dutch-owned land as illogical. The farmers had come to the end of their patience, concluded the governor, and were speaking angrily about resorting to arms.

Replying briefly, Koba promised to keep his people in check, yet omitted to mention his lack of autonomy in Xhosa territory. He was no more than a petty-chief of the Ngqika, one of the tribes, and therefore subordinate to a hierarchy of senior chiefs who, in turn, paid allegiance to a supreme ruler, the illustrious Rarabe. None the less, Koba succeeded in convincing Van Plettenberg of his sincerity. Bringing the meeting to a close, the governor then returned with his followers to camp.

Van Plettenberg and his entourage left Prinsloo's farm on the 17th, and moved south-eastwards along the Great Fish river. Two days later, with the governor's permission, Gordon withdrew from the trek. He had decided to head for the Camdeboo hills, the Great Karroo and thence for Table Bay. The rest of the party continued in a south-easterly direction, and came to the Bushmans river on the 21st. After a difficult crossing they struck out for the Sundays river, which they reached at dusk. The 22nd brought them to Algoa Bay.

The trek spent two days at the bay, then, moving westwards, entered the forest of Tsitsikama, one of the densest in southern Africa. For over a week they crept laboriously onwards, winding a passage across valleys and rises, the sun obscured by the canopy of treetops, and the air hot, moist and musty. On the 3rd the Outeniqua mountains came faintly into sight, and on the following Thursday the Keurboom river and the farmstead of a Colonial named Cornelis Jacobz. Next day the governor rode into the slopes of a nearby hill, his eyes pursuing the river in its flow to the sea. Reaching the summit, and facing eastwards, he beheld a beautiful inlet, which in a moment of delight he named Plettenberg Bay. During the afternoon he had a beacon planted near the river's mouth, a smooth heavy stone not dissimilar to the one erected two months before in the region of Colesberg.

Although enchanted with Plettenberg Bay, the governor could not be persuaded to stay more than two days in the area. Continuing the trek they soon reached the Knysna forest, then, turning gradually inland, pressed on through a labyrinth of hills, lakes and woods in the vicinity of what is now the Wilderness. On the 12th they trundled into Mossel Bay, and four days later the sedentary village of Swellendam. They arrived in Cape Town on Thursday the 26th.

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WIKAR AND GORDON

Of all Van Plettenberg's admirers at the Cape, the most ardent was probably a Swede named Hendrik Jacob Wikar. Born in Göteborg, Wikar had entered the services of the Company in 1773, and was then sent to Cape Town, where he worked as a medical clerk. A wild, reckless young man, he paid far more attention to gambling than to his occupation, so within two years of his arrival at the bay he fell foul not only of his superiors, but also of his numerous creditors. In April 1775, fearing dismissal from the Company, and even arrest, he stole out of Cape Town and headed northwards. By midwinter he had established a temporary hideout beyond the Kamiesberg range, and made contact with a friendly band of Nama stockmen. In accompanying them farther northwards, he came eventually to the banks of the Gariep river.

Nothing is known of Wikar's movements after reaching the river until 4 September 1778, for this was the first date recorded by him in a report he was later to write. On that day, having recently linked up with eight half-caste Hottentot pedlars, he was trudging eastwards along the banks of the Gariep. He and his companions were heading for Great Namaqualand, where they planned 'to barter beads and tobacco for cattle'* among the more northerly Nama tribes. As the river was heavily in flood, they were compelled to continue 'towards the rising sun'† in search of a crossing. Led by Klaas Barends – it will be recalled he had accompanied Jacobus Coetsee into Great Namaqualand eighteen years before – they came to a ford known to the Nama as Gü-daus – 'Sheep Crossing'‡ – but, finding it obscured by a raging current, continued towards the east. Three weeks later, having still not found a crossing, they came to Kamas, a Nama settlement screened on its northern side by the lofty banks of the Gariep river and fronted in the south by desert rubble and shifting dunes. On 23 or 24 September they reached the

* The quotations on pp. 85–86 are from Mossop (ed.), *The Journals of Wikar, Coetsee and Van Reenen*.

† Site of the future hamlet of Goodhouse.

‡ Renamed Pella in 1812.

Nama village of Kaykoop,* where they were cut off from the course of the river as suddenly it sneaked away to the north through gorges, cliffs and boulder-hills. Knowing they dared not venture farther along the river's edge, they pressed on across the desert.

The journey ahead, although over a rugged, hot and waterless area, was less arduous than had been predicted by Barends. What might have been an agonizing experience became a pleasant adventure, for all along the way they met up with Nama nomads and were given food and shelter. By the night of the 25th they had crossed the Ysterberg range, and reached a spring at Lower Swart Modder. It took them ten more days to advance a further seventy kilometres across the thirstland and come to within a stone's throw of the Gariep river. Wikar was puzzled. He could not understand how the river had been encountered again in the east, when at Kaykoop it had turned sharply towards the north. There could be only one explanation: it had eventually flowed from north to east, and then southwards, forming an arch across the thirstland he had just traversed.

During the past three days Wikar, Barends and their companions had journeyed with relative ease, for the country was flat, the soil firm and the customary rocky ridges, dunes and washaways far apart. Coming closer to the river, however, their progress was severely impeded, for now the land turned into a muddle of steep-sloped granite domes, dongas and thorn tree coppices. In spite of this, Wikar led the party zealously onwards. They all kept close to his heels.

According to Wikar's report, on 8 October, at a distance 'of a stage or even further' ahead, he became aware of a mysterious cloud of steam, 'like smoke from a fire', and 'a noise like the roar of the sea'. The Nama, he recalled, had referred to this part of the river as loukurubes - 'Noise-making Place'. He was about to become the first European to set eyes on Aughrabies, one of the most spectacular waterfalls in southern Africa.

It is difficult to imagine the impact of the unfolding scene on Wikar's mind, especially as the entry in his diary is surprisingly scant. When once he had negotiated the steep, rocky declivity that hugs the river's southern edge, he would have marvelled at the immensity of the gorge before them. Nine kilometres in length, its naked, granite walls rising two hundred and sixty metres out of the earth, it was curtained to the immediate east by somersaulting clouds of vapour that rose from the Gariep in its tumultuous transformation into a waterfall. Close by, where part of the river splits into a cluster of channels, eight great columns of water plunged with the central stream into the bowels of the gorge.

'It seemed to me as if the whole river was tumbling down from a rocky krantz twice as high as the castle [in Cape Town],' wrote Hendrik Wikar.

* Now Beenbreek.

Since his departure from Europe he had seen nothing to compare with the splendour of the Aughrabies Falls. In a moment of nostalgia, recalling days gone by, he wished he had been able to share this magnificent sight with friends he had long forsaken.

In the afternoon Wikar and the Hottentots moved south-eastwards, always keeping the banks of the river in sight. On 11 October they reached Renosterkop - 'Rhinoceros Hill' - and ten days later entered the region of Kakamas. By the 25th they had come into the Kheimos area, where suddenly the river divides into several streams, and embraces the islands of Rooikop, Skanskop and Bellavista. There they decided to remain awhile, for the surroundings were lush and inhabited by hospitable bands of Nama stockmen.

During the five months that followed, Wikar wandered up and down the river, calling on tribal encampments, meeting up with Bushmen hunter folk and carefully recording items of interest concerning their folk ways and languages. In addition to this, he made notes on the birds, game, insects, reptiles and trees he came upon, as well as the geographical features of the area. Considering his report as a whole, he believed it could be of infinite value to the Colonial authorities at the Cape. He had it delivered by runner, therefore, to Van Plettenberg, with a written request that, should it be of use to the Company, it be accepted in exchange for not only his pardon, but also the right to return unmolested to Table Bay.

On 15 April 1779, Wikar, Barends and the rest of the party set out on the second leg of their journey along the Gariep river, coming to Spiderweb Kraal, in the region of Koegas, towards the end of the month. At first nothing remarkable occurred along the way, but later, when on two occasions the little group was ferociously attacked by Bushmen, Wikar abandoned the idea of proceeding farther along the river. After a brief rest on the outskirts of Spiderweb Kraal, he and his party returned along the trail they had followed since 1 April. They reached their former camping site close to the islands at the beginning of June.

One evening, two weeks later, a Hottentot runner arrived with a letter for Wikar from a Colonial stockman named Pieter van den Heever, whose farm, Klipfontein, lay in the northern limits of the Kamiesberg range. Attached to the letter was another, signed by Governor van Plettenberg. It was the official pardon Wikar had hoped to receive. After some four years in exile he could return to the Cape without fear of arrest.

Taking leave of Klaas Barends and the rest of the party, Wikar set out southwards on 11 July. Two weeks later, having trudged almost five hundred kilometres across the desert wastes of Bushmanland, he reached the Kamiesberg range. There he came upon a row of wagons under the guard of a party of Colonial Hottentots. These wagons, he learned, belonged to the explorer Captain Robert Jacob Gordon, the English botanist

William Paterson and a farmer, Pieter Pienaar. The Europeans, the Hottentots said, were on expedition to the mouth of the Gariep river, but in the meantime had gone to a nearby farm in order to pay their respects to the owner, Pieter van den Heever. They had not said how long they would be away from camp, or when they intended pressing on to the north.

Gordon, Paterson and Pienaar met Wikar on the 26th. Invited to join the expedition to the Gariep, Wikar declined, explaining he had been a wanderer in the wilderness for over four years, and wanted sincerely to settle down and pursue a normal way of life. They parted company soon afterwards.

Wikar set out for the Cape, and weeks later, on arrival at the Castle, was reinstated by Van Plettenberg in the service of the Company. As the first white man to have travelled eastwards along the Gariep river to Spiderweb Kraal, an estimated distance of five hundred kilometres, and the first to locate the Aughrabies Falls, he was listed in the records of the Company as one of the most daring of the Colonial explorers to date. Hendrik Wikar became a respected citizen of Cape Town, and a valued Company official. It can be assumed he settled his debts, turned his back on gambling, married and became a family man. He played no further role in exploration.

Gordon, Paterson and Pienaar, after their meeting with Wikar, had had their wagons inspanned, and then moved to Ellenboogfontein, the farm of a stockman called Hermanus Engelbrecht. It was there, in the vicinity of Kamieskroon, that they met up with Jacobus van Reenen, a farmer who had spent much of his adult life in moving cattle and sheep to pasturage throughout Little Namaqualand. Considering his background, they saw him as the best available substitute for Hendrik Wikar. They persuaded him to join them on expedition.

The trek to the Gariep river began with the coming of August. First to depart were Gordon and Pienaar, one of their wagons bearing a boat they had acquired in Cape Town. Paterson and the rest of the party followed two or three days later, and on the 5th located Gordon's camp near the mouth of the Buffels river. After a rest of three days, the combined expedition moved on northwards following the Atlantic coastline through deep, sun-grilled desert sand. By the 11th it had entered that part of the wasteland where invariably not a blade of grass or a trace of water can be found from June to September. The oxen were beginning to falter now, and the wagon drivers to talk of deserting. Pienaar and three of his servants rode out into the desert in search of a waterhole. Gordon and Paterson looked upon the situation with grave concern. At nightfall matters worsened, for neither Pienaar nor his servants returned to camp, and were thought to be lost in the desert. On the following day they searched without success for the missing men. A spirit of gloom pervaded the camp.

Notwithstanding the agony of the situation, the trek continued at dawn on 13 August, and during mid-morning reached the dried-up Holgat river to the west of a Nama settlement known as Dabaras. Now, as by some miracle, the desert assumed a new dimension: parts of the river's banks were lush and green with strips of pasturage, and in the heart of its course lay a solitary pool of stagnant water. The oxen were quickly outspanned, and left to find their way to the drinking place. Prayers of thanksgiving were then offered at the wagons to God.

On the morning of the 14th, while the men lazed and chatted in the shade of the wagons, and the oxen grazed farther and farther along the banks of the river, Gordon and Paterson strolled leisurely in a westerly direction, knowing the sea was not far away. On arrival at the coast they came upon a heartening sight: the beaches were widely strewn with uprooted thorn-trees, and thickly littered with vegetable matter which they concluded had been carried to the sea by some flooded river. The mouth of the Gariep, they affirmed, could be no more than two days' march to the north. They hurried back to camp to report their discovery to the rest of the expedition.

On the following morning the trek continued, Gordon and Paterson riding ahead and pointing the way across a succession of dunes and empty watercourses. Between Dabaras and the salt-pans of present-day Wreck Point, 'the desert climbs into a range of hills and then tumbles into an immense valley, one so eerie in appearance, so deathly desolate as to send shivers snaking along the spine'.* Close by, in the east, lay the sand-bedecked Jackal range, and beyond it a vast undulation of vermilion sands. In that kind of environment Gordon and Paterson found difficulty in choosing a track for the wagons, and yet, at sunset, when they reflected on the distance covered, they had to admit they were not dissatisfied.

Ten kilometres farther on along the coast stand two haggard hillocks known as the Buchu Twins, their northern slopes overlooking a sandy valley cluttered with rubble and shrivelled ash-grey scrub. Passing these hillocks on the 16th, and crossing the greater part of the valley, the expedition pitched camp for the night. It had reached a point about twenty kilometres to the south of what are now the diamond towns of Alexander Bay and Oranjemund.

Next morning at dawn, while the oxen were being inspanned, Gordon and Paterson rode out towards the north. At about ten o'clock they came suddenly to the mouth of the Gariep river and, dismounting excitedly, gazed upon its beauty with wonderment. Fringed with acacia and sprawling beds of reed, the river itself slithered silently westwards through beige-hued dunes, its banks swarming with game and a large assortment of

* Becker, P., *Trails and Tribes in Southern Africa*.

waterfowl. Remounting, Gordon and Paterson 'made an excursion along the river to the eastwards',* in the hope they might meet up with Pieter Pienaar and his servants. At midday, having given up the search, they returned to the river's mouth. By then the wagons had also arrived, and the men were hard at work preparing camp.

When the unloading had been done, and the tents pitched, Gordon, calling all members of the expedition together, bade them carry his boat to the river's edge. The men were dumbfounded, for the sun had already begun to set, and the river was said to abound with crocodiles. Annoyed at their reluctance, Gordon urged them to hurry. He had an important ceremony to perform, he said, and insisted they all attend.

'We launched Colonel [*sic*] Gordon's boat,' wrote Paterson later, 'and hoisted the Dutch colours.' Gordon then proposed a toast 'to the State's health', and another to 'the Prince of Orange and the Company'. Henceforth, the captain said, the Gariep would be known as the Orange river. In this way the Colony would honour not only an illustrious prince of the motherland, but also Holland's ruling house.

The expedition devoted the following day to leisure, some of the men grouping together in conversation, some fishing and others strolling along the river's southern bank. A quiet day, it came to a close on an exciting note, for at dusk Pienaar and his three companions turned up at the wagons, their bodies bent with weariness, their faces blistered, their lips parched and cracked and their eyes bloodshot and aching. They had indeed been lost in the desert, Pienaar reported, and during the past five days had been without food. Had they not found the river, they would all have died of thirst.

A little above the mouth of the Orange river there is a cluster of tiny islands and several banks of silt. Farther upstream the north-western bank rises steeply from the water's edge, to form a succession of elongated folds. Worn, chiselled and smoothed by the sun and the blast of sandstorms, it resembles a gigantic, distended colon and, indeed, is known to this day as Grootderm - the 'Colon'. Beyond lies the verge of the Namib, the oldest desert known to man.

On the afternoon of the 20th Gordon, Paterson and a handful of Hottentots crossed the river by boat, somewhere between its mouth and the Colon. Picking up a trail in the sands beyond, they followed it into the desert. After covering about eight kilometres, they arrived at a Nama village, where Gordon called a halt. The occupants of the village, they learned, possessed neither cattle nor sheep, and in their daily quest for food turned to the beaches for shellfish, crabs and other aquatic creatures,

and to the desert sands for edible plants, insects, lizards and the smaller species of mammals. Towards sunset Gordon and his party retraced their steps towards the river and, reaching the boat at dusk, entered the stream.

For five or six minutes the boat moved smoothly across the flow, then, reaching the middle of the river, fell in with a powerful current and was swept with a jerk towards the sea. As they paddled frantically in gathering darkness, to the men's dismay the boat was sucked into a whirlpool and, spinning and bobbing, began to take in water. For half an hour, according to Paterson, he, Gordon and the Hottentots clung to their seats, expecting at any moment to be tossed overboard and carried out to sea. Then suddenly they drifted into calmer waters and, peering into the night, caught sight of a flicker of light - a fire being lit at the wagons. On arrival on the opposite bank, Paterson heaved a sigh of relief. At one stage of the crossing he had forsaken all hope of survival.

The expedition remained at the same camping site for nine more days. During this time Gordon and Paterson explored the river's mouth, coming to the conclusion that it was too shallow for navigation, even by the smallest of ships. On the 29th camp was broken and the southward trek to the Kamiesberg range began. Reaching Ellenboogfontein in mid-September, the farm whence they had set out for the north six weeks before, Gordon and Paterson parted company. The botanist headed homewards, and the captain north-eastwards, bound for the trail pioneered by Wikar along the course of the Orange river. After reaching the confluence of the Orange and Vaal rivers towards the end of the year, Gordon turned southwards on the journey back to the Cape. A new career awaited him at the Castle, one that would bring him happiness at first, and then so much anguish as to force him into suicide.

* The quotations on this page are taken from Paterson, W. A., *A Narrative of Four Journeys*.