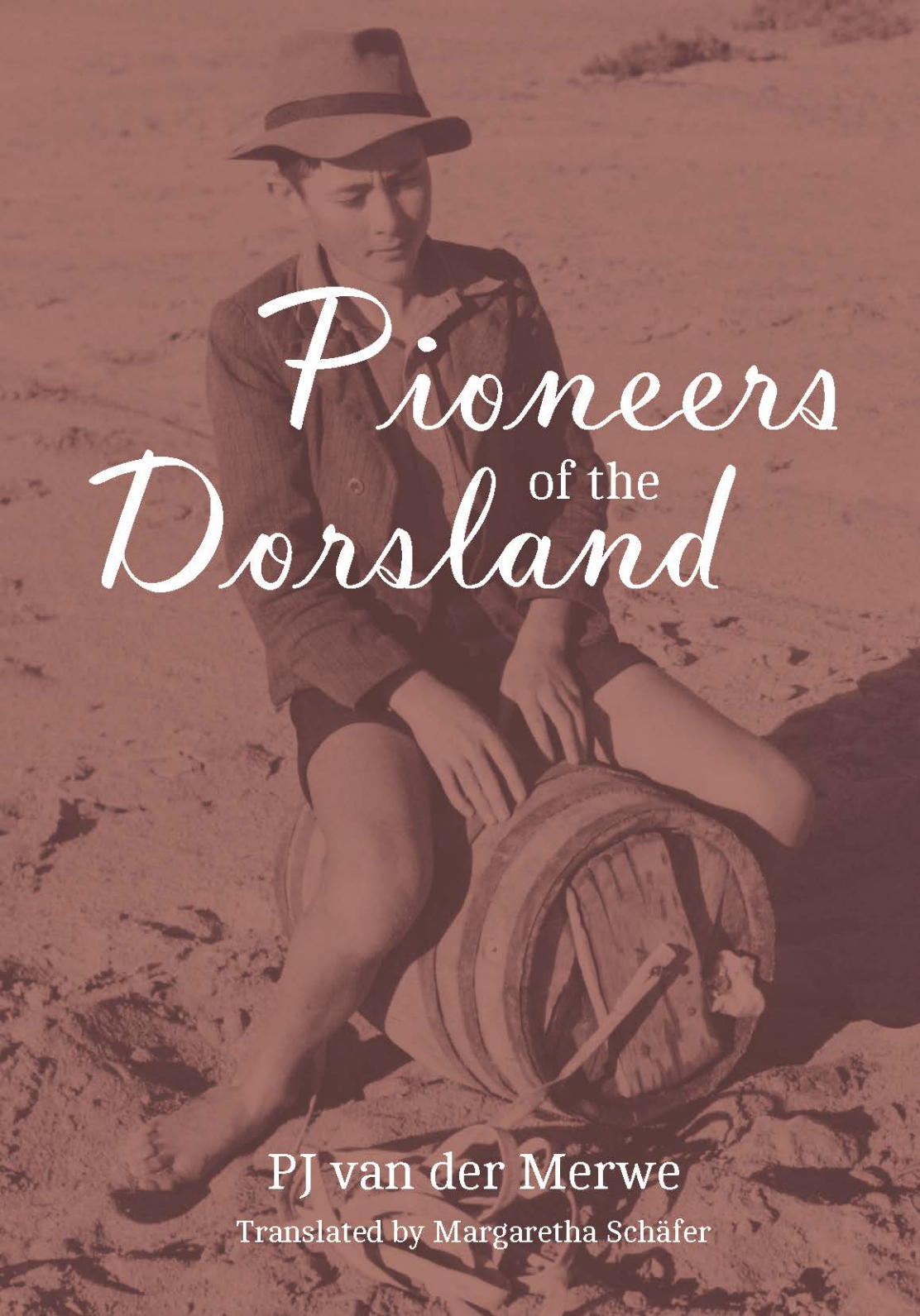

Pioneers of the Dorsland

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Also by this author

1. 1937: Die Noordwaartse Beweging van die Boere voor die Groot Trek, 1770–1842 (The Northward Movement of the Farmers before the Great Trek, 1770–1842)
2. 1938: Die Trekboer in die Geskiedenis van die Kaapkolonie, 1657–1842 (English translation 1995 by Roger B Beck: The Migrant Farmer in the History of the Cape Colony, 1657–1842)
3. 1940: Die Kafferoorlog van 1793 (The Frontier War of 1793)
4. 1945: Trek: Studies oor die Mobiliteit van die Pioniersbevolking aan die Kaap (Trek: Studies about the Mobility of the Pioneer Population at the Cape)
5. 1962: Nog Verder Noord (Still Further North)
6. 1972: Die Bronnelys en Voetnote
7. 1972: The Source List and Footnotes
8. 1986: Die Matebeles en die Voortrekkers (The Matebeles and the Voortrekkers) (posthumous)

Dedicated to the farmers of the Northwest
to whom I'm deeply indebted for their
kindness, information and coffee

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FOREWORD

A number of years ago I travelled all over the North-Western Cape for my research. I'll consolidate the results of my investigation in a book I'm writing at the moment. But one day I felt like sharing a few things about the Northwest that I won't be able to fit into the book. This small volume is the outcome.

I'm not very familiar with the region that this little book deals with. I simply rushed around by car, covering about 15 000 miles, and interviewed the people who live there. From them I heard everything I know about the Northwest. I spoke to hundreds of people: farmers, predikante (clergymen), teachers, school inspectors, livestock inspectors, businessmen, policemen, and officials of the magistrate's office, divisional council and school board. I compared their reports with one another and tried to deal with them as critically as possible. Even so, at times I may have taken a respondent a bit too seriously or believed the wrong person. Be that as it may, I hope my friends in the Northwest will not be too hard on one another for the things they told me.

I tried to conduct my research as exhaustively as possible, but I realise that you need to have lived in an area for many years before you are able to authoritatively write about it. And my stay in the Northwest was a very brief one. However, I decided to write about it anyway, since the people who know this part of the world better than I do never write about it. And this is surely worth doing. Many people in our country aren't familiar with the Northwest and are keen to know more about it. Besides, who knows what pleasure some future historian, who wants to record the region's history in a hundred years' time, may derive from these sketchy remarks.

I could have dealt with many other interesting things about the Northwest in this little book, but it all has to do with the peculiar migratory way of life of the region's half-nomadic pioneers. As such, it belongs in my next book: Die Mobiliteit van die Pioniersbevolking aan die Kaap.[1]

PJ van der Merwe

Stellenbosch
August 20, 1941

[1] This book, Trek: Studies oor die Mobiliteit van die Pioniersbevolking aan die Kaap, appeared in 1945.

Chapter I

ADVENTURE

"I've had an adventure," I told an old friend in Cape Town one evening. We were reclining in easy chairs in front of the fireplace, I with my pipe and he with a cigar.

"Really! What happened?" he asked curiously.

"I took a long trip through the Northwest, through Bushmanland and Namaqualand," I replied enthusiastically.

"Do you call that adventure?" he snapped grumpily. "Or did you perhaps try to get your hands on some diamonds?"

"No, my friend, the time for diamonds is over. These days you may perhaps find glass chips or trouble in Namaqualand, but no diamonds."

"Oh, so you probably went to see the flowers. They say the flowers were particularly good this year."

"Yes, the flowers were beautiful. It was an exceptional year. But unfortunately I went a month or two after the flower season."

"Then I don't understand you," my friend replied somewhat agitatedly. "What kind of adventure can you have in the Northwest? It's a few hundred square miles of nothing!"

My friend's response was typical of the ordinary person's attitude. In these southern parts most people know nothing about the Northwest. In fact, I was equally ignorant about it until I decided one day to go and have a look for myself. For me, Bushmanland was no more than a name. And it doesn't require much imagination to conclude that Bushmanland's original inhabitants were Bushmen. But this is usually also where one's knowledge of the region ends. I had no idea what today's Bushmanland looked like or even where it was. Does it have water? Do any whites live there? These are questions which I would not have been able to answer a few years

ago. But I'm not ashamed of this, because after I returned from my trip, several friends, who wouldn't get lost in London and who know every ruin in Rome, asked me: "Where exactly is Bushmanland?"

Most people's knowledge of Bushmanland does not extend much further. At school we learnt about Simon van der Stel's famous journey to the Copper Mountains. A number of years ago the incredible diamond riches of Namaqualand, where one could sometimes even find diamonds under a rock, became world famous. It was common knowledge that in those days people bought "parcels" *) and hoodwinked detectives in various ingenious ways, but soon lost their money again. Since today's fast cars have brought Namaqualand within easy reach of Capetonians, the region has enjoyed a lot of publicity thanks to its spring flowers.

Diamonds and flowers had suddenly put the nearly forgotten Namaqualand on the map. Thousands of people from all parts of the Union of South Africa and South-West Africa have in the past ten, twelve years flocked to Namaqualand to buy diamonds or see the flowers. At first most visitors were diamond smugglers, but they gradually disappeared from the scene. Today only flower lovers visit Namaqualand. Usually they delight in the exquisite natural beauty, but never get to know the region's inhabitants; even less so the diamond buyers, because they are always in a hurry. This is a pity, because Namaqualand becomes truly interesting once you get to know its people and history.

I told my friend about my trips throughout the Northwest and tried to convince him that you needn't seek adventure in Paris's night life, among Chicago's gangsters or on the Western Front, because it's available on our very doorstep. Just get in your car and drive in among the Northwest's farmers. This is where you'll make unexpected and undreamed of discoveries and hear incredible tales. You'll come across intimate and never-recorded aspects of people's lives and pioneer history, and there you'll meet the last remnants

of a pioneer population. They will gladly tell you about their past history, as they don't want the memories of bygone times to be irrevocably lost; romantic people who view the past through a veil of tenderness and melancholy. In the unknown Northwest you will discover a new world you never imagined could exist. This is also adventure.

But then you shouldn't be in a hurry. These days people drive much too fast. Cars have spoilt us. Because they never tire, there is no need to outspan. So you dash from one hotel to the next and never overnight with people on the way. You also don't talk to them. Car owners love to boast about how fast they can drive from one place to the next, especially when they know their audience can't cover the distance in the same time. But when you rush around like this, you don't see anything. The intrepid motorist who covers the distance between Cape Town and Goodhouse on the Orange River in ten hours, will undoubtedly be convinced there is nothing to see in the Northwest. But, for once, just take your time. Pull up at every farm or *matjieshuis* (traditional reed hut). Go off the beaten track. And, if need be, don't hesitate to go fifty miles off course when you hear about an interesting old pioneer who can spin a good yarn. I travelled in this way and don't regret it.

I went to the Northwest because I wanted to question aged pioneers about that region's history before they died. They are going one after another, and with their passing the memories of many never-recorded things are lost. Our pioneer history is so much the poorer and less colourful because no one made a timely start on this kind of work. Today we are prepared to pay a lot of money for a few old letters or a tattered hundred-year-old diary. But these documents contain only sparse information about the past. Today's historians would have been delighted if someone, just after the Great Trek, had meticulously questioned the people who took part in it and systematically recorded their anecdotes. But one usually thinks of these things when it's too late. One day our descendants will blame

the *predikante*, teachers and officials who lived among the modern-day pioneers for not writing down the stories they heard.

So it was my intention to gather oral recollections of the Northwest's pioneer history. And I especially wanted to know how the farmers trekked about with their livestock in the old days. These people's peculiar, nomadic lifestyle is one of their history's most interesting aspects. They roamed with livestock like the people of the Old Testament, like the desert Arabs and like the Cape Colony's Hottentots. What's more, their descendants are still trekking.

I went on my first trip shortly before the Great Trek Centenary [**)]. It was near the end of the year, and I was sick and tired of exam papers and printer's proofs. As the sun set, the train steamed out of Cape Town Station on its way to Klawer. From there I would travel by railway bus to Calvinia, where my friend Frans then lived and where I would rent a car from a Good Samaritan at a reasonable price. I did not own a car in those days, and it was only after I returned from my first trip that a Stellenbosch economist told me: "A man without debt is worthless." With this piece of economic wisdom he meant that if one had to wait until one had enough money to do the important things, very few people would achieve anything. As an example he mentioned marriage.

As the train rattled past the messy seaside flotsam, I looked back for a final glimpse of Cape Town. The last thing visible was the new power station's ugly chimney. Then I was happy that, for a short while at least, I could shake the city dust off my feet and breathe in the fresh air of the limitless Northwest. I am quite fond of Cape Town and its beautiful mountain backdrop, but every once in a while you want to turn your back on the familiar and look for change. Deep down, everyone has a yearning to roam. It may remain dormant for years, until the day it overwhelms you. Then even the most calm and collected of people will break away on a quest for adventure. This *Wanderlust* played a marked role in the Afrikaner people's

The author, as he looked with his beard, when he was suspected of being some kind of scheming sectarian.

pioneer history. It is partially due to this that the foremost *trekboere* today find themselves at the foot of Kilimanjaro just south of the equator in Africa, while others trekked right through the *dorsland* (thirstland) into Angola. And we Afrikaners are no exception. The American pioneer population may have been even more mobile, while the Gypsies' way of life is completely controlled by the *trekgees* (trek fever). The urge to wander aimlessly is present in all people to a greater or lesser degree – from the vagrant, who doesn't sleep two nights in the same place, to the respectable gentleman, who now and again likes to go on a journey with his family. Another of my journey's aims was to determine the role this mysterious urge played in the Afrikaner pioneer community. [1)]

Every time I visited the Northwest I felt like a traveller setting out to discover a new world. And I did discover one virtually on my doorstep; a new world I never before could have dreamed existed – the world of the unknown *dorsland* trekkers. I will later write a learned scientific work with footnotes about my findings, which only the proofreader and critics will read. So, now I want to touch only lightly on this, that and the other about my trips, hoping in this way to share something about the pioneers of the recent past with more people.

On these trips I often lived on canned food for days on end, until I ended up cursing the sight of a tin of sardines. Sometimes I drove from five o'clock in the morning till after dark in the evening, and then I would ask questions and take notes until three o'clock at night. In the Kalahari I experienced unbearable heat. I also got stuck in the sand, as I was still unfamiliar with the terrain and road conditions. In Bushmanland I struggled along bad tracks you would drive on only with a stolen car without feeling sorry for it. I slept on the ground and on bedsteads that were too short. Often I was dirty and had no water to wash. But despite the hardships, these trips will remain to be my most pleasant travel experiences. I honestly enjoyed

them more than my travels in Italy – even though Dr Con [***)] would probably call me a savage if he were to read this confession.

The train from Cape Town arrived in Klawer before dawn. The bus would leave only at half past six. The conductor set the bus clock for half past six, after all freight and postal articles had at last been loaded, and then we were off – I don't know what the actual time was then. We travelled to Vanrhynsdorp with its *"Knegsvlakte"* [****)], over Vanrhyns Pass and through Nieuwoudtville to Calvinia. My actual trip started in Calvinia. I drove from farm to farm, stopped everywhere and asked questions. Initially I feared it might be difficult to get strangers to talk about the things I happen to take an interest in. But it soon became clear that my concerns were unfounded. In most cases the farmers, even before they understood that I was deliberately questioning them for information on a specific matter, would tell me everything I wanted to know. It was easy to find a starting point. After we made our acquaintance, I might say to a farmer: "This part of the world looks a bit dry." The farmer might then say: "Yes, *Neef* (young fellow), we've had quite a bad year this year." Then I would ask: "Does *Oom* (uncle) trek with the livestock when it's so dry? … Where does *Oom* trek to? … "Does *Oom* trek regularly every year?" And soon I would have heard all about trek-farming in the Northwest. Then I would tell the *oom* that I was very interested in the trekking and ask him if he would mind me writing down everything he said. At this stage he would be as interested in the subject as I was. And then I would ask questions and he would talk, and I would take notes without him ever questioning the reason for it. Sometimes I could not avoid having to explain that I was writing a book about the history of the Northwest, but usually I didn't elaborate unnecessarily, as I became tired of repeating the same story. This resulted in my not always being very tactful. So, now and again, it happened that someone did not fully trust my motives. And once suspicion was aroused, nothing you said could save the situation; every explanation was seen as an excuse.

The author on the dunes at Witsand.