Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

The Great Trek: a national myth

Francken, A.A.P.; Praamstra, O.J.; Stobbe, J.; Deen, R.; Waal, M. van der

Citation
Francken, A. A. P., & Praamstra, O. J. (2022). The Great Trek: a national myth. In J. Stobbe, R. Deen, & M. van der Waal (Eds.), *Magic visions: portraying and inventing South Africa with lantern slides* (pp. 239-242). Amsterdam: Zuid-Afrikahuis. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3422644

Version:	Publisher's Version
License:	Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law (Amendment Taverne)
Downloaded from:	https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3422644

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

The Great Trek: a national myth

Eep Francken & Olf Praamstra

In a collection of slides that is intended to give an impression of South Africa and was to generate interest in the country in the 1900–1930s, the Great Trek is not to be missed. The problem is that the Trek took place when photography hardly existed and there are no pictures of it. Nevertheless, the Great Trek was given a place in the lantern slides collection as it was at the time considered one of the most important events in South African history.

The migration was the beginning of the spread of the European population over almost the entire territory of the present South African republic. In addition to the later Boer War, the Great Trek dominated historical consciousness for especially the 'free Boer Republics' of Transvaal and the Orange Free State. In the course of time, it became a national myth for all Afrikaners. Stories about these two historical events played and continue to play an important role in Afrikaner nationalism and in the formation of Afrikaner identities also in the Cape Province.

The commemoration of the Great Trek in 1938, a hundred years after it had taken place, was celebrated exuberantly throughout South Africa. Wagon trains drove through the streets, people dressed up as *Voortrekkers* (the so-called 'pioneers'), food was prepared on open fires — the beginning of the tradition of the African *braai* — streets were given new names and monuments were erected everywhere.

The Great Trek was remembered as an extremely daring venture which had exposed the Voortrekkers and their servants to great dangers. The Voortrekkers entered a territory they knew

little to nothing about and their equipment was poor. One of the lantern slides depicts, by means of two objects, how the Voortrekkers held on to their European roots with simple means (or at least how it was imagined in the period 1900–1930) — a primitive calendar and a chair. It is no wonder that many travellers died on the way due to illness, exhaustion or violence. However, this was precisely what emphasised the heroic nature of this journey for later generations.

As the story goes, the Voortrekkers were tired of the British administration and left the Cape Colony. Slavery was abolished but without the enslaved people, they had difficulty in conducting their business as they hardly received any compensation for labour loss after the abolishment of slavery. A thorn in the eye was also the imposed anglicisation and the fact that in the border regions they were hardly protected against looting. Furthermore, they were not allowed to take the law into their own hands as they did in the Dutch era. This is why they were said to want self-government: their own government in an independent state. They knew they had to travel to desolate and dangerous areas to achieve this, but they went, confident that they could count on the support and help of God. They loaded all their possessions on the ox wagon and moved into Africa, on their way to the promised land, as history handbooks tell us.

In the period between 1900 and 1920, there were still enough ox wagons in use to portray this journey afterwards. One of the slides shows packed wagons pulled by a huge number of cattle that travelled through the wild land, over mountains and through rivers. This is how the Afrikaner myth of the endless land came into being that the intrepid Voortrekkers with their 'brave wives' entered and where, with danger, they formed a

circle with their ox wagons in which everyone was safe. An image to re-enact this is included in the collection.

Although 1838 was a decisive year, the Great Trek had begun several years earlier. In the early 1830s, farmers who were dissatisfied with the British administration went to areas outside the Cape Colony. Initially, they remained close to the border but when British domination was felt there too, they moved further inland. In 1840, 6.000 farmers, ten percent of the white population, were said to leave the colony and this percentage would still rise. The political outcome of the Great Trek was that farmers in the interior founded their own republics with Dutch as the national language. They formed the main core of the Afrikaners who would dominate the republic of South Africa in the twentieth century. This is why the Great Trek was lavishly commemorated in 1938 throughout the country. The commemoration came too late for the compilers of the lantern slide collections, but one particular image gives an impression of what the entry of the ox wagons into a village must have looked like.

On the way to the North, the Voortrekkers were regularly attacked by hostile groups such as the Ndebele (Matabele) in the later Orange Free State. In November 1837, the Voortrekkers managed to drive them over the Limpopo to what is nowadays Zimbabwe. The fiercest battles the Voortrekkers fought were with the Zulus in Natal. They were defeated twice until in December 1838 when they inflicted a crushing defeat on the Zulus on the banks of the Ncome River, also known as the Battle of Blood River. Although the Zulus surpassed the Voortrekkers well in number, they were no match for the Voortrekkers who were armed with guns and two cannons. A drawn image to refer to this in hindsight is included in the collection of lantern slides as well. The purpose of these slides in the collection is clear.

The slides were meant to show the public that South Africa and the Afrikaners were a country and people to be proud of; to show that Voortrekkers loved their freedom above everything and feared no danger; that they had brought civilisation to the barbaric regions in Africa; that with great personal sacrifices, they had made a primitive country into an exemplary republic. This is the message that these lantern slides tried to convey to the public in order to keep the myth of the Great Trek alive in the young South African nation.

References

Cameron, Trewhella, and S.B. Spies, eds. 1991. *Nuwe geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika*. 2nd ed. Cape Town/Johannesburg: Human & Rousseau/ Southern.

Giliomee, Hermann, and Bernard Mbenga, eds. 2007. *Nuwe geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.

Pretorius, Fransjohan, ed. 2012. *Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika. Van voortye tot vandag*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.