

Her Majesty's Loyal and Devoted Trekker Leader: Petrus Lafras Uys

Voortrekker history, as taught at schools, was largely based on Gustav Preller's *Voortrekkermense*. Having married Piet Retief's great-granddaughter, Preller tended to favour Retief. Members of the Uys family wrote to him, but to no avail.¹

The clash between the Voortrekker leadership was referred to by Senator J.J. Uys, son of Wessel and nephew of Petrus Uys, when he wrote:

The Commission returned with great joy to their homes, which they reached in the year 1835. They handed in a report of what had been done by them after which Piet Retief and his followers left for Natal. I shall not say anything more about the relations between Piet Uys and Piet Retief.²

The disagreement between Retief and Uys was more than occasioned by the generation gap of 17 years, that of the oldest versus the youngest Trek leader. It was the first of the fundamental schisms splitting the Afrikaners into 'Verkramp' and 'Verlig' camps — in this case rejection of the Crown as opposed to co-operation with the British authorities. The lack of a formal constitution, coupled with their new-found freedom from British laws, were factors which contributed to the discord which was to arise among the Trekker leadership. Ultimately these divisions would lead to bloodshed and bitterness, the effect of which are still felt today.

The foremost Trekker, Hendrik Potgieter, 45, was ostensibly a clan leader by nature. He motivated Louis Trichardt to set off on his ill-fated journey to Lourenço Marques in Portuguese East Africa. When Potgieter trekked he fell foul of the Matabele and fought them off at Vegkop. He lost his livestock to them, including his draught oxen, and had to be assisted by the Rev. James Archbell and the Barolong Chief Moroka.³

Gert Maritz, 40, then arrived with his party at Blesberg (Thaba Nchu) where Archbell had his mission station. He agreed to assist Potgieter in a reprisal raid on the Matabele's Mosega kraal. After the successful sortie they then argued over the division of the cattle which had been taken as booty. Potgieter felt that the major share should go to his party, who had lost cattle to the Matabele, but Maritz disagreed.⁴

When Piet Retief, 56, arrived with his party in April 1837 he was welcomed by Maritz as the solution to the problem. As he was a decade older than

Potgieter and was untainted by any Trekker disputes, surely he would be accepted as the overall leader! Retief promoted the idea of a united laager and on 17 April accepted the position as governor of all the emigrant farmers. He unwisely excluded Potgieter from his provisional government, although he did include one or two of Potgieter's supporters. His vision of an Afrikaner state, free of British influence and with himself at its head, seemed very near.⁵

On 29 June Piet Uys, 39, arrived with his party of Trekkers. A bombshell must have seemed to burst at the combined laagers, as he refused to accept Retief as governor. Although he was always respectful towards his elders, Uys had no time for Retief, whom he considered as a bankrupt and a self-seeker. The recently formulated Trekkers' basic code of 'Nine Articles' virtually entrenched Retief and Maritz as the governing hierarchy.

Who was this young upstart who so distrusted Retief that he wilfully defied the fragile authority of the fledgling Trekker government? What right did he, as a latecomer, have in deliberately ignoring the new Trekker laws? No doubt he was vilified for his revolutionary attitude and his insistence on independence from the 'United Laagers'. Perhaps, on the other hand, he was one of the few men to foresee the bloody consequences of Retief's leadership?

Petrus Lafras Uys was born at Hesseguas Kloof, Swellendam, on 7 October 1797, the second son of the deeply religious Jacobus Uys. At 18 years of age he married his 16-year-old cousin, Alida Uys, and they were to have three sons, Jacobus, Dirk and Petrus. Jacobus was born in February 1819.⁶ At the age of 21 Uys probably fought with Commandant Linde's Swellendam Commando in the Frontier War of 1819. A man of Uys's temperament would have been one of the first volunteers, especially as his older brother was crippled and could not represent the family on commando. A daughter was born in April 1821, but died aged one week.⁷ His second son, Dirk, born on 3 March 1823 was to be immortalised as one of the outstanding child heroes of the Trek.

Uys had, no doubt, seen advantages in farming at the mouth of the Kromme River, for late in 1823 he moved with all his family to the Eastern Cape. A third son, Petrus Lafras, was born at their farm Brakfontein on 1 September 1827. Five years later while his son, Jacobus, was out collecting wood a wagon toppled over onto him and he was crippled. He was thereafter nicknamed 'Kruppel Koos' to distinguish him from his grandfather and namesake. Uys then moved to a farm closer to the frontier, in the Bushman's River area. In October 1833 he applied to the authorities for a higher charge for supplying horses to convey persons who travelled at government expense. As a noted horse-breeder, Uys was popular with British officers, among whom he had many friends.⁸

When dissatisfaction with British rule became rife three reconnaissance or 'Commission' Treks were organised. The first under Johannes Pretorius reported unfavourably on South West Africa. The second group, led by J. Scholtz, gave an encouraging report on the Zoutpansberg area. The third party would follow the route of Dr Andrew Smith along the coast to Port Natal. The inhabitants of the Albany and Uitenhage area organised the expedition and appointed Piet Uys as its leader.

On 19 July 1834 Petrus Uys, Petrus and Jacobus Moolman and Gert Rudolph requested permission from the governor to cross the frontier. This was recommended by the civil commissioner and approved by the governor.⁹ The reason Uys gave to his family for the Commission Trek was, 'I don't know what will come of the country; I will ride to see if I can find a land good enough

for me and my descendants and countrymen and if I don't find one I'll go to America, as the oppression is becoming too heavy'.¹⁰ The Commission left Uitenhage on 8 September. The party of 14 whites included two of Uys's brothers, Cobus (with his wife Gertruida) and Johannes as well as Hans (Dons) de Lange and Stephanus Maritz, Gert's older brother.¹¹ Beyond the border they met with Louis Trichardt and held discussions with him before proceeding to the Xhosa and Mpondo Paramount chiefs, Hintza and Faku. The Trekkers reached Port Natal in December 1834 where they met the English settlers, including Robert Biggar, whom Uys had probably known in Port Elizabeth. They then spent their time hunting south of the Tugela River and camped near present-day Stanger. Richard (Dick) King was sent to the Zulu king, Dingane, to arrange a meeting with the Trekkers. Uys was ill when summoned by Dingane, so sent his youngest brother, Johannes, in his stead. The Tugela had meanwhile come down in flood and Johannes could only shout messages across it to Dingane's envoys. He gathered from them that the Boers would be welcome to settle in Natal.¹²

Word was then received of the outbreak of war on the frontier, so Uys decided to return. They travelled through Xhosa territory, guided by Hintza's son, and arrived in Grahamstown in March 1835. While there, Uys reported to D'Urban on the Trek and also on Hintza's attitude to the war. After obtaining Colonel Harry Smith's permission he then visited his family.¹³ Uys had left his wife and children in the care of his father at the Kromme River. This was fortunate as his Bushman's River farm had meanwhile been attacked. On 23 May he wrote of his losses to the Government and requested compensation. He then joined Commandant Linde's Swellendam Commando as a field cornet in the First Division and remained with them until they were recalled. Thereafter he served as a field commandant in the Second Division under Colonel Somerset.

Meanwhile Uys and the Moolman brothers were accused of having stated that they intended quitting the Colony and returning to Natal. On 5 June Uys swore before the Uitenhage magistrate that he had never expressed any unfriendly feeling towards the government, but admitted that on more than one occasion he had said that if the British government should take possession of that country, he would have no objection to residing there. His intention would be solely in assisting to civilize the savages!¹³ During the military sweep of September 1835, Uys was commended for his bravery at the Keiskamma River when he and 22 men attacked and defeated a party of raiding Xhosa, killing eighteen.¹⁴ On 4 August Uys wrote from Grahamstown to Governor D'Urban, complaining about the insubordination of indentured labourers in the Uitenhage area during the absence of the men on commando. The following month he wrote to the civil commissioner of Albany requesting the grant of farms in the Klaas Smits district to himself and members of his family.¹⁵

On his return from commando in late October, Uys was told at the Gamtoos River ferry that his wife had been arrested and had passed there as a prisoner. She had been accused by an indentured servant, Rosina, of having slapped her. Uys was furious at the treatment meted out to Alida. He turned back and intercepted his wife and Special Constable Tee near Uitenhage, then accompanied her to her trial in Port Elizabeth. Alida was tried by Special Justice Thomas Sherwin, a former marine officer, and found innocent of all charges. Rosina, on the other hand, was jailed for perjury. Uys returned to

Uitenhage where he wrote to the governor, accusing Sherwin of ‘cruel and oppressive conduct’ and requested ‘redress and reparation’. D’Urban had the charge investigated and replied at the end of November, clearing Sherwin, but adding ‘It is an obnoxious law . . .’¹⁶

In January 1836 Uys held a meeting of cattle-farmers at Uitenhage, with D’Urban’s permission, where they discussed the problems of indentured labourers. Uys then laid a civil charge on behalf of Alida against the unpopular Justice Sherwin. He demanded £100 compensation for her wrongful arrest and forcible removal, when she had to leave a crippled child behind despite her husband’s absence on commando. Sherwin contested the charges but in March 1836 was overruled by the Circuit Court and his costs were paid by the district treasury. When he heard of this Uys exploded:

What! My complaint is as just as any — if I get sentence in my favour the costs are paid out of the district treasury — if I fail in the proof of my case, I must pay treble costs; do you call that equally protecting all parties? — I prefer living amongst barbarians, where my life depends upon the strength of my arms . . .¹⁷

While the case against Sherwin dragged on Uys decided to trek. He sold his farm *Brakfontein* to Hermanus Swart,¹⁸ then spent the next few months organizing the large party who would be trekking with him. Uys then travelled to Cape Town to see D’Urban and obtain permission to leave the Colony.¹⁹ His journey over the Hottentots Holland Mountains near Cape Town was eased by using the new Sir Lowry’s Pass.

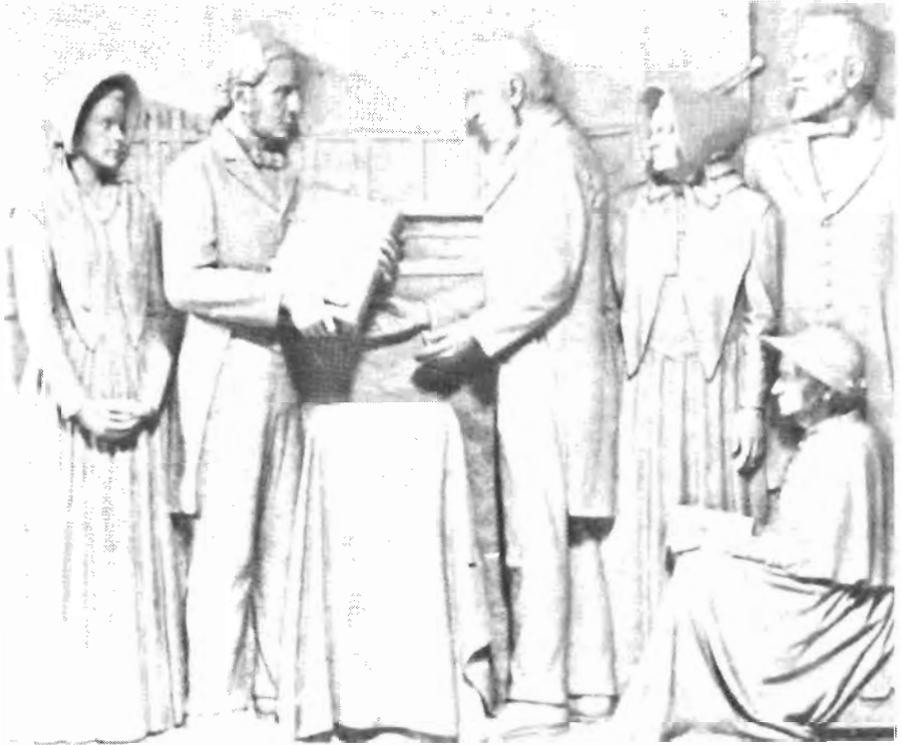
The nominal leader of the Uys trek party was his father, Jacobus Uys, 66, though Petrus was the actual leader. They left from Uitenhage and on reaching Grahamstown encamped on the heights north-west of the town. The *Grahamstown Journal* reported on 20 April:

We regret to find that Mr Peter Uys, who so greatly distinguished himself by his gallantry during the recent Kaffir War, is now in the vicinity of Graham’s Town on his way to join the emigrant farmers. He had with him a party of 23 wagons, and upwards of 100 souls, and he is accompanied by his father, who, at a very advanced age, is about to abandon forever the land of his birth.²⁰

The English settlers then presented them with a large copy of the Bible, the only trekker party to be so honoured.* This was mainly due to the popularity and charisma of Uys.

Pieter Uys was one of the best stamp of man to be found in South Africa. He had not the advantage of a university training or even of a good school education, but he had the capacity of drawing information from every source within his reach, and putting it to the best use. He could write a letter or draw up a document in clear and concise Cape Dutch, and he was acquainted with what was going on over the sea. His upright conduct, his religious convictions, and his kindly disposition caused him to be held in general esteem, not only by his Dutch-speaking neighbours,

* On 17 December 1962 the State President of South Africa, Mr C.R. Swart, unveiled a monument in the shape of a Bible on the site of the Bible presentation.



The mural in the Voortrekker Monument depicting the presentation of a bible to Jacobus Uys by Thomas Pringle on behalf of the settlers.

(Photograph: Voortrekker Monument Council)

but by the English settlers of Albany, with whom he was brought into close contact during the Kaffir War of 1835.²¹

In his reply Uys said, 'Thank you to the deputation for the very kind manner in which you expressed yourselves. I feel deep regret at parting from so many kind friends, but hope that as long as we all remain on this side of the grave, although parted by distance, we should remain united in heart'.

They remained there for a week provisioning themselves for the arduous journey which lay ahead. Uys decided to follow the other Trekkers through the territory beyond the Orange River and thus avoid all the rivers which lay across the coastal route to Natal. They crossed the Orange and reached the main Trekker laagers on 29 June. When Uys heard of Retief's accession to the governorship of all Trekkers, he summarily declared his opposition to it.

Uys had remained on good terms with Sir Benjamin D'Urban and had been the only Trekker leader to visit the governor in Cape Town and obtain his permission to leave. D'Urban possibly asked Uys to ascertain from other emigrants what their principal reasons were for quitting the Colony, for on meeting with the main group of Trekkers, Uys had lengthy discussions with them, then wrote to D'Urban summarising their grievances. Unlike Retief's manifesto, this was not published in the *Grahamstown Journal*, as Uys

probably did not wish to embarrass D'Urban.²² A long statement of Trekker grievances concluded:

If I can be of any use to your Excellency, or any report of mine be of service to a governor whom I so much esteem, I shall spare no trouble.²²

The Uys party then formally disassociated themselves from Retief's 'Nine Articles'. In his *History of South Africa* G. McC. Theal wrote:

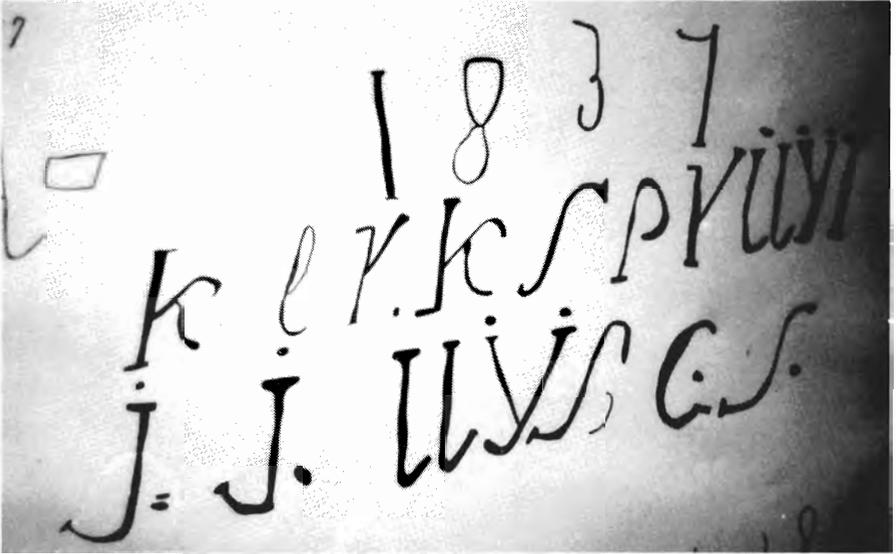
The political position, or the attitude assumed by Pieter Uys and his party towards the emigrants who had preceded them, was one of independence. As well, he thought, might he assert authority over Mr Retief as Mr Retief over him. The time had not yet come for framing a constitution, which should be deferred until the tide of emigration had slackened, when it could be done with the consent of the whole body of the people, and not merely of a small section of them. Accordingly on the 14th August 1837 a series of resolutions were drawn up and signed, placing their attitude clearly before their countrymen.

On 9 September Retief announced that the scouts he had sent out had found at least five passes down the Drakensberg into Natal. A meeting of all Trekkers was then held at Tafelkop on the 13th. Potgieter had welcomed Uys as an ally when he had declared his independence from the 'United Laagers' and had promised to assist Potgieter in a second punitive raid on the Matabele. At the meeting Uys warned Retief about Dingane and possible treachery and told Retief to await his and Potgieter's return before leaving for Natal. Retief decided to ignore this well-meant advice. Henry Francis Fynn was to note in his diary:

This appears to have irritated Retief and he may have been led to conceive the chieftainship to be his personal right. It is therefore likely that he thought the best way of attaining that position was by proceeding to the Zulu chief Dingane and inducing him to cede the country of Natal to him and emigrant Boers, the result of which is so clearly described in the Honourable Cloete's lectures.²³

As Uys left the meeting one of the Trekkers shouted after him, 'How will things go with the journey now?' Uys's answer did not please them. 'Each one goes his own way; these go before in front, others go on the flank. None of them will come in the rear.'²⁴ As far as he was concerned the trek party which reached Natal first would have no prior claim to it over those who followed.

The split between Maritz and Potgieter soon affected all the Trekkers. Potgieter decided to set up his own government on land which he had purchased from Mokwana, whereas Uys decided to settle somewhere in Natal. The Uys laager, meanwhile, was situated on a tributary of the Modder River, north of the present Dewetsdorp. The God-fearing Jacobus Uys set about building a church with poles and reeds which would be large enough for their whole party. After completion of the church, which measured 12,2 m by 15,5 m, the Wesleyan missionary, James Archbell, was invited to officiate at a Communion service. Uys had struck up a lasting friendship with the American minister, who did mission work among Maroko's people at Blesberg. Some of the other Trekkers, especially the Retiefs who had the unordained Erasmus Smit as their preacher, found Uys's action abhorrent. The communion service was held during October and was the first to be held for the Trekkers north of



The Uysklip, now in the Bloemfontein National Museum.

(Photograph: Author's collection)

the Orange River. After the service Jacobus Uys (Koos Bybel) had his name carved on a memorial stone (which is today in the Bloemfontein National Museum) and named the tributary 'Kerkspruyt'.²⁵ Uys then visited the Basuto chief, Mosheshwe, who ceded all the land near Kerkspruyt to him and his descendants. Uys undertook to erect a more permanent church on the site.²⁶ On 19 October Uys concluded a treaty of friendship with Maroko and Archbell at Thaba Nchu, then left immediately on the punitive expedition with Potgieter.

A newcomer, Andries Pretorius, then joined them. He was on a reconnaissance from the Graaff-Reinet area, not yet having decided to trek. The commando consisted of 330 mounted Trekkers in two sections, accompanied by a number of Barolong herders. They left Pretorius and a small laager at the Vet River, then proceeded to Mosega, which they found deserted on 2 November. Then followed a campaign of nine days in which the Trekkers outfought the Matabele in every battle. The Matabele put up a spirited defence, which included driving maddened oxen against the mounted Trekkers. Potgieter and Uys fought their way northwards in the Marico River valley and to the capital at Kapain. Mzilikazi and his defeated nation then fled from the Transvaal.²⁷

When Uys returned to the main Trekker laagers at Winburg he found that Retief had descended the Drakensberg. He and Pretorius then followed and awaited Retief at Doornkop. Retief was convinced that he had achieved a major *coup* in being the first Trekker leader to negotiate with Dingane, and was then *en route* to recapturing Zulu cattle taken by Sikonyela. He was no doubt surprised to find Uys awaiting him. He had heard of the victories over the Matabele and used them as a veiled threat against Dingane. A meeting was held at which Retief and his party attempted to justify their actions and

obtain Uys's co-operation. Erasmus Smit, Retief's preacher, wrote disparagingly:²⁸

Friday 15 December 1837. Today the party of A. Pretorius arrived in our camp with two horse waggons and one ox waggon, to which Piet Uys had added himself . . .

Saturday 16 December 1837. The arrival of a certain fellow-emigrant provided the Governor with much work and caused him to be thoughtful and on his guard towards the man who caused much commotion and disturbance in the camp, but most emigrants who are with us, remained on the side of the Governor, P. Retief. In the afternoon Mr G. Maritz, G. Rudolph and others arrived. These came at the right time for strengthening the hand of the Governor . . .

Monday 18 December 1837. . . . In the forenoon the Governor sent a messenger around with a letter in which all emigrants . . . are invited to meet together at three o'clock . . . The result of the meeting was that some differences between two important persons, which had risen high and become noticeable, had been settled to the great joy of all the emigrants.

Tuesday 19 December 1837. . . . B. Liebenberg . . . gave to the Governor the following memorial, which the Governor then read aloud: 'We citizens here are very pleased with the settlement of differences . . . but it is our earnest desire that Mr P. Uys shall now bind himself with us by an oath of loyalty to His Excellency the Governor, P. Retief . . . (Signed) B. Liebenberg.' Mr P. Uys agreed to this, and arranged that it would be done on a later visit to the united camp together with the party who left with him in convoy from the Colony.

It is highly unlikely that Uys would ever have done so. He returned to his party in Transorangia to report on his meeting and to decide on a common strategy. The situation was extremely serious, for Retief's actions would rebound on all Trekkers who settled in Natal. Their decision was to dissociate themselves entirely from Retief.

Uys then dictated a letter to James Howell, an English trader from Port Elizabeth. Howell was the stepson of Lourens Badenhorst, one of Uys's party, and was willing to act as a go-between with the British authorities in the Cape. Howell wrote the letter and Uys signed it.²⁹

To His Excellency, Sir Benjamin D'Urban KCB
Governor and Commander in Chief

Your Excellency

It is with feelings of the utmost regret that we, the Commandant and principal officers of a large portion of the emigrated Burgers at present without the boundaries of this colony, have ascertained, through the medium of the *Commercial Advertiser*, that Mr P. Retief, Commandant of a small portion of Burgers at present encamped in the 'Dongella' River is likely, by the proclamation of his disloyal sentiments in the above-mentioned Paper, to cause great displeasure towards Her Majesty's Government.

We therefore, feeling it a duty incumbent on ourselves to come forward and disclaim any participation in his [desperate] proceedings and in the

voice of the people at large, not only to declare ourselves totally averse to his proceedings, but that we will by every means in our power frustrate any sinister designs that he may have against Her Majesty's government.

We have also respectfully to request that your excellency will always consider us and our whole 'Laager' as loyal and devoted subjects and worthy of your excellency's favour & protection & that your excellency will be pleased to make use of our services whenever they may be required and in whatever [way] your excellency may think proper.

Any communication your excellency may think proper to make to us we respectfully duly request may be forwarded to our agent Mr James Howell at Port Elizabeth, who will immediately bring the same to the place of destination, and who can also give your excellency any further information that your excellency may require, he having lately visited us at our encampment.

We have the honour to be, with the greatest (respect),
Your excellency's most humble and devoted servant

P.L. UIJS

Justinces Berg
24th Jan 1838

Uys could hardly have made his viewpoint clearer. As a British subject, not given to treasonable behaviour and having loyally served King William IV, he now transferred his loyalty to the 18-year-old Queen Victoria who had ascended the throne six months earlier. His party was not only 'totally averse' to Retief's actions, but added that 'we will by every means in our power frustrate any sinister designs that he may have against Her Majesty's government'. This probably alludes to some plot against Britain. From his recent meeting with Retief, Uys may have gathered that it was Retief's intention to wrest Natal not only from the Zulus but from the British settlers at Port Natal as well. From his visit to these settlers in 1834 Uys would have known of their yearning for recognition by the Crown. Retief's 'sinister designs' left Uys in no doubt where his loyalties lay.

After returning from the Commission Trek he had sworn that he had no intention of returning to Natal unless it was a Crown Colony.³⁰ His later problems with Sherwin may have tarnished his belief in speedy British justice, hence his favouring of the United States Constitution. Despite his valid criticism of the implementation of British policies and justice, at heart Uys had tremendous respect for his friend, Governor D'Urban, who was doing his best in very difficult times. As an honourable man Uys was not prepared to see D'Urban and the Crown hoodwinked out of a possible Natal Colony by Retief. He declares that his party are 'loyal and devoted subjects' and offers their services 'whenever they may be required and in whatever way your excellency may think proper'. As fighting men this undoubtedly includes taking up arms on the side of the Crown. A 'Civil war' among the Trekkers over the land of Natal with the possible intervention of Britain, would have been likely.

D'Urban was extremely pleased at receiving Uys's letter and instructed his staff to communicate with Howell.³¹

Mr Jas Howell

Sir

His E [excellency] the Gov [Governor] has rec [received] a letter from Mr P.L. Uijs dated at Justinces Berg the 24th of January last, written in the name of the expatriated farmers at present beyond the Colonial boundaries, expressing their disapproval of the proceedings of Mr Retief and those who accompany him, their own feelings of attachment to the Government of this colony, and their readiness to yield their services whenever and in whatsoever manner His Excellency shall require them.

These assurances have proved very satisfactory to His Excellency, but before he can make any reply to Mr Uijs, he will require to be informed by you who are named by these farmers as their agent, what is the precise situation of Justinces Berg, whether they occupy the country around it as permanent or temporary possession and in the latter case, whither it is their intention to proceed after quitting it.

(Illegible signature)

In the interim Retief had tricked Sikonyela into donning handcuffs, then confiscated or stolen his cattle, some of which were returned to Dingane. He ignored the warnings of Uys, Gert Maritz,³² the Revd George Champion and others not to take many men with him on his return visit to Dingane. Retief and over 70 men were murdered, then over 500 Trekkers and their servants massacred at Blaaukrans and in the Bushman's River laagers. Gert Maritz, though dying of illness, rallied the survivors and beat off further Zulu attacks. He then sent urgent messages to Uys and Potgieter for assistance. Uys put aside all thoughts of co-operation with the Crown and hurried to the Natal Trekkers, who were in desperate straits.

Potgieter and Uys led a combined command of 347 men, which was ambushed in the hills near Dingane's chief kraal on 8 April. Uys rode to the rescue of two impetuous Malan brothers and was mortally wounded by an assegai in his back. He was supported in his saddle but kept fainting and eventually ordered his men to leave him. His 15-year-old son, Dirkie, then achieved immortality. The boy looked back to see his dying father raise his head and watch him ride to safety, while Zulus swarmed towards him. Dirkie swung his horse around and rode back to fight and die with his father. Piet Uys was the only Trekker leader to die on the battlefield.³³

History has not forgotten the spontaneous heroism of Dirkie, but has largely overlooked the tremendous charisma of the man which inspired it. The boy's love for his father was the natural consequence of the respect and adulation his family and friends bore for a morally and physically courageous man.

Piet Uys's vision of a United States of South Africa, based on the American constitution and in co-operation with Her Majesty's Government, would have been difficult to realise. Nevertheless, had he survived Iteleni perhaps he would have brought peace to Natal. Together with Potgieter's Transorangia and Transvaal Trekkers a confederation could have evolved, which would perhaps have prevented the carnage of two Anglo-Boer Wars and led to a more peaceful solution to our sub-continent's problems.

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IAN S. UYS

