

Unsung heroes: the trek ox and the opening of Natal

In the 1850s the midlands colonist who lived furthest from Pietermaritzburg and closest to the Drakensberg, Robert Speirs, waxed lyrical about the ‘primal forest’ that he found all about him. This was the thick bush at the top of the Dargle Valley, beneath the Nhluzane. It had, he said,

... innumerable waterfalls, cascades, pools and glens matted with Maidenhair, giant yellowwood trees, alongside the Sneezewood, Red Pear, Bitter Almond, Cambid [white] stinkwood, cape chestnut with its distinctive pink blossoms, the knobthorn all festooned with monkey rope, [and] the little orchid known as Grannybonnet.¹

What the eloquent British settler did not notice, perhaps, was the degree to which, for the Trekker farmer that he had displaced, this forest was a commercial treasure house. As Barbara Line reminds us, the Trekkers used its yellowwood for building and for furniture, its sneezewood for fencing and firewood, its lemonwood for the felloes of wagon wheels (the circumference segments), its wild peach, or ‘speekhout’ for wheel spokes, its knobthorn for the disselboom (draught-pole), its wild olive for the *jukskei* (yoke-pin), and its halleria and bush willow for brake blocks.² Note the paradox in that last item: it needs a soft, not a hard wood to get the right friction for the brakes of an ox-wagon. A hard wood heats the iron tyre so that it expands and comes off. The non-indigenous ‘weeping’ willow was the preference, a tree that, in the opinion of many settlers, descended from a primary ancestor at Napoleon’s grave in St Helena. These Natal woods were so highly prized that, long after Natal became a British domain, Free State farmers would come down here to purchase timbers from the Dargle forest.

We get some inkling, then, as to what crafts and skills were incorporated in that slowest, surest form of transportation, the ox-wagon. One newly-arrived colonist in the 1850s explained the technology of ox transport to his audience back home. The ‘narrow canvas-tented wagon’ was pulled by ‘a dozen or fourteen big-horned African oxen’. For his English readers, he defines the ‘juk’ and the ‘skei’ in South African parlance:

A strong drag-chain is passed forward from the wagon between each pair of the sturdy quadrupeds, which are ranged in double file; and transverse bars of wood [i.e. yokes, or ‘jukke’] cross the drag chain, with descending prongs [i.e. skeis] at either end, to fork each over the neck of its own particular beast. The prongs, when adjusted astride of the oxen’s necks, are fastened beneath by thongs of stout hide: the drag chain, prongs and thongs constitute the entire harness of the equipage.³

This genial observer was struck by some of the peculiarities of the wagon ride in Natal—very different, it seems, from what he was used to:

The ordinary rate of travelling is about three miles an hour, and while this is maintained, the wagon moves over boulders and through ruts sedately and steadily enough. But every now and then a fit of go-ahead fever seizes the driver; the long whip is clutched from its resting place by the side of the wagon; its streaming thong is given to the winds, and amidst resounding cracks and scarcely less startling articulate abjurations, made up of about an equal moiety of Zulu and Dutch—a composite language which African oxen seem to understand perfectly—the beasts take to a heavy and inexorable trot, and perhaps for a third of a mile carry the wagon pell-mell over stones, rocks and whatever inequalities happen to lie in the route.⁴

We learn one principle from this picturesque account that explains a good deal about the relation of human being to ox in the business of wagon transport. In contrast to the way horses are hitched in an equine drive-train, the ox-team is not controlled by long reins, and is not attached to one long axle-tree or to extended shafts or traces. Yoking to a pliable central chain is the genius of ox transport, and the reason why it would be, for millennia, the chief source of motive power for all transport by land. The span of oxen is an articulated drive-chain. You can put seven or eight pairs of oxen ahead of the wagon, well beyond the short disselboom of the wagon, and so make a power combination unmatched until the coming of the steam engine. On occasion that very flexibility of the ox-span could become a nuisance. Barbara Buchanan recalls what was always a potential catastrophe with this flexi-system—the possibility of a ‘meet’ on a treacherous bend:

Wagons approaching a curve signalled and the one going downhill halted until the other had rounded the curve. It was not possible for them to pass at the curve. ... But a span of oxen cannot be put in motion nor stopped quickly, and not infrequently the wagon was too near to obey the signal of bus or post cart.⁵

It could take half a day to extricate the wagon from such a mêlée. There was no option but to make the fastidious passengers in the mail cart dismount and wait while the lighter vehicle was shunted.

Just how hopelessly muddled-down the ox-wagon could become is made clear in a report from Lady Florence Dixie, the controversial war journalist for *The Morning Post*, who visited Natal in 1881. She writes of the scene below Curry’s Post, after heavy rain:

As we rode along we came across many wagons hopelessly stuck; some were completely overturned while here and there total breakdown added to the confusion and disaster of the scene. Double spans of oxen struggled wildly and vainly to extricate their foundering wagons; but even with the aid of a spade and a pick all their efforts proved fruitless, and the weary laborious task of unloading was in the end the general result.⁶

On the tight steep contours of colonial Natal, roads could dissolve into mud in a matter of minutes. Diaries kept by members of the McKenzie family record again and again how, after heavy rains, the wagons would sink down to the axles, or tip over on one side so that the buck-rail nearly touched the ground. An ox-wagon would then become a huge clogged sled, and have to be pulled along for some hundred yards by two or three spans of oxen until it became free to run on its wheels again. (This was the reason why



*The Godbold family moves house from Pondoland to the Natal interior in the 1900s.
(Brian Godbold, Mountains, Bullets and Blessings)*

a transport rider preferred not to set out with only one wagon: if he got stuck he needed the additional team from his other wagon to extricate the first.)

Road conditions being so uncertain, the Natal wagon-driver had to be a politician of the highway. Wagon-drivers were almost invariably black men, and one does not have to read much in the literature to realise that seldom in the 'old' South Africa did black men have such status in the eyes of their entrepreneurial bosses as did the driver and *voorloper* of the wagon team. Not only would the driver—'*u shangele*'—know each ox by name, but the performance of his team would have vastly to do with his ability to walk alongside them, flicking his whip just above their ears, and cajoling them like so many individuals. Talking to his animals, the driver might, over a period of two or three weeks, walk from Pietermaritzburg, say, to Salisbury in the new-found Rhodesia. (It was considered bad technique, by the way, to make the whip actually descend on the animal. Pat McKenzie tells me that in his boyhood, before tractors came to the farm, the ability to crack a whip was the first feat that appealed to a boy's imagination.)

No driver's skill was more memorable than his ability to assemble his span, and that by simply calling the names of the individual oxen. The yokes and chains would first be laid in position, and then (as Maurice Mackenzie said to me⁷) there came the amazing sight, 'once seen never forgotten', when, from all the milling mass of animals, the animals called for would one by one step out of the crowd and come to stand in their allotted positions. What we might mean by a 'milling mass' here is recalled in Don McKenzie's journal, concerning his arrival at Karl Roode's Drift south of Ermelo. The river was flooded, and there were camping on the near bank some hundred wagons waiting to cross, some of which had waited for over a month.⁸ If we calculate that each wagon had a team of fourteen to sixteen oxen there must have been some 1 500 head of cattle being maintained on open grazing. It was in a *mêlée* like this that a good driver would get a response from each member of his span.

The milling herd just off the roadway was a familiar sight when oxen were the chief motive power for the whole country. An entire industry was devoted to the production of the trek ox. The perennial problem for the stock-farmer was that whilst grazing his animals at high altitude protected them from disease, in winter they needed the grasslands of a lower altitude. This meant an annual 'drove' from highveld to low. The Geekie family at *Benvie*, for instance, whose farm was right on the neck of the pass from the old village of York up to the Karkloof, were at the bridgehead between highveld and low, and, by the unwritten laws of commonage, they had to accept the annual influx with a good grace. Every 24 May, for example, the stock belonging to the Smith brothers of *Rondebosch*, Mooi River, would arrive at *Benvie* at about four o'clock in the afternoon, having left Mooi River at sunrise. Imagine the tolerant Geekies overrun by 150 horses, 1 000 head of North Devons, 2 000 sheep, and a wagon and driver coming on behind for the stragglers.⁹

One of the skills that distinguished the good driver was his ability to select the most suitable animals for each position in the span. We must remember that there were, at best, three men allotted to a long-distance ox-wagon: the driver, the *voorloper* and the brakeman. The young *voorloper* at the front, would, like any apprentice, hope to become a driver one day. Up front the leading pair would be animals of special temperament, stable and imperturbable. (Some believe that the familiar name 'Jumloot', properly 'uJamludi', derives from the Dutch for 'Jim the Pilot' – loods – but it is in fact a Zulu rendering of the Dutch 'Jan Bloed', a name often given to a red ox, or indeed as a nickname to a red-headed man.) In general one attempted to match, along the span, skittish newcomers with older animals who had been longer in the business. The skill was to get the best distribution of temperament and energy. For instance, it was no gain to get your strongest animals all on one side of the file. You then got a lop-sided effect that could eventually waste hours of haulage time. Animals under the yoke soon tell whether their partners are doing their share or not, and they slacken off accordingly. 'Tuning' an ox-span has an analogy in the tuning of the valves of a reciprocating petrol engine!

With the mention of energy-distribution we must consider further the ancient technology involved. The ox takes the haulage-pressure on the hump, the horse on the shoulder and chest. As we have seen, this limits the length of the parallel shafts or traces that stretch forward from a horse-drawn conveyance: sketches from the pre-railway era seldom show more than three pairs of horses in draft. Only rigid shafts can support the lateral harness that is needed for mules or horses. It is the system of yokes connected to a single flexible chain that makes possible the long team of oxen, and even for the coupling of additional spans on occasion. Hence the concentration of energy that could keep a laden wagon going for days on end. (Incidentally it is not quite true to say that this technology stretches all the way back to the time of the pharaohs. I would gather from my reading that the wagoners of the later decades of the nineteenth century could run more pairs of oxen than ever did the Trekkers in the 1840s, and that because of the improved quality of steel making up the central yoke chain. The McKenzie brothers used to get their chains all the way from Scotland.)

Given the great weight of the wagon behind them, it was a matter of principle to select the two most massive, best-tempered animals as the after-pair, the ones who would be attached to the disselboom itself. These great creatures could send the message 'brake required' all the way along the span by the solid application of their own braking force.

Cloven-footed creatures not only give you more power, but also a more effective braking system. The cloven hooves can steady themselves on muddy surfaces and supplement the axle-brakes on the wagon – brakes which, on their own, often failed to prevent the wagon's rapid transformation to become a sliding sled. It was, incidentally, invariable practice to call one of those large rear animals 'Sataan', presumably one who would have to conjure up, on occasion, demonic strength. I was told by one farmer that sometimes, when the laden wagon was being shunted for off-loading and there was no space for the whole span, those two animals alone would shift the entire load.

To return to the actual in-spanning of the team – one skill that should not be forgotten was the actual harnessing of the animals. There was a danger here akin to shunting a nineteenth-century freight train in the days before vacuum brakes. The animals had to be 'coupled', so to speak, by positioning the yoke and securing the skeis. Trek oxen were, as we have seen, not de-horned and many accounts make it all too clear that those horns just had to take a sudden swipe while you were around the animal, and you could be wounded or maimed for ever. An ex-student of a sometime agricultural college for women to whom I have talked remembers her lecturer insisting that the horns of an ox are utterly necessary for the rhythm of its swinging head which balances its stride. If you de-horn an ox you dramatically reduce its efficiency. I must say that the theory has a musical cogency!

While we talk of the music of the days of the ox-wagon, let us not forget a factor that emblazoned itself on the memories of all who recall them, the never-ending repertoire of throaty cajolements by which the driver egged on his team. Since he had to have the same instinctive intimacy with his animals as the horse-whisperers of North America, one might think that he would, therefore, have the final choice in their naming. But this was certainly not the case: there seem often to have been more English and Dutch names than anything recognisably local. In her history of the Hathorn family Amy Young tells us that Hannah Hathorn, newly arrived in the colony, was most offended by the way that her cousin, obviously assisting the driver, addressed the bovine team.

It was on this trek that George Peacock yelled at the oxen 'Yak fort ye skamkort trek', and my mother rebuked him and said that she would not have the oxen spoken to in Hottentot Dutch. Mother said they were to be properly named after European Countries and English Counties. We had thereupon Devon and Holland, Snowball (a white ox) Chester and Derby, York, England and Warwick. Of course Devon was at once converted to Devil, and Mother would not have that and said it was just as easy for a native to say Devon as Devil.¹⁰

The person who is perhaps Natal's finest diarist, Mary Moore, was entirely fascinated with the ox culture she was introduced to in the 1890s, when she was a school-teacher fresh from England. The ox-team she writes home about appears to have been named in both Dutch and English, the rear oxen being named 'Sataan' and 'How-de-do' respectively while another pair is Olifant and Rhinoceros (apparently the latter had lost half of one of its horns). There were also Applesauce and Hamba Policeman, and another pair kept the flags flying as Yankee Doodle and Rule Britannia. (I cannot believe that a good driver would go on using these northern hemisphere names all the way to Pilgrims' Rest) In the front were Akermann and Scotchman, and Mary Moore would ever recall the cry: 'Trek! Trek! Akermann, Trek!'¹¹

We have talked of the critical distribution of energy that requires the careful matching

of an ox-team, and this was inevitable since an ox's haulage effort is all at the hump (so much less easy to imagine than the pressure on the chest). An interesting debate was carried on in the pages of the *Natal Agricultural Journal* for 1905¹² as to whether the time-honoured yoke used by the Voortrekkers was in fact the best design for use in Natal. There was in colonial Natal often a variation in the type of trek-animal used. The favourite trek-ox in South Africa had always been a cross of Nguni and Afrikaner: the former giving the necessary resistance to tick-borne diseases, and the latter giving the body-mass for sustained effort. The traditional yoke suited the big-humped variety very well, but the colonial English often got extremely good haulage from their own particular hybrids, a cross of Nguni and small-humped animals from the British Isles. The Nguni side of the equation was so restrainedly introduced that, in any photograph, one often does not notice the cross-breed at all. Pat McKenzie remembers the South Devons that made up his father's Nottingham Road span which were used for an amazing variety of jobs – driving the mealie-grinder, drawing the mower, drawing the rake that came after the mower, drawing the V-shaped drag that took the hay to the baler, and then working the baler itself. These specialised teams were doing their work well into the 1940s, long after tractors had become a familiar sight in the fields of Natal. But the debate in the *Natal Agricultural Journal* stemmed from the fact that the South Devon hybrid was not so good for the long haul out on the road itself. The unmoulded South African yoke began to put a strain, after hours of work, on the smaller-humped animal.

Thus there followed the exchange between Messers James Speirs and Donald Sinclair. Both exponents were convinced that the bow yokes used in England and America got the better performance out of the smaller animals. They had both made use of imported yokes in their days of transport riding, and both claimed that one got an equivalent performance from ten to twelve animals using the bow yoke to a team of sixteen using the South African yoke. So what was the debate about? Simply that Mr Speirs preferred the English yoke and Mr Sinclair the American!

When we discuss the attributes of a good wagon-driver, we must recall something of the 'politics' involved in the use of the road, even in the days before the motor car. The driver – often an illiterate man – had to have a clear imagination of the road ahead (which might mean, in the 'eighties and 'nineties, the road from Pietermaritzburg to Salisbury!) There was a distinct rhythm discernible in the combined energy that you could call upon from an ox-team between points of in-span and out-span. Individual oxen might weaken and have to be coerced, but the 'lore' of wagoning makes it clear that there was a moment when the whole team began to sag, at which point it was as useless to try and force further effort as to drive a motor car without petrol. The expert driver sensed at once that – to use the analogy – he had run out of fuel, and that his entire team was under-performing. This meant that it was grazing-time, and the regularity of the bovine rhythm with regard to the production of energy required that the driver be as much a geographer as an animal psychologist. By the last decades of the century, there was by no means free grazing always available alongside the road. Recall that barbed-wire fencing arrived in the 1880s and completely changed the open-veld philosophy of the colonists. The roads got busier, and the landowners alongside them more and more protective of their private terrains. The McKenzie brothers were sometimes shot at for grazing their teams on what they had thought was public domain. In Natal, the colonial government set up specific sites along the main road for outspanning, and in the heart of winter even provided fodder at those sites. The driver had not only to anticipate the

distance between fodder sites, but to be assured that they were well supplied. So if the Victorians used to talk about 'railway time' as marking the era when everyone carried a watch, the wagoner of the pre-railway age, who carried no watch, planned his journey according to a requisite pattern of grazing, cud-chewing, and hours at the yoke.

We touch here on one of the most primitive rules of bovine lore. If oxen are not given time to chew the cud – if, that is, the nutriment is not turned into fuel – then all the whip-lashing and name-calling on earth does not improve their performance. There is an object-lesson here in the difference between ox and non cud-chewing animals like the horse. The horse will work for more hours than the ox in a single turn, but then will need grazing and a whole night's sleep. The ox gives you two or three turns of duty per day, each of fewer hours, but longer in total. The ability to work in stages gives a further flexibility to the ox-team as an instrument of haulage. It is obvious from the literature that ox-wagons often worked far into the night – indeed, transport-riders from Natal found that if they were anywhere near the tsetse-fly belt they had best accomplish their haulage only by night. (If one thinks that a road in those days was often not much more than a track through the bush, one pities the young *voorloper* having to find the way by starlight!) In mid-summer, a typical schedule is recorded by Don McKenzie:

We travelled from sundown to twelve midnight, when we tied up the oxen for a couple of hours' rest, during which I usually sat by a fire and drank coffee till 2 am, when I roused the drivers and we set off again till sunrise. Then after a couple of hours for breakfast, we started off again till by eleven or twelve it was too hot to go further, and we outspanned for the afternoon and every afternoon there was lots of work to do, as the loads were always needing repacking, or the tyres were getting loose and had to be wedged.¹³

One presumes that those two-hour rest intervals correspond to the two hours of grazing and cud-chewing.

As the railway crept further and further inland the government's sponsorship of outspan points supplied with fodder became controversial. Natal farmers had integrated themselves so thoroughly into the transport industry that the brand new railway was not always welcome. John Robinson, sometime editor of the *Natal Mercury*, speaking in the Colonial Assembly in 1884, noted that 'as we travel along by train we still see by the side of the railway, along the old road, the same long lines of heavily laden wagons, toiling through the dust and the mire'.¹⁴ Natal was, in the 1880s, rather as it is today, a hotbed for the 'road' lobby. It had become known in fact as 'the colony of transport-riders'¹⁵ and farmers-become-wagoneers (a company that included, incidentally, black transport-riders) complained of the railway as a tyrannical competitor. The Natal railway was of course irritated by this obstinate competition, its General Manager claiming that the government outspans along the roads were nothing less than a 'system of free dinners'.¹⁶

If some surprise attaches to this wholesale transfer of the farming community to the transport industry, a further surprise concerns the position of Pietermaritzburg in the interior trade. Why was 'Maritzburg more of a hub for inland transport than the port city itself? In the *Recollections of a Natal Colonist* by H Ryle Shaw, written in 1909, a theory is presented that explains the strange predominance of the capital city. Says Ryle Shaw:

Pietermaritzburg was a sort of port that funnelled at one centre all the inland trade for the coast. This enviable position was due to an insect – the tick. At that

time the disease-transferring tick was not commonly known. It was, however, generally recognised that up-country oxen might be taken as far as Maritzburg with reasonable safety, but that to go further coastward was to court the risk—almost the certainty – of losing every ox. There were plenty of theories. Academically some held the evil to be in the air, others in the grass; but all had the practical conviction that for up-country oxen death was on the Durban road. The Durban-transport cattle were grazed on the Durban side of the town and the up-country oxen on the other.¹⁷



The ox-wagon is still the main unit of thriving commerce in this 1890s picture outside the Pietermaritzburg Market Hall (eventually demolished in 1972). (Pietermaritzburg 1838–1988, Shuter and Shooter)

Let us put ourselves in the shoes of the farmer's son who has thrown his loaned wealth into the purchase of a wagon and span, and berthed his enterprise in the Market Square, 'Maritzburg, (where the municipality would maintain a fodder supply right through to the 1950s). He wanders the central streets looking for trade, and Ryle Shaw suggests that he would not have far to go:

At the entrance of every store was a blackboard with notices in chalk such as: Wanted: wagons for Lydenburg, Kimberley, Newcastle, Potchefstroom, Pretoria, and so on. On some boards the rates offered were notified, and on others were inscribed: 'For rates, enquire within.' The 'way-bills' were severely-worded contracts but I imagine they were rarely read by the transport rider.¹⁸

Ryle Shaw is perhaps a little casual about this. A bill of lading was – even at the pace of the ox – quotable script, and a point of reference if a delivery date was not accomplished. In 1884 Duncan McKenzie was out-bid for the carriage of timber from Pietermaritzburg to Barberton where one Mr Wheeldon was trying to build a hotel to cater for the gold rush. The contract went to a Mr Tradoux, who offered eighteen shillings per hundred-weight as against his twenty shillings. McKenzie did manage to contract for the remnant of the timber at his own price, and duly set off to Barberton. When he got there and, as

he says, 'presented my way-bills to Mr Wheeldon', he found the latter to be very angry that Tradoux's consignment had not yet arrived. The unfortunate Tradoux had become hopelessly enmeshed in unseasonal rains. Even McKenzie noted that 'it rained every day, and we had no wood on the high veldt, and everything was so wet that we had the greatest difficulty in getting any food cooked, or even a cup of tea made.'¹⁹ But this made no difference to the terms of conveyance. Wheeldon upheld his case against Tradoux, and, says McKenzie, 'I am not sure the matter was settled out of court'.²⁰

In his fascinating piece, Ryle Shaw gives us an intimate peep into the prevalent commercial vehicle of the 19th century, the general dealer's or *smous's* wagon, which corresponds no doubt to the pantehnicion or the 'mixed' goods train of later eras:

On the up-trip into the interior, it would be loaded with coffee, sugar, moleskin suits, elastic-sided boots, calico, cheap watches and jewellery, gun-powder, lead, soap, musical-boxes, saddles, spades, beads, blankets, mirrors and knives. On the return trip it would be loaded with ivory and the skins of all the best known fauna of South Africa – lion skins, strips of hippo hide for sjamboks, skins of the giraffe for whiplashes and skins innumerable of oribi, duiker, rietbuck, bushbuck and indeed of almost all the antelope tribe from eland to little bluebuck.²¹

But not all the wagoners were general dealers. With young men leaving farms in droves to go transport-riding, the developing country demanded – and paid well for – highly specialised loads. In 1880, even before the Witwatersrand goldfields were discovered, the Dargle McKenzies were loading hydraulic machinery at Howick station (today's Merrivale) for Pilgrim's Rest.

Some of the best day-to-day accounts of the life of a transport-rider are preserved for us in the writings of the McKenzies. Donald McKenzie, of *Leeubosch*, lived in times of economic hardship when schooling was a luxury; he had in fact only one year of formal education. Nevertheless it is reported that he 'wrote a good readable hand, and became a great reader for the rest of his life. Scott's poetry and Burns he knew well, and was fond of music and singing'.²² Don wrote a sort of working manual for his brothers, and in its pages he suggested some guiding principles. The essence of the art of ox-driving was, he said, to get the team to exert pressure all at the same time:

In crossing a bad place such as a mud-hole, spruit, river, donga or rut, the brake should be put on as the front wheels drop slowly into the rut. The span should then be straightened out nicely, and lastly the brake taken off. The driver should come alongside and give his commands in a loud decisive voice, at the same time raising his whip in the air and casting his eye over the whole span, noting at a glance if any ox in the span has not obeyed quickly and put his whole strength into the pull. If any of the span has not pulled properly and the wagon sticks, then the driver should go up to each of them in turn, call the ox by name, and at the same time bring the whip over him. He will at once move forward and lean steadily on his yoke and thus be ready to pull.²³

The point of the exercise was to get a single concerted pressure. In modern times when we can set so much mechanical horsepower to work by the pressing of an accelerator, it is difficult to imagine the skill it takes to make sixteen quadrupeds give all their effort at one signalled moment. No matter how many oxen you had, a stuck wagon was as good as fixed if you could not tap all that pulling-power in one instant. To such a degree was this the art of wagon-driving that Donald expressly warned against any attempt to try to force the oxen to pull a genuinely stuck or immobile wagon. The animals would then

make an equation between the immobility of the wagon and the uselessness of trying any further, and from that moment on would prefer to be stalled!

AO Curry, grandson of George Curry of Curry's Post, would agree with him. 'If any particular span's wagon got stuck and, after three or four efforts, they failed to pull it out, it was always of little purpose trying them further.'²⁴ Now came the real test of the driver's skill. In many cases two inexperienced drivers would simply pile on more power, and hitch both their spans to try and make the wagon move. But, says Curry, 'I have in such cases seen a third driver suggest that the two unsuccessful spans be unhitched and moved away out of sight. Then he would calmly hitch his own span to the wagon, walk up and down the line, talking to each ox by name, two or three times, before giving the word to pull. And that would do the trick.'²⁵

The brother who became the leading entrepreneur of the McKenzie brothers was Duncan, one day to be General Sir Duncan McKenzie. In 1888 the McKenzies were contacted by Mr Henry Nourse, of the Henry Nourse mines on the Reef. Most wagons were in this year fetching only five shillings per hundredweight to Johannesburg because of the advancing railway, but Duncan was offered twenty shillings per hundredweight to take up three exceptional loads. Just how exceptional the load was I can only illustrate by comparison. A modern Toyota Corolla weighs 1,3 metric tonnes (and a metric tonne is not that different from a ton imperial). Consider craning on to an ox-wagon at Ladysmith station a boiler that weighed 7 tons and 15 hundredweight imperial. On the second wagon there was loaded a boiler casing 12 ft long weighing 5 tons, and on the third wagon a casing 6 ft square and weighing 6 tons. I would calculate that that would be tantamount to loading 12 to 14 Toyota Corollas on three ox-wagons – vehicles that, we must remember, were entirely unsprung and would have to clamber over every stone and rut all the way to Johannesburg. I would also calculate that this order fetched McKenzie £375 for the total shipment – not bad for two weeks' work in days when, for example, a headmastership was advertised at £250 per annum.

But, you only got your cash on delivery. An industrialising South Africa was now requiring heavier loads than ox-wagons were designed for, and we can hardly be surprised that, at a drift beyond Charlestown, the hind wheel of the boiler wagon sank into the mud. So the wagon plus the eight ton boiler had to be lifted from the mud with a hand-worked jack.

The jacking up was very slow, difficult work, for the jacks kept sinking down, and more stones had to be put under them, and it was a long time before we could get a sign of an upward move, but eventually it came, and so did the rain. The result was that I could not move on until the third day. I put up a wagon sail over where we were working, and this not only kept us dry, but also the ground from getting soft.²⁶

On the wagon trail blacks and whites were equal partners, brewing tea and frying bacon together, all entrepreneurs in their own way, and all equalized by the common obstacles of road and rain.

Two natives came along with a light wagon loaded with ten bags of mealies, and stuck in the mud a little above us. I promised to pull them out whenever it cleared. A Dutch farmer, who was riding round his stock, came and had a chat with me – he said he had a lot of oxen, and if I liked he would come and pull me out when the rain stopped. I thanked him and said I would send for him if necessary.²⁷

The McKenzie team had quite an audience, then, when the weather at last cleared and all three spans were attached to the boiler wagon. As usual, however, Duncan's technique won the day:

It was a cold morning, and I made the drivers just touch with the whip any ox which did not show the usual signs of pulling. The brake was taken off, and when I gave the word each driver spoke to his own oxen at the same time, and the three spans all pulled at once. The wagon came out nicely, and we were once more ready to move on. The Dutchman complimented me, and said he had never seen oxen pull like that before. I sent one span to pull the native's wagon out and so left the old fellow delighted.²⁸

On the great highway to the interior they met all types and races, even Natal's future Prime Minister, Sir George Sutton, 'with whom I had a few words when he was passing down in the Post Cart'.²⁹ A few days later they arrived at the Henry Nourse Mine. 'Off-loading was very simple and we easily dug a trench to sink the wagon wheels on one side, and the heavy boiler and cases came off very gently, falling on to the soft earth. I was thankful to see the last of the boiler.'³⁰

The idyll of transport-riding came to an end in the late 1890s not so much because of the advancing railway as because of the outbreak of rinderpest – an epidemic that saw the reduction by half of Natal's cattle population. Contracted for a trip to Rhodesia in 1897, Duncan set out with that most ancient means of transport, the ox-wagon, but was warned about the spreading disease by the most modern means, the electric telegraph.

Everything was going very nicely, when I received a letter from Mr Bland (the agent in Salisbury) telling me that some disease had broken out away north, and seemed to be killing cattle wholesale. Shortly after this, I had another letter telling me this disease was coming nearer and nearer, and wiping out everything before it, even buffaloes. Later I had a wire saying it was coming down the coast so rapidly that he feared it would be there almost immediately; at last his wires became so urgent that he wanted definite orders as to what he was to do. By this time I realised that it was hopeless for me to think of going forward with my twelve wagons and three hundred oxen, so, much against my inclination, I decided to hand back the two or three loads I had to the agents, and to sell my own goods, unfortunately at a loss. I brought back a good deal of tea, sugar, flour and golden syrup.³¹

There was one strange sequel to this failed enterprise. Up in Rhodesia, Cecil Rhodes, trying to resuscitate his fragile new colony after the ravages of rinderpest, contracted with the McKenzie brothers to bring to Rhodesia 100 oxen from their farm *Cotswold* in Natal. They were not to use the fever-ridden route inland, but the sea-route via Beira. The expedition left Durban in November 1896, attended by Peter McKenzie, and it turned into a real old-world imperial adventure. The small herd was shipped by steam-freighter to Beira, thence by river-boat up the Pungwe River to the railhead, thence by the Portuguese narrow-gauge railway up to the frontier at Chimoio. On the river itself, the vessel carrying the cattle got stranded on a sandbank. Many of the Natal oxen died from the heat as the men sought desperately to improvise a crane, driven by the engine of a river tug, to hoist the oxen ashore. Nevertheless the McKenzie wagons did eventually trundle into Salisbury, leaving the brothers to claim that it was a Natal enterprise that saved Rhodesia's fledgling economy!³²

In conclusion we may again refer to AO Curry, who owned eight spans of oxen, each matched in colour, and who believed that 'a middle-aged, well-trained ox, treated kindly,

is almost human'.³³ He must have known what he was talking about, because, well into the twentieth century, he kept a span of oxen standing by at Curry's Post. The reason was simple. Time and time again he and his oxen were called upon by luckless motorists to pull their clogged vehicles out of the mud! So Natal oxen performed an encore as late as the 1960s!



The Natal Mountain Club treks to the mountains from Bergville station in the 1920s. (Photo: Nixon Collection)

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