

Book Review

The Boer Invasion of the Zulu Kingdom 1837–1840

John Laband

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“Heritage”, as Clinton David van der Merwe argues, is a contested concept in South Africa.⁴¹¹ This is illustrated by the existence of two separate commemorative museums in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa: the Blood River Heritage Site (*Bloedrivier Erfenisterrein*) and the Ncome Museum on opposite sides of Blood/Ncome River.⁴¹² These museums represent ‘memory sites’,⁴¹³ as tangible manifestations of the controversial and complex Battle of Blood River (*Impi yase Ncome* in IsiZulu or *Slag van Bloedrivier* in Afrikaans) of 16 December 1838.

The Boer Invasion of the Zulu Kingdom 1837–1840, written by the renowned historian, John Laband, provides an insightful and balanced re-appraisal of the encounter at Blood/Ncome River, between the Voortrekker *kommando* under Chief Kommandant Andries Pretorius and the Zulu impi of King Dingane kaSenzangakhona, the second king of the Zulu nation. On that Sunday (16 December 1838), 464 Boer Kommando fighters (Voortrekkers), with 3 white volunteers from Port Natal, 60 black levies, 130 black wagon drivers, 100 commando auxiliaries (*agterryers*) and 300 other blacks confronted between 10 000 and 15 000 of Dingane’s Zulu impi commanded by Induna Ndlela and Induna Nzolo in a military engagement, which had a lasting effect on South African history.⁴¹⁴ Before the battle, on 9 December 1838, the Voortrekkers (or Trekkers), took an oath (known as the Covenant or the Vow) to God, committing to honour him if he assisted them in defeating the Zulu warriors. The Trekkers emerged victorious, and 16 December was celebrated by the Boers (Afrikaners) as a day of thanksgiving. Subsequently, 16 December was declared a public holiday in 1864 by the Transvaal Republic (Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek) to commemorate what they described as ‘God’s grace’ in liberating the Boers from Dingane’s yoke.⁴¹⁵ Another independent Boer republic, the Orange Free State, proclaimed 16 December as Dingaan’s Day in 1894. From 1910, when the Union of South Africa was established, Dingaan’s Day became a national public holiday. To mollify a critical and revolting black population, the ruling National Party later renamed it the Day of the Covenant (1952–1979), and still later, the Day of the Vow (1980–1993). In recent decades, some historians however started to reassess the Battle of Blood/Ncome River, mainly questioning and demystifying the Day of the Covenant, which perpetuated exclusive Afrikaner nationalism and the notion that they were God’s ‘Chosen People’ with the right to dominate South Africa.⁴¹⁶ In the light of that Afrikaner perspective,

celebrating 16 December as the Day of the Covenant was regarded as divisive. In 1995, the new democratic government under Nelson Mandela revised South African national public holidays, and 16 December was renamed “Day of Reconciliation” to promote the post-apartheid nation-building agenda. In 1998, the Ncome Museum was established on one side of Blood/Ncome River, designed to correct the ‘imbalance of heritage discourse’ represented by the *Bloedrivier Erfenisterrein* on the other side, both memorialising the epic encounter on 16 December between the Boers and the AmaZulu.⁴¹⁷

The establishment of South Africa has been a protracted process of struggle for key resources, such as land, economic and political power, and also the ‘right’ to ‘author the past’.⁴¹⁸ In this sense, as Van Schalkwyk and Smith argue, indigenous communities in South Africa were marginalised due to the ideology of separation, and had limited opportunities in the construction of history.⁴¹⁹ The Battle of Blood/Ncome River, with its controversial significance and ‘focus of emotional commemoration’,⁴²⁰ is one such case where perspectives of the AmaZulu often disappeared into insignificance in the historiography. The impact of the migrant land-starved Boers’ encroachment on Zulu territory, the threat they posed, the strategic politico-military calculations, anxieties, and motivations of the AmaZulu hardly feature in the mainstream historical accounts. To correct this imbalance, John Laband wrote *The Boer Invasion of the Zulu Kingdom 1837–1840*, which considers the evidence of the AmaZulu (in the form of recorded testimonies). In his book, Laband engages with the story of the Boers’ intrusion into the Zulu kingdom established by Shaka kaSenzangakhona in the mid-1820s. Laband explores the trials and tribulations of the adversaries, political and economic dimensions of the conflict, the epic encounter at Blood/Ncome River, and its consequences.

The Boer Invasion re-examines the Battle of Blood/Ncome River by putting the AmaZulu at the centre of the story alongside the Trekkers. Laband argues that many historical accounts focused too much on the ‘triumphant Boers’ and failed to appreciate the ‘mainsprings of Zulu policy and action’.⁴²¹ In the first ten chapters of *The Boer Invasion*, Laband insightfully brings into focus various critical and overlapping encounters between the different warring groups to contextualise the conflict. He also deals, inter alia, with the inter-group relations between Europeans and Africans from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, the occupation of the Cape of Good Hope by the Dutch East India Company in 1652, their expansion east and north into the interior of South Africa, the military defeat and dispossession of Khoikhoi, San and AmaXhosa lands, the British conquest of the Cape in 1795 and 1806, and the assertion of English political and cultural supremacy, which led to the migration of the Boers into the interior. Laband then reflects on black communities found in South Africa further east and north of the Cape, notably the AmaXhosa and the AmaZulu, and the period of political turbulence and migration generally known as *Mfecane* (i.e. large-scale political and socio-economic disruption, expansion, consolidation, and forced migrations caused by constant warfare). Laband’s interest in military matters is clearly discernible in the analysis of the founding of the Zulu kingdom by Shaka kaSenzangakhona, the politico-military system, socio-political organisation, weapons, war rituals, intelligence, logistics, strategies, and operational tactics. The emphasis here is on the development of the militaristic nature of the AmaZulu, their military identity, and the inculcation of a warrior ethos as the mainstay of the Zulu state under Shaka. Similarly, Laband writes in detail about the Trekkers, their

background and character, their political system, cultural and religious practices, military system (*kommando*), and their operational tactics. He also explores the English trading settlement at Port Natal (now Durban) and the diplomatic manoeuvres by Henry Francis Fynn (called *Mbuyazi* by the AmaZulu) and Lt Francis George Farewell (called *Febani* by the AmaZulu) to obtain Shaka's permission to occupy the area. Circumstances and conspiracies surrounding the assassination of Shaka and the rise of his brother, Dingane, to ascend the Zulu throne are dealt with remarkably.

The book comprises 29 well-researched and easy-to-read chapters on varying themes. These include the English traders' colonisation of Port Natal, the growth of that settlement and Dingane's tenuous relationship with influential figures, such as Allen Gardener, John Cane, and Alexander Biggar, who distrusted Dingane and depicted him negatively. Laband also explores the search for land by the Boer scouting parties (*Kommissietrek*) and the early migration from the Cape to escape the British rule from 1835, then the mass migration of the Boers from the Cape due to 'cultural marginalisation, lack of land, labour and security' (p. 67), and general discontent about the British rule, leading to what became known as the Great Trek. After crossing the Orange River, the Trekkers, as they became known, led by Andries Hendrik Potgieter who came from the Cradock district in the Eastern Cape, and Sarel Cilliers (or 'Charl Celliers', as Laband has it on p. 102), from Colesburg district in the Northern Cape, Cilliers encountered and defeated a powerful and marauding migrant king of the AmaNdebele, Mzilikazi, at the Battle of Vegkop in October 1836, using a combination of firearms (muskets) and wagon laager tactics. Laband also profiles leaders, such as Gerrit Maritz, Piet Retief, and Piet Uys, in terms of their character, attitude, role, and influence among the Trekkers. Furthermore, he examines the Trekkers' elementary political system and governance, election of self-assured Piet Retief as governor, as well as persistent factionalism and disagreements regarding the purpose and direction of the trek. Eventually, Retief's party held sway, and moved eastwards across the Drakensberg mountain range, into Dingane's domain.

Laband then deals with the nature of the Trekkers' encroachment into the Zulu kingdom. He explains why their arrival posed an existential threat to Dingane, who was still consolidating himself as the rightful monarch and intervener (*uMalamulele*) among the Zulu nation. Laband identifies some key problems that resulted from the presence of the Trekkers in Dingane's domain:

- Trekkers who arrived with horses and firearms presented a new threat to Dingane's rule, while he was contending with the growing military capacity of Port Natal;
- Trekkers settled in Zulu territory without Dingane's permission;
- They commandeered maize and sorghum from Zulu villages in the immediate vicinity; and
- Trekkers increasingly arrived in the Zulu domain and occupied additional land.

Moreover, Retief frequently issued veiled threats in his negotiations for land with Dingane, using the Trekkers' success against the formidable Mzilikazi and the retrieval of cattle from the recalcitrant BaTlokwa chief, Sekonyela, to intimidate the Zulu monarch. The mock firearm displays by Retief's entourage at Dingane's great place, emGungundlovu,

increased Dingane's apprehensions and mistrust. Dingane hence ordered the assassination of Retief and his men, and the subsequent massacre of Trekkers encamped around Blaauwkrans on 16 February 1838, to pre-empt potential retribution. Retief's death triggered vengeance among the Trekkers. In April 1838, Piet Uys and Hendrik Potgieter attempted a revenge attack against the AmaZulu. Their mounted force was surprised at eThaleni Hill and suffered defeat against Dingane's impi. Port Natal settlers also mobilised a 'Grand Army of Natal' (p. 206) under John Cane and Robert Biggar, and attempted raids against AmaZulu. Due to poor coordination, the 'Grand Army of Natal' however suffered heavy losses at the Battle of Thukela/Dlokweni on 17 April 1838.

After initial failed attempts to take the fight to Dingane, the Trekkers needed to reorganise. They invited an irregular frontier fighter, Andries Pretorius from Graaff-Reinet in the Eastern Cape, to lead them against Dingane. The scene was set for the epic encounter between the Trekkers' *kommando* under a resolute Pretorius, and Dingane's impi at Blood/Ncome River on 16 December 1838. Laband reiterates the significance of that encounter, which even prompted the new South African government in 1998 to establish a 6-member committee comprising English, Afrikaner, and Zulu researchers and academics 'to formulate an interpretation that fostered understanding and national reconciliation' (p. 228) (the course of the Battle of Blood/Ncome River is discussed in Chapter 23). Laband examines in detail Pretorius's *kommando*, its mobilisation and force design, command structure and orders of battle, operational design and plans, weapons, intelligence, logistical arrangements and movements towards emGungundlovu to confront Dingane's forces, the *kommando*'s Covenant on 9 December, and the arrival and formation of an ox-wagon laager (defensive circle of wagons) at Blood/Ncome River on 15 December 1838. The analysis then follows a similar pattern regarding the war preparations and plans by Dingane's impi to resist and defend the Zulu kingdom.

The battle commenced on the morning of 16 December, and Laband describes the conduct of operations in great detail. Despite multiple strong assaults by Dingane's impi, the Trekkers effectively repulsed them by employing their concentrated firepower from behind the laager. The Trekkers comprehensively defeated Dingane's impi at Blood/Ncome River. After their victory, Pretorius's *kommando* was called the *Wenkommando* (the Victorious Commando). Laband is credited for illuminating other aspects of the battle, which do not appear in mainstream historiography – the role of blacks within the laager. Close to 600 blacks contributed to the Trekkers' triumph by, for example, assisting them in controlling the oxen and horses to prevent these from causing a stampede, bringing up ammunition, loading firearms, and also fighting alongside the *kommando* (p. 233). Another aspect which Laband brings into the equation is the less known legend of Dingane's spy, Bhongoza kaMefu of the Nongoma. Bhongoza lured the *Wenkommando* into a trap laid by the Zulu impi. The *Wenkommando* were tempted with a promise of finding easy cattle from the defeated, demoralised and disorganised Zulu impi. The over-confident *Wenkommando* was surprised, and suffered a near-disastrous defeat against the Zulu impi during an ambush in thornbush terrain at oPhate around the White Umfolozi River on 27 December 1838. That was the last direct encounter between the Trekkers and the AmaZulu, and the *Wenkommando* withdrew from an abandoned and torched emGungundlovu on 31 December 1838. Dingane was eventually overthrown in 1840, through a dynastic conflict initiated by his brother, Mpande, who defected and formed an alliance with the Trekkers

in exchange for additional land. After Dingane's defeat, Mpande was proclaimed the Zulu king by Pretorius. The Trekkers then annexed more of the Zulu territory, from Thukela in the south to Black Umfolozi in the north, as compensation for assisting Mpande. The original Zulu kingdom created by Shaka was dismembered, and Mpande ruled over a reduced territory.

As indicated, at the beginning of the book, Laband makes a point that his objective is to 'remedy the imbalance' (Preface, p. xiii) in the historical accounts of the Trekker–Zulu conflict, by expanding on the part played by the AmaZulu, almost in the same vein as Kriel's re-assessment of the Boer–Maleboch War of 1894, that is, not merely from the usual narrative of the victorious Boers, but also from 'the other side', that of the vanquished African people.⁴²² I believe Laband has succeeded in doing so by bringing into focus the central role and plight of the AmaZulu in their effort to resist the 'unprovoked invasion of their kingdom' by the land-hungry Boers or migrant farmers who moved from the Cape to escape British rule and decided to establish their own independent republic on Zulu soil.⁴²³ Laband contextualises Dingane as a 'tragic figure' (p. 305) who had to fight by any available means, the unprecedented existential threat – from the revolt within the royal house to battling the intrusion of the 'battle-hardened' Trekkers (p. 305) skilled in firearms and wagon laager tactics. Laband contends that it is even doubtful whether Shaka could have survived such odds. Ultimately, it was the royal clash and civil conflict in the Zulu kingdom which brought down Dingane. The Trekkers exploited the tragic situation to claim the land of the AmaZulu. The Trekkers' land claims however came to nothing, as the British intervened with a threat of force, and annexed the Zulu territory south of the Thukela River as the Colony of Natal in 1843.⁴²⁴

Laband effectively widens the lens of analysis regarding the Trekker–Zulu conflict, its causes, course and consequences, fundamentally explaining why and how it occurred, the contrasting military systems and strategies, motivations and ambitions of the warring parties, and reflects on the reasons for triumph and defeat. The book contains various maps, mostly related to battlefields, and varied images of paintings and drawings in black and white, for illustrative purposes. As a point of criticism, some maps and images are very small, making it difficult to read the original inscriptions. Although the book is written in English, Laband is commended for retaining authenticity throughout the text, keeping the nomenclatures, phrases and concepts in their original IsiZulu, Afrikaans and IsiSwati, ending with a glossary translating and explaining non-English words. Additionally, Laband has consulted an extensive variety of sources, such as archival material, recorded Zulu oral testimonies, a collection of published documents, official reports, letters, diaries, memoirs, and contemporary newspapers as well as a variety of secondary sources to provide an enriched multi-sided account of the conflict. *The Boer Invasion of the Zulu Kingdom 1837–1840* is therefore highly recommended for different types of audiences.

Fankie L Monama 

*Department of Military History, Stellenbosch University,
Saldanha, South Africa*

ENDNOTES

- ⁴¹¹ CD van der Merwe, 'Contested Heritage(s): The Case(s) of the Battle of Blood River (December 16th, 1838, Dundee and Nqutu, South Africa', *Modern Geografía*, 19, 2 (2024), 109–125.
- ⁴¹² Van der Merwe, 'Contested Heritage(s)', 109.
- ⁴¹³ M Marschall, 'Public Holidays as *Lieux de Mémoire*: Nation-building and the Politics of Public Memory in South Africa', *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 36, 1/2 (2013), 12.
- ⁴¹⁴ J Laband, *The Boer Invasion of the Zulu Kingdom, 1837–1840* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2023), 230–233; see also A Ehlers, 'Desegregating History in South Africa: The Case of the Covenant and the Battle of Blood/Ncome River'. Paper presented at the Australian Historical Association Conference, Adelaide, 2000.
- ⁴¹⁵ Ehlers, 'Desegregating History'; see also SM Ndlovu, 'Johannes Nkosi and the Communist Party of South Africa: Images of "Blood River" and King Dingane in the late 1920s–1930s', *History and Theory*, 39 (2000), 111–132.
- ⁴¹⁶ A Ehlers, 'Apartheid Mythology and Symbolism: Desegregated and Re-invented in the Service of Nation-building in the New South Africa: The Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome', *Alizés: Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 24 (2019), 173–197; D Ngobese & T Makhuba, 'Re-inventing the Battle of Ncome/Blood River: Reflection on its Contested Historical Consciousness and Commemorative Events', *Gender and Behaviour*, 16, 2 (2018), 11751–11761; see also SM Ndlovu, *African Perspectives of Dingane ka Senzangakhona: African Histories and Modernities* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 129–166.
- ⁴¹⁷ Ngobese & Makhuba, 'Re-inventing the Battle', 11751–11761; Ndlovu, 'Remember Dingaan's Day', 129–166.
- ⁴¹⁸ JA van Schalkwyk & BW Smith, 'Insiders and Outsiders: Sources for Reinterpreting a Historical Event', in AM Reid & PJ Lane (eds.), *African Historical Archaeologies* (New York: Springer, 2004), 325.
- ⁴¹⁹ Van Schalkwyk & Smith, 'Insiders and Outsiders', 325–346.
- ⁴²⁰ Laband, *The Boer Invasion*, 'Preface', vii.
- ⁴²¹ Laband, *The Boer Invasion*, xii.
- ⁴²² Laband, *The Boer Invasion*, x; L Kriel, 'Same War, Different Story: A Century's Writing on the Boer-Hananwa War of 1894', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30, 4 (2004), 790.
- ⁴²³ Laband, *The Boer Invasion*, vii, 305.
- ⁴²⁴ Laband, *The Boer Invasion*, 304–306.