

The Boers of Dutch descent under British rule in South Africa

Chris Williams-Wynn (South Africa)

Key words: Freehold title; land occupation; land tenure security; de facto land rights; land administration

SUMMARY

This paper is about the South African people group colloquially called the “Boers”, who are descendants predominantly of the Dutch settlers. Due to the circumstances at the time, the Boers were variously known as free burghers, trekboers, Voortrekkers (sometimes abbreviated to trekkers), pioneers, frontiersmen, frontier ruffians, adventurers, misguided subjects of the Crown and Farmers.

The Dutch had occupied the Cape Town area of South Africa as early as 1652 in order to provide a victualling station for the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC – the Dutch United East India Company) to restock their ships travelling between the Netherlands and their interests in South East Asia. Free burghers expanded their occupation northwards and eastwards from the Cape. Although the VOC fully intended the free burghers to remain subjects of the company, the further they migrated from the original VOC settlement, the less committed the free burghers became to supplying the company with fresh food and the more they became free from obligations to the VOC. These migratory free burghers became known as “trekboers”. The VOC established towns at Swellendam and Graaff Reinet in an attempt to hold the trekboers accountable, with limited success.

There was sporadic conflict between the trekboers and the indigenous Khoikhoi herders and the San hunters. The conflict involved three things: land, cattle and women; the three “needs” of the trekboer! By the time the British took over the Cape Colony, the trekboers had extended their movement as far as the Great Fish River. And so the British inherited a volatile environment, particularly along the Eastern frontier.

Any colony was expected to be of financial benefit to the imperial authorities, and so generation of

revenue was achieved through the sale or rental of land. The British Colonial Government, therefore, attempted to establish an administration system to ensure that all newly adopted subjects (Dutch, British, French, et al or trekboer) purchased and paid tax on their land holdings. This was not popular, especially among the trekboers, and so for the next hundred years, the Boers attempted to disassociate themselves from British rule, continually moving and establishing their own Republics.

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FIG Working Week 2020
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Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 10–14 May 2020